

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)

Veterans and Community Oversight and Engagement Board (VCOEB)

VA Responses to Recommendations from the May 21, 2020 VCOEB Meeting

Recommendation 09-01: “...that the (West LA campus) Grand Lawn gated entrance at the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and San Vicente Boulevard shall be named ‘Carolina Winston Barrie Gate’...that a plaque shall be placed in her honor at the Grand Lawn entrance or promenade; and...that VA Voluntary Services partner with the community to ensure all necessary funding to carry out these recommendations are raised through private contributions.”

VA Response: Non-concur. As a direct descendant of Arcadia Bandini de Baker, one of the two original donors of the land on which the West Los Angeles (LA) campus now stands, Ms. Carolina Winston Barrie was a staunch advocate for LA’s most vulnerable Veterans and for restoration of the historic National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers campus. To her work, she brought a clear commitment to creating a modern community for Veterans that honors the historic legacy of that 1887 gift. Ms. Barrie passed away at her home in Santa Monica on April 29, 2020.

Only Congress may name Federal buildings, including VA facilities. While this statutory requirement, found in 38 United States Code (U.S.C.) 531, arguably may not apply to the Grand Law gates on the West LA campus, it is instructive as to the weight with which the Federal government approaches such decisions and with the significant public interest in them. Given the more than 130-year history of the West LA campus, honoring the personal memory of any one individual over that of another is a difficult and consequential choice. For that reason, VA prefers to defer to Congress in affixing names or memorials to its structures, and when doing so prefers to honor Veterans.

VA remains committed to honoring Ms. Barrie’s legacy through its commitments expressed in the 2016 Draft Master Plan to develop at least 1,200 units of service enriched, permanent supportive housing for severely disabled and vulnerable Veterans, particularly those Veterans experiencing homelessness. VA is also committed to honoring Ms. Barrie’s vision for the renovation and future operation of the historic Wadsworth Chapel, the oldest building on Wilshire Boulevard and an important symbol of the West LA campus’ legacy as a place of healing.

Recommendation 09-02a: “...(T)o act in partnership with the City and County of Los Angeles as the fate of countless homeless individuals are in question following a federal court order by U.S. District Judge David O. Carter. VCOEB has previously recommended that VAGLAHS increase emergency shelter capacity on campus. We do so again in the light of both COVID-19 and the seemingly impossible task imposed on the City and County to create nearly 7,000 emergency shelter beds to house homeless individuals living near freeways and overpasses. We believe VA has a unique opportunity to expand on the early success of CTRS by opening more shelter beds on campus for homeless

Veterans. Doing so would offer a life raft to those homeless Veterans affected by the court order while opening more beds for non-Veterans elsewhere in the community. It is essential that VA act in partnership with local authorities as COVID-19 is a threat to all regardless of Veteran status.”

VA Response: Concur. The Community Engagement and Reintegration Service – the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System (VAGLAHS) program serving Veterans experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness – works alongside agencies of the City and County of Los Angeles as partners to address the crisis in homelessness in this community. At the onset of the Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, VAGLAHS swiftly instituted new initiatives to address the emergency needs of Veterans experiencing homelessness.

Most importantly, VAGLAHS created the Care, Treatment and Rehabilitative Service (CTRS) initiative, in which homeless Veterans living on the street in personally-owned tents are offered a safe environment on VA grounds. CTRS is positioned as a low-barrier-to-entry care initiative incorporating shelter for homeless Veterans by aligning safe, socially-distanced tent-sites together with hygiene stations, laundry, meals and case management services. Under the CTRS initiative, more than 60% of CTRS Veterans have moved on to other treatment and supportive housing programs. This is a great success for a street-level entry program. After an initial pilot of 25 Veterans, this program quickly scaled to handle 50 Veterans. VAGLAHS is now planning for the next expansion to 100 Veterans, with the ability to flex and grow as conditions require.

To further serve the needs of Veterans experiencing homelessness, VAGLAHS realigned 138 Domiciliary beds in Building 214 to serve the following:

- Veterans who need to self-isolate due to a medical condition that increases susceptibility to COVID-19 or known contact with someone who has the disease;
- Veterans who are presumed to have the infection and are awaiting test results; and
- Veterans who are positive and need to remain isolated for a 14-day period.

VAGLAHS also accelerated opening of the A Bridge Home (ABH) project by 45 days. Scheduled to open in May 2020, VAGLAHS worked with its contractor, Carlos Lopez & Associates, to accelerate operations in an alternate site while construction was nearing completion. Although it was originally designed to house 100 homeless Veterans who were moving into transitional housing, it will now be used as a 50-bed facility for non-symptomatic homeless Veterans in order to maintain social distancing measures. It is worth noting that since COVID-related operations began at VAGLAHS in March 2020, CTRS only briefly reached its capacity of 50 Veterans. Neither Building 214 nor ABH have reached capacity.

Recommendation 09-02b: VCOEB also recommends that VA prioritize expenditures of the Lease Revenue Fund to the extent permissible under current law, for the purpose of increasing emergency shelter on campus. VAGLAHS' current plan to expend the Lease Revenue Fund to beautify the campus would be acceptable under ideal conditions by the health and safety of Veterans exposed to conditions living on the street should always take priority."

VA Response: Non-concur. In accordance with section 2(d) of the West Los Angeles Leasing Act of 2016 (Public Law 114– 226; 38 U.S.C. 101 note), revenues from leases at the West LA Campus stay with VA to be used for the renovation and maintenance of the land and facilities at the Campus. (Absent that statutory authority, lease revenues would be directed to the Treasury as required by 38 U.S.C. 8122(a)(1).) Any funds received under a lease pursuant to that authority are credited to the applicable Department medical facilities account and must be available, without fiscal year limitation and without further appropriation. The primary sources of funds in the lease revenue account are the University of California, the Brentwood School and the Building 209 Enhanced-Use Lease (EUL).

To determine appropriate uses of the lease revenue funds, in 2018, Greater Los Angeles (GLA) developed a decision-making framework that prioritized projects that: (1) conform with the West LA Leasing Act; (2) show a demonstrable benefit to homeless or at-risk Veterans; and (3) would not be something otherwise funded through normal medical center operations or programs. After a review of several potential projects, GLA determined that the renovation of the exterior courtyard space between the West LA Campus' two Domiciliary buildings into a therapeutic healing garden met all three criteria, while significantly enhancing the environment of care for Veterans with wide-ranging care needs, including posttraumatic stress, substance abuse disorder, military-sexual trauma and homelessness.

Creation of the Domiciliary healing garden is not a mere beautification project. Rather, it is a significant investment in the environment of care for exactly the cohort of Veterans the West LA Master Plan is designed to serve. Accordingly, the expenditure of lease revenue funds on the Domiciliary healing garden will be done over time and in phases and will account for less than half of the projected \$10 million lease revenues over the next 10 years. Should VAGLAHS need access to these medical facilities funds to support additional emergency shelter at the West LA campus, a significant portion of the lease revenue account will be available to do so. Currently, there is no need to access the lease revenue account to address such needs, as COVID-related funding is available.