**New York City**

**Veterans Advisory Board**

Minutes for the March 25, 2021 meeting held virtually,

representing the meeting for Brooklyn

**Members**

**Present:**

Todd Haskins (Manhattan) Wendy McClinton (Brooklyn)

Mercedes Elias (Queens) Andrew Walcott (Brooklyn)

John Rowan (Queens) Paul Dietrich (Staten Island)

Joe Bello (Bronx) Peter Kauffmann (Queens)

Jennifer Kamrowski (Manhattan)

**Absent:**

Charles Hernandez (Bronx)

Note: Awaiting board member to be appointed by Speaker’s Office.

**Minutes**

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* Todd Haskins (Chair) commenced the meeting at 6:00 pm.
* Todd introduces former Secretary of the VA Dr. David Shulkin as presenter for the evening

Chair discusses that we will go over end of year report recently published, the Commissioner will speak on priorities DVS is focused on and will conclude the session with officer selections for the VAB.

**Presentation**:

Todd welcomes Dr. Shulkin, asked him to give background, professional history prior to getting involved with VA, and discuss how he became involved with the VA.

Dr. Shulkin discusses that he is a physician practicing his career as an internist and leading healthcare organizations. First served as President and CEO of Beth Israel in New York City, having spent most of career in private hospitals. Recalls difficulties VA was having in 2014, the “wait time crisis”, where veterans had a difficult time getting treatment at the VA. Was contacted by President Obama administration to help ‘fix the mess’ and became the Under Secretary of Health for the VA in 2015.

Chair discusses the vetting process, noting that Dr. Shulkin was the first non-veteran to hold the position and the rough political climate at the time since he was officially appointed under President Trump. Todd asked about the confirmation process and his experience transitioning under both administrations. Dr. Shulkin discussed that he was not a politician and navigated the process realizing issues such as Agent Orange that effected Vietnam veterans and that they needed to be addressed. Acknowledges getting fired by tweet by President Trump and wanted to stay as non-partisan as possible.

Chair discusses Dr. Shulkin’s initiative to post data publicly and from a leadership perspective asked him to discuss the importance of that transparency and how it was met internally. Dr. Shulkin discussed that he was focused on getting the wait time crisis within the VA fixed. He stated that instead of trying to incrementally increase efficiency, he started with same day appointments for veterans because that’s what they deserved. Was met with hesitancy by the Obama administration, but by 2016 he wanted same day appointments available at every VA facility within the country. Dr. Shulkin stated that the only way to keep a problem from reoccurring, he had to publish data and hold people accountable. He developed a system to publish and update wait times on the internet but was told he couldn’t by the Obama administration because outside media outlets would use the data against the administration and republicans would hold congressional hearings to use the data against them. When President Trump took office, he asked him if publishing the data was going to be good for veterans, Dr. Shulkin said yes, and President Trump told him to go ahead and do it. Discussing President Trump’s decisive actions, he was able to pass 11 bills with bipartisan support and minimal delays.

Chair discusses the complexity of running a healthcare system, and how Dr. Shulkin brought up the benefits and difficulties of outsourcing. Dr. Shulkin discusses when he first took over as Secretary of the VA, he wanted to see how the VA operated and started at the 23rd Street VA in Manhattan. He realized even patients with complicated healthcare and substance abuse issues are able to be taken care of at the VA, and that the veterans would not be able to be taken care of the same way at private healthcare facilities. He also knew the VA couldn’t do it all. His priority was making sure the veteran could get the best care at either location, creating a hybrid system for veterans to determine where to get best healthcare. He was instructed to privatize the VA, and because he didn’t want to do that, he was fired. After firing, he published an article with New York Times stating why we could not privatize the VA. Mentioned that many of the doctors that work at the VA also work at the academic centers (i.e. university hospitals).

Chair asks about patient centric care at the VA and how it changed during his tenure. Dr. Shulkin discussed that in the private sector, the healthcare insurance companies make the rules and the VA doesn’t have that situation since they don’t have to worry about getting paid by them. Working with Veteran Service Organizations, he would approach Congress and tell them how much he needed to support the veterans within the VA healthcare system. He worked on using that funding to help veterans get homes, assist with transportation, medication refills, vocational help, adaptive sports, etc.

Chair asks about how the VA has navigated the COVID-19 pandemic. Dr. Shulkin stated he was disappointed in President Trump’s response to the pandemic and that the VA missed the opportunity to showcase their capabilities. Specifically, being the largest healthcare provider in the country, one of the VA’s missions is to be the national backup healthcare system in times of emergency. Acknowledged the importance of the telehealth capabilities, thought the process for veterans getting vaccine is doing a good job.

Todd asks about the other pandemic of veteran suicide. Dr. Shulkin acknowledged there needed to be a focus on reducing and preventing veteran suicide. Stated of the 20 veterans committing suicide a day, only 6 are getting seen by the VA and the other 14 are getting seen out in the community.

Chair discusses Secretary McDonough recently confirmed, asked of any recommendations or areas of focus for him. Dr. Shulkin recommends asking all of the other secretaries of their advice, because there is constant turnover in Washington which delays progress. Secretary McDonough has done this, as well as ask all previous VA Secretaries for their advice as well. Dr. Shulkin stated the hardest problem for Secretary McDonough is does he know the issues well enough to advocate for the right things.

Chair asked biggest regret and proudest accomplishment during his time at the VA. Biggest accomplishment was fixing the wait time issue, even though the issue has resurfaced during pandemic. Biggest regret was that he wasn’t there long enough, wanted to do more with his passion to help veterans to have the type of system he believes they deserve.

Chair discusses the **annual report**.

Reviews of areas of focus for DVS:

1. Food security during COVID response, helping to coordinate 25,000 meals and 40,000 masks.
2. Mission VetCheck – coordinated outreach effort by volunteers facilitating 24,000 calls (wellness checks)
3. Mission home helping to end veteran homelessness, having placed 1,000 veterans in homes last month and 18% more veterans than the prior year

Recommendations by VAB:

1. DVS is under resourced/staffed, approximately 1 to 14,000 (including family members), 1 to 5,000 if they are not included
2. Veterans on Campus – initiative needing funding to bring money into the city
3. Assistance for veterans obtaining benefits
4. Contracting preference for veteran owned businesses

Todd turns it over to Commissioner Hendon to discuss DVS initiatives.

Commissioner thanks VAB and Dr. Shulkin for their time. Asks attendees to contact them for any assistance and provides contact information: Website: nyc.gov/vets

Email: connect@veterans.nyc.gov Phone: 212-416-5250 Social media: @nycveterans. Discussed resources currently offered by DVS that veterans can reach out to utilize. Wants to attract more veterans to NYC.

Chair turns to elections. Three people running for the three positions are afforded time to speak. Mercedes Elias speaks first, running for Secretary. Charles Hernandez running for Vice Chair but not present at the meeting. Joe Bello confirms Charles is still interested in the position although he was not able to attend. Wendy McClinton running for Chairman of the Board. Todd makes motion to approve officers as a slate, Jennifer Kamrowski seconds and none oppose.

Todd thanks attendees and closes meeting.

**Public Comments**: The following comments were submitted to the board during the virtual meeting.

**J. Carr Montford Point**: What would be your position on opportunities to target Veteran Specific messaging for the adoption of Vaccine compliance given that many are in targeted communities. In the same vain of outsourcing VA Services - would it not have made more sense for integration into a cities/states Public Health-Municipal Systems so as to leverage EMR integration etc. This would aid in turnaround times and access issues.

**Lobsang Salaka:** January 06, has been an issue and media and politician start labeling extremism. It was heartbreaking to read an article that says “1 out of 6” was veterans where were involved in capital riots. It is true there was veteran in the group, and the other way, veterans defended the capital. How to address the extremism labeling in this political environment.

**Ellen Greeley**: DVS has been fortunate to participate in SAMHSA's SMVF Suicide Prevention Crisis Intercept Mapping in Staten Island and has leveraged the talents of VA social workers in assisting civilian medical centers in becoming Veteran culturally competent. We are hoping to replicate this in Queens.

**Meeting adjourned.**

**Next meeting:** 6 pmApril 29, 2021

Submitted by: Mercedes Elias, Secretary