

**Testimony of Francisco Ureña, Secretary
Department of Veterans' Services
Joint Hearing of the House and Senate Committees on Ways and Means
March 11, 2019**

Introduction by Secretary Ureña

Good morning/afternoon Representative Garlick, Senator Rush, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means. My name is Francisco Ureña and I am the Secretary of Veterans' Services. I am joined here today by Superintendent Cheryl Poppe from the Chelsea Soldiers' Home and Superintendent Bennett Walsh from the Holyoke Soldiers' Home. I want to thank the Chairs and the members for this opportunity to address you today and answer your questions about the Department of Veterans' Services and Soldiers' Homes proposed Fiscal Year 2020 budget.

We are grateful that the Baker/Polito Administration and the Legislature have afforded our Department the necessary support to continue to serve the nearly 311,000 Massachusetts men and women who have served our nation with honor. I am proud to report that Massachusetts is recognized as a national leader in providing veterans' services and benefits. The Department is committed to ensuring access to all veterans' benefits and that services are available throughout the Commonwealth. We continuously work to create meaningful partnerships to maximize resources and maintain our status as a national leader by collaborating with our Soldiers' Homes, municipal partners, veteran service organizations, public/private businesses, and other state agencies.

FY 20 Budget Overview

The Governor's House 1 budget allocates \$90 million in FY2020 which supports:

- A total of \$5.6 million for veteran homelessness prevention. This funding designates \$3.2 million to homeless service providers and \$2.4 million to the New England Center for Homeless Veterans which reaches 350 veterans a day.
- The outreach account provides \$5.3 million allocated to outreach service providers offering supportive services such as mental health counseling and substance use disorder, with an investment in mental health education and training for crisis intervention.
- \$42 million to support 12,000+ individuals receiving Chapter 115 Veterans' benefits, providing qualified veterans and their dependents the necessary financial assistance for food, shelter, clothing, fuel, and medical care.

- \$30 million for the veteran annuity program including 14,000 individuals who are 100% disabled veterans, Gold Star parents and surviving spouses of veterans whose death was related to their military service.
- More than \$600,000 for training programs for 350+ municipal Veteran Service Officers, and their staff throughout the Commonwealth, as well as other organizations who provide specialized training to professionals who work with veterans.

Other Key Initiatives

I want to take this opportunity to highlight just a few of our other initiatives:

- Our outreach service providers deliver transportation, food pantry, peer and professional counseling, case management, work and school opportunities, as well as other community linkages. These providers have helped over 38,500 veterans in the first half of Fiscal Year 2019 alone.
- Our housing providers offer approximately 565 temporary beds each day in four emergency shelters, and 11 transitional facilities.
- The Statewide Advocacy for Veterans' Empowerment, (SAVE) program began in 2008 in collaboration with the Department of Public Health and their suicide prevention program. The core mission of SAVE is to offer peer-to-peer suicide intervention and prevention support for veterans returning from deployment. With assistance from the Department of Mental Health (DMH), Massachusetts Trial Court (TRC), and the Department of Public Health (DPH), approximately 6,000 veterans attended outreach events and presentations made by the SAVE team. Six hundred twelve veterans received direct referral and linkage services through the SAVE hotline. In addition, more than 350 veterans received active case management because of Interdepartmental Service Agreements (ISA) with DMH and TRC. The SAVE Team also focuses on veterans who are court involved through a jail diversion program, as well as assisting veterans experiencing mental health issues, and substance use disorders.
- The Women Veterans Network (WVN) was established in 1997 to serve as the central resource for Massachusetts woman veterans, our fastest growing segment with over 32,000 in Massachusetts. As a result, the WVN has increased its outreach providing direct services to more than half the female veteran population in this state. The WVN provides networking opportunities and leads an annual conference attended by women veterans and service providers to promote employment opportunities, mental health services, as well as leadership guidance and financial counselling.

Agawam and Winchendon Cemeteries

DVS oversees two state veteran cemeteries located in Agawam and Winchendon, which average over 100 burials per month. Both cemeteries do an exceptional job. Winchendon cemetery received the highest recognition as a National Shrine by the Federal Department of Veterans Affairs and serves as a model for other states in administration and perpetual care for our deceased veterans.

Thank you for your time. I urge you to support the Governor's budget request for DVS. I am happy to answer any questions you may have before inviting our Superintendents to speak.

Chelsea Soldiers' Home by Superintendent Poppe

Good morning/afternoon Representative Garlick, Senator Rush and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means. My name is Cheryl Lussier Poppe, and I am the Superintendent of the Soldiers' Home in Chelsea (CHE). Like Secretary Urena, I also want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today about the Home's mission, priorities, and the Fiscal Year 2020 budget.

The Governor's House 1 budget recommendation funds the Chelsea Soldiers' Home at \$29.9 million for Fiscal Year 2020.

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 to the present day. The mission of the Home is to provide comprehensive and quality health care services with dignity, honor, and respect.

The Home provides both long term care and domiciliary / supportive services for those who honorably served their country. We are grateful for the support we receive from the Baker/Polito Administration, the legislature, our partners at the U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs, and our partners in the community.

This year we have exciting and important news to share regarding our long term care facility. The Quigley long term care facility currently has a 174 bed capacity. It opened in 1952 with an open ward design. An open ward floor plan is an antiquated design

concept. It is no longer an acceptable way for accommodating long term care patients. The open ward design was first rejected by the VA in 2012. The VA always had high praise for the quality of care CHE provides its veterans, its programs and living conditions; however, the basic layout of the building is no longer permissible.

In 2016, CHE in concert with DVS, DCAMM, EOHHS, began work on replacing its long term care facility. A Boston based architectural firm was retained in the last quarter of calendar year 2016 and design meetings began later that year. In September 2017, CHE submitted an initial grant application to the VA under its State Home Construction Grant Program, which will provide up to 65% of the costs to design and build the new long term care facility. The VA approved \$100 million for initial reimbursement of this project following final submission of design materials later this calendar year.

In September 2018, Governor Baker, Speaker DeLeo, and several members of the MA Legislature held a ceremonial ground breaking for this \$199 million new 154 bed, long term care Community Living Center (CLC). The new CLC will be in compliance with all VA standards and include community based services and supports. One key improvement of the new CLC is the ability to accommodate more women veterans, the fastest growing veteran population. I am pleased to inform you that the project began this month with the commencement of initial site work. Construction is anticipated to commence in late Spring 2019 with a target completion date in 2022 and full occupancy in 2023.

While the Community Living Center (CLC) is Phase 1 of the Campus Framework, Phase 2 will explore housing opportunities for the rest of the Soldiers' Home campus. A study was completed, and a Master Plan was completed in August of 2018. The Soldiers' Home, in collaboration with EHS, DVS, and DCAMM is currently exploring further opportunities, in accordance with Phase 2 of the Campus Framework.

We wish to thank the Governor and the legislature for their leadership and support of this project.

The long term care facility has an active waitlist of 49 veterans

The long term care facility contracts with a national survey firm to conduct a customer satisfaction survey; a sample of veterans and family members are asked to rate the quality of care at the Soldiers' Home. In 2018, the Soldiers' Home's customer satisfaction survey resulted in overall satisfaction rate of 98.4%.

Additionally, the Home is currently providing independent living in a domiciliary for 173 veterans. Our case managers and social workers work with and respond to the needs of these residents with an eye to transitioning them back to the community. To further this goal, we have created and enhanced partnerships with 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. In FY 18, 19 veterans transitioned from our domiciliary back into the community.

The Home frequently partners with other community organizations including the Greater Lynn Senior Services, The American Legion, the Jewish War Veterans, the Middlesex County Deputy Sheriff's Association, Berklee College of Music, and Interns from various Art programs, to provide our veterans with opportunities for personal growth.

Each year, we host the United States Navy fleet wide Chief Petty Officer Selectees who are assigned to the USS Constitution as part of their ongoing community service training. Some 90-180 men and women sailors participate in visitations with our veterans and provide an extra hand with various operations functions around the campus. This year was extra special as it took place the same time as the signing of the BRAVE Act. We were proud to host the signing at Chelsea.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have about the Home and our FY20 proposed budget.

Soldiers' Home in Holyoke by Superintendent Walsh

Good morning/afternoon Representative Garlick, Senator Rush and distinguished members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means. My name is Bennett Walsh and I am the Superintendent of the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke. It is an honor to serve as Superintendent after having served in the military 24 years.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today about the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke's mission, priorities, and the Governor's Fiscal Year 2020 budget allocation of \$25.2 million. Day in and day out, our 351 person staff have the privilege of taking care of 265 veterans who call the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke their home.

Since 1952, The Soldiers' Home in Holyoke has ensured our veterans experience the highest possible level of health and well-being, through comprehensive care and supportive services with honor and dignity on a 24/7 basis. Like our sister Home in Chelsea, we have a Domiciliary which has the capacity to provide independent living for 30 veterans. Currently, Holyoke has 249 long term care beds. This year Holyoke received its second consecutive Veterans Affairs survey where we achieved 100% compliance with all health care standards.

In addition to our main mission of providing care with honor and dignity for our veterans, other programs include physical, recreational, and occupational therapy; outpatient general medicine and specialty clinics (optometry, podiatry); a pharmacy department, laboratory services and specialized geriatric mental health services. The Soldiers' Home in Holyoke also provides dental services and medical outpatient services to both veteran residents and veterans in the community. Through a partnership with the Holyoke Health Center, the dental clinic continues to address the significant unmet needs of our veteran population in the region and their family members.

In September 2018, we completed our state funded .7 mile walking path and have initiated a plan to safeguard our dementia patients from wandering by creating a secure outdoor space for year round use.

To further ensure veteran safety, SHH is undertaking several quality improvement projects.

The Soldiers' Home in Holyoke increased the mobility of our veterans' population (through programs such as Walk across America, Otago Exercises and a change in culture by the staff) by 50% while simultaneously reducing our falls by 30% for calendar year 2018. In addition, our use of psychotropic medications continued to decline and we achieved the national benchmark set forth by the American Health Association.

A patient safety and culture survey is currently underway. It began in November 2018 and will conclude November 2019. In addition, two new patient centered studies are planned for 2019. The first is a dignity project which will be conducted in collaboration with UMASS Amherst. The purpose of the project is to raise the level of awareness of the dignity shown to patients. The second is a staffing study by Suffolk University designed to review our current staffing patterns to ensure we operate at peak performance.

The Home annually contracts with a national survey firm to conduct customer satisfaction surveys. Our overall satisfaction yearly rate was 99.6%, which exceeds the national average.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have about the Home and our FY2020 proposed budget.