



COLORADO

Department of Human Services

January 1, 2022

The Honorable Jared Polis
Governor, State of Colorado

The Honorable Dafna Michaelson Jenet
Chair, Colorado House of Representatives Public and Behavioral Health and Human Services Committee

The Honorable Rhonda Fields
Chair, Colorado Senate Health and Human Services Committee

The Honorable Chris Kennedy
Chair, Colorado House of Representatives State, Civic, and Military Affairs Committee

The Honorable Julie Gonzales
Chair, Colorado Senate State, Veterans, and Military Affairs Committee

Governor Polis, Representative Michaelson Jenet, Senator Fields, Representative Kennedy, and Senator Gonzales:

The Colorado Department of Human Services, in response to reporting requirements set forth in Section 26-12-402 C.R.S., respectfully submits the attached Commissioners of Veterans Community Living Centers Report.

"On or before January 1, 2008, and on or before each January 1 thereafter, make an annual report of issues and recommendations developed by the board of commissioners to the executive director of the state department and the governor; and (II) Transmit electronic versions of each annual report to: (A) The members of the general assembly who sit on the health and human services committee of the senate, the public health care and human services committee of the house of representatives, and the state, veterans, and military affairs committees of the senate and the house of representatives, or any successor committees; and (B) The members of the state board of veterans affairs."

If you have any questions, please contact Kevin Neimond, CDHS' Director of Policy and Legislative Affairs, at 303-620-6450.

Sincerely,

Yolanda Webb
Director, Office of Adult, Aging, and Disability Services



Board of Commissioners of Veterans Community Living Centers

Tenth Floor, Colorado Human Services Building
1575 Sherman Street
Denver, CO 80203

December 1, 2021

The Honorable Jared Polis, Governor
Office of the Governor
136 State Capitol Building
Denver, CO 80203

Ms. Michelle Barnes, Executive Director
Colorado Department of Human Services
1575 Sherman Street
Denver, CO 80203

Members of the Senate Committee on Health and Human Services, the House Committee on Public Health Care and Human Services and the Senate and House Committees on State, Veterans and Military Affairs

Members of the State Board of Veterans Affairs

Dear Governor Polis, Ms. Barnes, and Committee and Board Members:

The 2021 Annual Report of the Board of Commissioners of Veterans Community Living Centers is submitted for your review. A summary of the key issues and recommendations is provided on the pages that follow.

This year's report makes special note of the results of the Office of State Auditors Performance Audit completed in October. The Audit confirms what the Board has observed—that the staff at the centers and the Division have done a truly remarkable job in managing the COVID pandemic—far better than other long term care facilities. That is due to great management and dedication from all. They, and indeed CDHS are to be thanked and congratulated on the results of this audit. It reflects remarkable and dedicated performance.

Our concern going forward is the diminished census and staff shortages that are causing the centers to operate at a loss, and the resultant drain on the Central Fund. The Department is taking many steps to help improve the census, to include intense marketing and staff hiring efforts. We are grateful that the Governor's budget request includes salary increases for dietary and housekeeping staff to be able to compete with the civilian market in hiring and retaining these key staff members.

Respectfully submitted,

William "Robby" Robinson
Chair, Board of Commissioners of Veterans Community Living Centers

Annual Report 2021

Board of Commissioners of Veterans Community Living Centers

December 31, 2021

The Board of Commissioners of the Veterans Community Living Centers has the statutory responsibility to provide continuity, predictability and stability in the operations of the Colorado Veterans Community Living Centers. An Annual Report is to be submitted to the Governor, the Executive Director of the Colorado Department of Human Services, four committees of the General Assembly and the State Department of Veterans Affairs. The Colorado Revised Statutes, section 26-12-402 (7)(i)(I) states:

On or before January 1, 2008, and on or before each January 1 thereafter, make an annual report of issues and recommendations developed by the board of commissioners to the executive director of the state department of human services and the governor; and (II) Transmit electronic versions of each annual report to: (A) The members of the general assembly who sit on the health and human services committee of the senate, the public health care and human services committee of the house of representatives. And the state, veterans, and military affairs committee of the house of representatives, and the state, veterans, and military affairs committees of the senate and the house of representatives, or any successor committees; and (B) The members of the state board of veterans affairs.

Members of the Board of Commissioners of Veterans Community Living Centers

William “Robby” Robinson	Veteran, Designee of State Board of Veterans Affairs
Karren Kowalski	Veteran
Christine Merriman	Expertise in Multi-Site Nursing Home operations
Carolyn Ruhl	Licensed Nursing Home Admin
Tiara Stingley	Expertise as Long-term Care Clinician
Richard “Dick” Young	Veteran, Designee of United Veterans Coalition
VACANT	Ombudsman

Executive Summary

COVID-19 and the Variants

In 2021, the VCLC Division, staff and the Board of Commissioners continued to give major attention to managing cases of COVID-19 and its variants and reducing its impact on each of the veterans centers. If a veterans center experiences an outbreak, defined as having two or more staff or residents testing positive within 14 days, additional protective measures must be taken. These measures include additional testing for staff and residents, changes to the dining process; visitation protocols and vaccinations. These and other precautions are factors in the overall wellbeing of the veterans and staff at the Veterans Community Living Centers.

Numerous steps were taken to reduce the onset and spread of COVID-19. As of November 15, 2021 the resident vaccination rate is 97.4%, which compares very favorably with the national average of 81 %. Additionally, 86.4% of VCLC employees are fully vaccinated as of the same date. VCLC staff were required to have submitted a medical or religious exemption request or be fully vaccinated by October 31, 2021 as a condition of employment. An audit by the Office of the State Auditor concluded that the VCLCs had implemented the required infection control measures to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and reported **No Findings**.

Census and Finances

There is a serious and continuing decline in the cash balance in the VCLC Central Fund. The cash balance decreased \$3.9 million from FY 2020 to this fiscal year as of September 2021, even after receiving \$8.3 million from HR133, HR1319 and the state General Fund. These funds have temporarily covered the increased expenses and subsequent revenue loss due to the pandemic. The primary step necessary to increase the Central Fund is to increase the census at each of the VCLCs. The Board of Commissioners commends the marketing and admissions staff at the Division level and the centers for their efforts in increasing the census.

Needs Assessment

In February 2020, CDHS and Colorado Health Institute signed a contract for a Needs Assessment to identify the long-term care needs of Colorado veterans. The goal of the study was to identify the needs and healthcare expectations of Colorado's veterans and to determine how the VCLCs will meet these needs in the next 5, 10, 20 years. The Board of Commissioners engaged in the study throughout 2020 and the final results were shared with the Board in December 2020.

The Board of Commissioners supports the approach of the Division which will first look internally at four areas of study which are now underway or are planned for the immediate future:

1. Admissions – Standardize and improve the process to eliminate barriers for admission. Included in this study is finding out who is being accepted for admission and who is being denied.
2. Marketing – Continuing awareness efforts with current customers and referral sources through building stronger relationships with them and documenting the process.

3. Service planning registry – Create a place for people who may require VCLC resources in the future and provide them the opportunity to pre-register and keep them informed about the centers.
4. Behavioral health – Information is being collected regarding existing behavioral health resources and programs at the Colorado VCLCS and other state’s veteran homes. This information will help determine the next steps for Colorado centers.

The next phase of work, following the research now being conducted, will involve stakeholders, including veterans, professional consultants, personnel with expertise from other departments, community members and members of the Board of Commissioners.

Kudos

The dedicated performance of the Division and the staff at the VCLCs has been remarkable in many ways. On page eight of this report we note the appreciation of the Board of Commissioners for the faithful service and outstanding efforts of many people the Board wishes to recognize.

Introduction

The Board is composed of seven members, appointed by the Governor and subject to confirmation by the Senate. The Board composition includes three who represent different areas of expertise in the operation of nursing homes, three who are veterans, and one who is a nursing home ombudsman. The ombudsman position has been vacant since April 2020. One of the veterans on the Board also serves as the designee to the State Board of Veterans Affairs and is the liaison of that Board to the Board of Commissioners.

There are four state-operated VCLCs within the CDHS Office of Adult, Aging and Disability Services which oversees the VCLC Division. The fifth VCLC in Colorado, Spanish Peaks VCLC at Walsenburg, is managed by the Huerfano County Hospital District and has a contracted oversight relationship with CDHS.

The official names of the VCLCs are as follows, although their commonly used names are used in this report:

- Bruce McCandless Veterans Community Living Center at Florence (VCLC at Florence)
- Veterans Community Living Center at Fitzsimons (VCLC at Fitzsimons)
- Veterans Community Living Center at Rifle (VCLC at Rifle)
- Veterans Community Living Center at Homelake (VCLC at Homelake)
- Spanish Peaks Veterans Community Living Center at Walsenburg (VCLC at Spanish Peaks)

The following duties of the Board of Commissioners are spelled out in Colorado Revised Statutes, section 26-12-402 (2):

- Advise the Division of VCLCs and each of the individual centers;
- Provide continuity, predictably, and stability in the operation of the veterans centers
- Provide guidance in future administrators at the veterans centers based on the collective institutional memory of the Board of Commissioners

The Board is also directed to “Endeavor to ensure that the highest quality of care is being provided at the veterans centers and that the financial status of the veterans centers is maintained at a sound level.”

The Board met six times this year, each of which was held by virtually using Google Meetings due to infection control protocols prohibiting the VCLCs from hosting in-person meetings. The Board is looking forward to the time when we can resume our previous travels to each center as was the practice before the pandemic.

The meetings consisted of Division level updates and included specific reports regarding COVID-19 outbreaks, vaccines and other pandemic related topics. At each meeting, one of the Nursing Home Administrators presented updates, stories and statistics about their veterans center.. Additionally, the Division reports included resident census and its impact on the financial status of the VCLCs, the Needs Assessment operationalization plans, marketing/communication efforts, staff vacancies, staff retention and staff turnover.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs conducted their annual surveys virtually this year and the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment surveys were fewer in number this year and those that were held were also conducted virtually.

COVID-19 and the Delta Variant

As was the case in 2020, the enormous attention of the VCLC leadership was on managing the pandemic and reducing its impact on the centers. Since vaccines became available in late December 2020, the VCLCs saw a reduction in positive cases; 87% of confirmed positive residents and 50% of confirmed positive staff in 2021 were considered “breakthrough” cases, meaning the positive person was also vaccinated. Per CDPHE, an outbreak is defined as two or more cases in staff or residents with an onset in a 14-day period. Outbreaks are disruptive to the quality of life in the VCLCs as they can impact dining processes, visitation guidelines, activity planning and other important parts of well-being.

The centers took numerous steps and instituted a variety of policies and procedures to reduce the onset and spread of COVID-19. Besides improved infection control practices, some vaccinations were made available to residents and staff in December 2020. The VCLC resident rate of vaccinations averages 96.95%, considerably higher than the national average of 81% in long-term care settings. Staff acceptance is also above the national average at 77.8%. CDHS mandated all employees in the VCLCs and other 24/7 operations be fully vaccinated by October 31, 2021 as a condition of employment. The chart below shows the total number of resident and staff confirmed positive cases of COVID-19 from March 2020 through October 2021 and the percent of vaccination rates at each VCLC as of 10/7/2021:

VCLC	Total Resident Positive Cases	Total Resident Deaths Due to COVID-19	Total Staff Positive Cases	Percentage Residents Fully Vaccinated	Percentage Staff Fully Vaccinated
Fitzsimons	71	26	82	97.5%	94.7%
Homelake	9	1	27	100% SNF 94% DOM	71.3%
Florence	7	0	40	93.8%	73.1%
Rifle	53	17	65	97.8%	68.3%
Spanish Peaks	31	12	56	98.6%	81.6%
Total	171	56	270	96.95 avg	77.8 avg

In February 2021, the Office of State Auditors initiated a Performance Audit of the COVID-19 Infection Prevention at the VCLCs. The purpose of the audit was to assess the VCLCs response to the pandemic between March 2020 and June 2021. The audit focused primarily on three areas: testing and screening; training and communication and monitoring. In October 2021, the OSA presented its final report to the Legislative Audit Committee. The OSA concluded that the VCLCs implemented required infection prevention measures to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and reported **no findings**. This is a truly remarkable positive outcome that speaks to the efforts of the staff at all levels.

Veterans Community Living Centers Census and Finances

2020--Veterans Community Living Center Total Census (Jan-Dec)*

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
502	508	497	480	454	438	426	414	410	405	392	359

2021--Veterans Community Living Center Total Census (Jan-Oct)*

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sep	Oct
350	355	356	359	364	365	368	374	375	376

*Census totals for 5 Colorado Veterans Community Living Centers

Of great concern to the Board of Commissioners, CDHS, the Division and each of the VCLCs, is the seriousness of the continuing decline of the cash balance in the VCLC Central Fund. The cash balance in FY 2020-21 decreased by \$1.05 million from FY 2019-20 after receiving the COVID-19 Stimulus Fund of \$6.68 million from the Provider Relief Fund, Quality Incentive Payment and VA one-time Emergency Fund (HR133 and HR1319) and \$3.2 million from the state General Fund in FY 2020-21. The cash balance at the end of FY 2020-21 is \$24.51 million, which is a 4.46% decrease from FY 2019-20.

The decline of the census at each of the centers, and its slow growth back, has resulted in a revenue shortfall. The average daily census (ADC) in August, 2021 was 374 residents including Fitzsimons, Florence, Homelake, Homelake Domiciliary and Spanish Peaks. This compares with the ADC in August 2020 of 414 residents. The census increased by 24 residents from January to August 2021, indicative of the slow return to a profitable census. The Board has been told that this decline in the census numbers has been a common occurrence in nursing facilities throughout the country due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The VCLCs received COVID-19 Stimulus Funds from both the state General Fund and Federal stimulus funds. These funds have been used for a variety of purposes including employee salaries and benefits, incentive pay, personal protective equipment (PPE), vaccine administration and testing. The total amount of \$9.88 million received from COVID-19 Stimulus Fund has temporarily covered the revenue loss and increased expenditures due to COVID-19. These stimulus funds are a direct benefit covering the decrease of the Central Fund. However, the primary way to improve the Central Fund balance is to increase the census in each VCLC. The Board commends the Division, marketing and admission staff at the VCLCs for their efforts to increase the census. Many of these initiatives are described in this report under the heading of Needs Assessment.

Needs Assessment

As reported in the Board's 2020 Annual Report, CDHS entered into a contract with Colorado Health Institute in 2020 for a needs assessment of the health and long-term care needs of Colorado's veterans. The goal of the study was to identify the needs and healthcare expectations of Colorado's veterans and to determine how the VCLCs will meet those needs in the next 5, 10 and 20 years. The report was presented to the Board of Commissioners in February. In brief, the report made numerous recommendations that will require additional time for assessment, planning and implementation. The Board of Commissioners will be engaged in these efforts.

The first goal from the findings of the assessment is to increase residency at the veterans centers. There were several suggestions for census growth including providing new services at the centers, building stronger connections to the community, creating a service planning registry and enhancing current services of telehealth, behavioral health supports, memory care and adult day health care.

The second goal of the needs assessment is to adapt the institutional care model to the evolving health needs and preferences of the veteran population. These recommendations included the possibility of adapting current physical structures, locations and purposes of structures. Examples of this could include renovation for infection control, developing a small home model approach, creating a new model

to boost the census, relocation to areas with greater veteran populations, and providing services for substance abuse treatment and other unmet needs.

Elements of the COVID-19 recovery include financial sustainment, census growth, operational improvement, the quality of life of the residents, and workforce stabilization. The specific areas of action now underway and planned for the immediate future are the following:

Admissions: Standardize and improve the process to eliminate barriers for admissions. This is done through ensuring consistency for all VCLCs during the admission process and making sure the admission data collected is utilized correctly. Finally, look at all admission referrals and denials to find who is being accepted and who is being denied.

Marketing: Continue awareness efforts with current customers and referral sources and building stronger relationships with the referral sources.

Service planning registry: Create a place for people who may require VCLC services in the future to provide them the opportunity to pre-register and keep them informed about what is happening at the centers.

Behavioral health: Conduct research to improve the knowledge of the existing resources and programs currently at the VCLCs and at VCLCs in other states. Determine the next best step for the Colorado veterans homes.

The Board of Commissioners supports the approach of the Division in placing its initial focus on the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. The steps being taken at this point are internal in nature, using the Division staff in cooperation with the VCLC staff, to gather data and other information on the topics listed. Stakeholders, including veterans, professional consultants, expertise from other state departments, community members, and members of the Board of Commissioners are expected to be involved in the phase of work following the research now being conducted.

Kudos

This year was once again a time of difficult decisions, major stress, and extreme workloads for the VCLCs and the Division staff located in Denver. In view of the challenges and the successful response to the difficult situations faced, the Board wants to commend the work of many individuals involved in the VCLCs.

To the Staff at All Levels. Your work has been an inspiration to the Board by giving your best efforts to protect the VCLC residents from the damaging effects of COVID-19 and its variants. Your faithful service was needed in this effort and you came through with extraordinary work in this difficult time.

Low Turnover and Retention Rates of the Nursing Staff. The VCLCs have experienced exceptional retention and low turnover in its nursing staff, especially when compared with national averages. For example, nursing staff retention has been in a range from around 70 to 85 percent and the turnover rates have been in a range of a low of about 15 to 35 percent, with the low rates described as phenomenal.

Gratitude Tour. The brainchild of the Division staff, the Gratitude Tour was a successful “Thank You” for the staff at the VCLCs. There are few ways the Division can show its appreciation to the staff so

they chose a servant leadership approach. They drove to each community and provided a staff car wash and cooked the hotdogs and treats to show appreciation. The reports received were that the time and effort of the Division was well spent and well received.

Kim Longe, Nursing Home Administrator at Fitzsimons, received a well-deserved honor by receiving the 2021 Public Service Recognition Award which is awarded to one state of Colorado employee in each of the Governor's 20 Departments for their exceptional performance. Out of 5,000 CDHS employees, Ms. Longe was the winner for the Department of Human Services for the 2021 award which was presented by Governor Polis.