



**THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
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Secretary, DVS

**Joint Hearing of the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means
Testimony of Cheryl Lussier Poppe, Secretary
Department of Veterans' Services
February 15, 2022**

Good morning, Vice Chair Donato, Vice Chair Friedman, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means. My name is Cheryl Lussier Poppe, and I am honored to be the Secretary of the Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services. I am joined here today by Superintendent Eric Johnson from the Soldiers' Home in Chelsea and Interim Superintendent Michael Lazo from the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke. I want to thank the Chairs and the members for this opportunity to address you today and answer your questions about Governor Baker's FY23 House 2 budget proposal for the Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) and the Soldiers' Homes.

We are grateful to the Baker-Polito Administration and the Legislature for providing critical support for the Department to continue to serve the approximately 300,000 Massachusetts men and women who have served our nation with honor. Thanks to your support, and the work of our dedicated staff, Massachusetts is recognized as a national leader in providing veterans' services and benefits. The leadership in the Commonwealth allows us to offer the robust array of programs and services, and our dedicated community partners who support this work, and make Massachusetts a place for veterans and their families to thrive.

Overview

The Governor's House 2 budget allocates \$93.5 million for FY23, which supports ongoing programming from the Department of Veterans' Services to connect our veterans with the benefits and services they have earned. This budget includes continued funding for core services including the Statewide Advocacy for Veterans' Empowerment (SAVE) program, our Veterans Memorial Cemeteries, and our financial benefits for veterans, and to continue to expand the Women Veterans' Network outreach program. This funding also supports the Department's expanded

outreach efforts to connect and engage with veterans in communities, and further support continued collaboration with community providers, veteran service organizations, and other state agencies to achieve the best outcomes for the Commonwealth's veterans.

The FY23 budget recommendation includes \$68 million in benefits for veterans, including \$35 million to support more than 7,000 individuals receiving Chapter 115 "safety net" benefits, which provide economic assistance to qualified veterans and their dependents to purchase necessities like food, shelter, clothing, fuel, and medical care. **While the total DVS recommended budget reflects a 4% decrease, I want to be clear: there is no cut to benefits.** The amount reflects the full reimbursement to municipalities/districts who administer the benefits; the reimbursement is made one year in arrears.

Also included in the Governor's budget is \$32 million for the annuity program, which provides financial support for nearly 16,000 individuals who are 100 percent service-connected disabled veterans, Gold Star parents, or surviving spouses of veterans whose death was related to their military service.

The Governor's budget recommendation includes \$1.5 million for the Statewide Advocacy for Veterans' Empowerment (SAVE) program, which is a peer support program with the three focuses of suicide prevention, jail diversion, and substance use/mental health treatment. The SAVE program collaborates with the Department of Public Health's Suicide Prevention Program, the Trial Court, and the Department of Mental Health to support veterans who are experiencing significant challenges. In 2021, SAVE received 535 referrals and is currently helping 224 veterans with active peer case management and 21 veterans who are active in veteran treatment court.

The Governor's budget recommendation continues to fund the expansion of the Women Veterans' Network outreach program as women veterans comprise our fastest-growing segment, representing over 22,000 individuals in Massachusetts.

Key Initiatives

I want to take this opportunity to highlight just a few of our other initiatives that support veterans in communities across the Commonwealth.

The Commonwealth's unique model of having an assigned Veterans' Service Officer (VSO) in each city and town makes Massachusetts a supportive place for veterans to live. The budget provides \$372,000 for training programs for 200+ municipal Veteran Service Officers and their staff, who provide community-based support for resident veterans, throughout the Commonwealth, as well as other organizations who provide specialized training to professionals who work with veterans. This includes training on benefit programs, supportive services, and on the modernized benefit administration system that rolled out in 2021 for all DVS staff and VSOs. In 2021, DVS conducted over 60 in person and 110 virtual training sessions to ensure a smooth transition and continues to implement enhancements to expand and improve the system.

The Commonwealth is home to two Veterans Memorial Cemeteries, located in Agawam and Winchendon. Together, the cemeteries hosted over 1,300 burials in calendar year 2021, which is

the highest number of burials in any calendar year since opening. Both cemeteries have been recognized by the National Cemetery Administration, ranking among the highest scores awarded to state-run veterans' cemeteries by the Federal Department of Veterans Affairs, and serve as models throughout the country.

The Department's budget includes \$4.1 million for veteran homelessness prevention, which supports providers around the Commonwealth offering critical housing and supportive services to veterans experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity. This includes trusted emergency shelter providers, such as the New England Center for Homeless Veterans and Soldier On, who offer approximately 756 temporary beds each day including emergency shelters & transitional housing.

The Department also provides nearly \$9 million in funding to outreach service providers who specialize in veteran outreach and supports, such as transportation, food, peer and professional counseling, case management, work and school opportunities, as well as other community linkages. These providers help approximately 80,000 veterans each year, and we plan to work with providers to grow the number of veterans served.

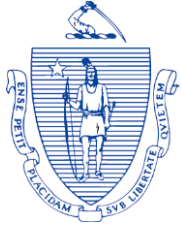
All across the Department, we are participating in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and Veterans' Affairs *Governors Challenge Policy Academy to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families*, alongside sister agencies at the Departments of Mental Health and Public Health, as well as community-based organizations. The policy academy includes four areas of focus, Identifying and screening for suicide risk, promoting connectedness & improving care transitions, Lethal Means and safety & safety planning, and Military Culture training (first responders & clinicians). The first Military Culture Training garnered more than 180 attendees. Our takeaways from the policy academy will inform our future programs and operations. In November of 2019 we held a virtual training on military culture that was attended by over 170 professionals. This is an effort to provide awareness to non-VA affiliated clinicians and other professionals.

The Women Veterans' Network has been engaging with women veterans in new ways, hosting its first ever hybrid annual conference in the face of COVID-19 which reached nearly 200 participants, and this year is conducting a statewide study of women veterans that includes a comprehensive survey and focus groups. This survey is the first statewide survey of women veterans in decades and is being conducted so that the Department to better understand the services that women veterans in the Commonwealth currently use, and those that could best support their unique circumstances and the issues that impact them. The survey results will be used to develop data-driven strategies to better engage women veterans and to direct resources in ways that better support women veterans and their families.

We are also pleased to share that we are completing the procurement process for an Electronic Medical Record system or EMR, at both of our Soldiers' Homes. The EMR will support the management of eligibility determination, admissions, clinical care, regulatory compliance, and reimbursement. It also supports our care givers and our continued focus on better coordinating care, providing quality care, improving outcomes, and promoting the safety of our veteran residents.

Conclusion

Thank you for your time today. I urge you to support the Governor's FY23 budget request for the Department of Veterans' Services so that we can continue to support those who served our Nation and Commonwealth. I am happy to answer any questions you may have before inviting our Superintendents to speak.



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**Testimony of Eric Johnson, Superintendent
Department of Veterans' Services, Soldiers' Home in Chelsea
Joint Committee on Ways and Means
February 15, 2022**

Soldiers' Home in Chelsea

Good morning, Vice Chair Donato, Vice Chair Friedman, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means. My name is Eric Johnson, and I am the Superintendent of the Soldiers' Home in Chelsea. I would like to extend my gratitude for the opportunity to appear before the committee and testify on the Soldier's Home in Chelsea's mission, priorities, and the Governor's proposed Fiscal Year 2023 budget.

The Governor's House 2 budget recommendation funds the Soldiers' Home in Chelsea at \$49.3 million for Fiscal Year 2023, which will fund staffing and operations to provide quality care to our veteran residents and supports the Home through the opening of our new Community Living Center.

The Soldiers' Home in Chelsea opened in 1882 and is the second-oldest veterans' home in the nation. Since that date, Chelsea has provided the finest care and support for generations of Massachusetts' veterans. We are proud to be able to continue that tradition and are excited to soon be able to provide this care in a state-of-the-art new facility. The Home provides skilled and long-term care and domiciliary / supportive services for those who have honorably served their country. The mission of the Home is to provide comprehensive and quality health care services with dignity, honor, and respect.

We are privileged to provide care to the approximately 87 veterans currently in the long-term care building, and our approximately 120 veterans living in the domiciliary program, and welcome new veteran admissions regularly. Veteran residents in the long-term care building are provided skilled care from our nursing, ancillary clinical and medical teams. Our Domiciliary veteran residents receive supportive services from case managers and social workers who work with and respond to the unique needs of these residents with a goal of supporting their safe transition back to the community whenever possible. We actively collaborate with local partners such as community housing authorities, employment providers, community leaders, healthcare providers, and

educational institutions to assist us in strengthening our residents' ability to return to the community.

Quality Care and Quality of Life:

Our long-term care facility currently has a waitlist of approximately 34 veterans, which operates on a first come, first served basis. Once the new Center is opened, we look forward to having the opportunity to serve many more veterans, with a capacity of 154 private rooms in a small home design.

In addition to striving to provide excellence in quality care to veteran residents every day, we also focus on the social and emotional wellbeing of our veterans. We offer a very robust calendar with daily opportunities for our veterans to enjoy many and varied recreational activities.

Currently, the Soldiers' Home in Chelsea has 287 employees, and is in the process of hiring additional direct care staff. Our dedicated staff answered the call to serve our veteran residents and provide care with honor and dignity. Currently, our veterans received an average of 9.3 Nursing Hours Per Patient Day, which is significantly above the CMS Five-Star requirement.

Growth: Capital and People

The Soldiers' Home in Chelsea is in the middle of significant growth, both among its staff and its physical buildings. Through the support of the Baker-Polito Administration and the Legislature, we will continue to serve Massachusetts Veterans with the dignity, honor, and respect that they deserve.

In FY23, the long-awaited new Community Living Center will open, and will include 154 long-term care beds. This process began in 2016, when the Soldiers' Home in Chelsea, in concert with Executive Office of Health and Human Services, Department of Veterans' Services, and the Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance, began work to replace the long-term care facility, originally built in 1952 as an acute care hospital, Chelsea was awarded funds through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs State Home Construction Grant Program, providing up to 65% of the costs to design and build the new long-term care facility.

In September 2018 we broke ground on the \$199 million long term care Community Living Center. The design of our new Center follows the most current VA standards and will provide community-based services and supports in a more home-like setting. This new Center will allow veterans to live in private rooms while receiving quality healthcare and enjoying the camaraderie and support of their fellow veterans and dedicated staff. One key improvement of the new Center is the ability to accommodate more women veterans which is the fastest-growing segment of our veteran population.

With this new Community Living Center model comes an increased staffing requirement for resident care and support staff. The capacity increase to 154 beds, along with an 80,000 sq. ft. increase in space with all private rooms does require a significant increase in our direct care staff. The budget reflects an increase of 104 FTEs from FY22 to accommodate the expansion and change

in care delivery model. The Center has been designed using the small home model which also requires additional support staff, such as dietary, environmental services, and facilities staff, to provide services and maintain the building for the resident veterans. For example, with transitioning from wards to all private rooms, we will increase the number of bathrooms from 40 to 175, increase our resident seating areas from 2 to 18, kitchens and food stocking areas from 1 to 11, and a much-anticipated outdoor Meditation Garden. Chelsea will be enhancing the services it offers to veterans with the opening of the new building with a goal of becoming a Certified Dementia care facility, adding a post-acute care neighborhood with additional therapeutic services such as physical and respiratory therapy.

Domiciliary Campus Redevelopment

As part of the Soldiers' Home in Chelsea's Redevelopment Plan, the Home is pursuing a public-private partnership for the domiciliary portion of its campus. This second phase of development is taking place in collaboration with the Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance (DCAMM) and the Department of Veterans' Services. Phase II will provide veterans in the region new and affordable supported housing.

Following the Asset Management Board's approval, DCAMM issued a Request for Proposals in December of 2020 for redevelopment of the facilities and long-term service provision. In consultation with a multi-agency evaluation committee, DCAMM selected Pennrose, LLP in September of 2021 as the Commonwealth's development partner for a ninety-nine-year lease. While diversifying the unit style and income mix on the campus, the development calls for 100% veterans' preference across all housing units. The plan accommodates all current Domiciliary residents into the new housing units. In November 2021, DCAMM and Pennrose executed a Provisional Designation Agreement and a License of Entry. The project is now in a due diligence phase, during which assessments are being performed on the buildings and the grounds. This year in coordination with HHS, DVS, and the Chelsea Soldiers' Home, it is expected that DCAMM and Pennrose will execute a master development agreement, advance the design of the campus, complete the local zoning process, and identify public financing for affordable housing and historic preservation. The redevelopment is expected to break ground in 2023.

Electronic Medical Record (EMR)

As mentioned in Secretary Poppe's testimony, we have been working with our counterparts at the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke on the procurement of an Electronic Medical Record (EMR) System. An EMR system will enable the Soldiers' Homes to increase patient safety, better support the clinical team, and improve the billing process. This process has been a collaborative effort from both Homes, DVS and EOHHS IT, and has involved several other internal and external stakeholders. We very much look forward to the completion of the procurement process and starting on the implementation phase of the process.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have about the Home and our FY23 proposed budget.



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**Testimony of Michael Lazo, Interim Superintendent
Department of Veterans' Services, Holyoke Soldiers' Home
Joint Committee on Ways and Means
February 15, 2022**

Soldiers' Home in Holyoke

Good morning, Vice Chair Donato, Vice Chair Friedman, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means. My name is Michael Lazo, and I am the Interim Superintendent of the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you on behalf of the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke. The Governor's Fiscal Year 2023 budget, which proposes \$29.7 million to support the mission and priorities of the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke. The budget funds robust staffing levels to support quality care, continues to make strong progress in clinical and infection control protocols.

2022 is proving to be a significant year for the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke in many ways: we have had the honor to care for and serve some of our nation's heroes every day and are planning for the future of the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke, as we have welcomed new residents into the Home for the first time in over 18 months. The Soldiers' Home remains committed to ensuring the safety of the veteran residents and treating them with honor, dignity, and respect, and continue to strengthen and support of our staff..

Staffing

Our 307-person strong staff take great pride in providing care to the 92 veterans who currently reside at the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke. In December 2021, we were pleased to resume admissions to the long-term care facility and have welcomed 12 new veteran residents since.

None of the progress that we have made, or the planning for the future, would be possible without our dedicated team. Over the course of the public health crisis, our staff has shown resilience, flexibility, and dedication in caring for our veteran residents. They remain steadfast and vigilant in compliance to infection prevention and control measures and following the guidance for the well-being of our veterans and each other.

The Soldiers' Home continues to engage in recruitment for qualified clinical and non clinical staff. The Soldiers' Home has focused on recruiting and hiring direct care staff such as CNAs, LPNs, and RNs, and has filled the key positions of the Chief Medical Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Volunteer Services Coordinator, and two Infection Prevention nurses. The Home also utilizes contracted agency staff to support strong patient care staffing patterns.

As a result of increased staffing, our Hours Per Patient Day (HPPD) consistently remains above the CMS 5-star rating standard of 4.4 for skilled nursing facilities, with a January 2022 average HPPD of 10.7. We continue to build our team and remain focused on continuously recruiting qualified clinical staff.

Quality Care

The Soldiers' Home in Holyoke continues to maintain high standards as evidenced by successful surveys conducted over this past year. In March of 2021, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) conducted their annual survey of the Homes Long Term Care and Domiciliary. Our Home 'met' 449 out of 472 standards. The few deficiencies were cited as "No actual harm, with potential for more than minimal harm." A Corrective Action Plan (CAP) was submitted to the VA and was accepted. Holyoke was granted a provisional certification following this acceptance in June 2021.

Joint Commission, an independent, not-for-profit accreditation organization, surveys the Home every three years. On July 15, 2021, The Soldiers' Home in Holyoke received accreditation from The Joint Commission.

The Home conducts a customer satisfaction survey with a national survey firm. In 2021, the Soldiers' Home's monthly satisfaction survey, conducted by Pinnacle Insights, resulted in an overall satisfaction rate of 87%.

This past year, the Soldiers' Home welcomed back entertainers, volunteer-sponsored celebrations, and specials guests. Of note, the Home was honored to have Congressional Medal of Honor recipient, Michael Fitzmaurice visit and spend time with our veterans in September. As part of the National 2021 Medal of Honor Convention that took place in Boston. Mr. Fitzmaurice was flown to Holyoke in a Black Hawk helicopter that landed in our parking lot. He spent time talking to our veteran residents one to one and they were honored and thrilled to welcome him and see his "ride" up close.

Planning for the Future

The Soldiers' Home in Holyoke, in partnership with the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, Department of Veterans' Services, and the Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance made significant capital investments to address both the short and long-term needs of the Home. This included a short-term Refresh Project on all of our nursing units and throughout the Home, and a longer-term Rapid Planning Capital Project to create a new Soldiers' Home in Holyoke. An additional, ongoing construction effort will improve our isolation unit by making it a fully enclosed, negative pressure space.

The Refresh project was completed in October of 2021 and all our veteran residents are in their newly refreshed rooms. As part of the project, the updated Canteen reopened in June of 2021, and our veteran residents were thrilled to return and enjoy congregate activities including entertainment, BINGO, art projects, ice cream socials, exercise classes, sporting events, movies and celebrations. We also opened a new media room, gift shop, and hair salon.

I want to thank the Governor and his administration, and the Legislature, for securing the capital authorization to construct a new long term care building for the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke. With this authorization, and the overwhelming support of the Baker-Polito Administration and the Legislature, in July 2021 the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke submitted a grant application to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs State Home Construction Grant Program, which, if approved, would reimburse the Commonwealth up to 65% of the costs to design and build the new long-term care facility.

Community Partners

Local veteran organizations and VSOs are integral to the mission of the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke. Their volunteer power and support are a part of the daily life of our veteran residents, and we deeply appreciate their partnership with the Home.

In November of 2021, the Soldiers' Home held its first Veteran Community Engagement meeting to keep them abreast of the work we do with our veterans, and to gather their feedback. This quarterly meeting provides updates to local veteran organizations and veteran service officers. This meeting serves to open lines of communication in order to better serve veterans in the community and the Home. Along the same line, the Home launched a new community newsletter called The FRONTLINES to keep the community informed and updated.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have about the Home and our FY23 proposed budget.