

# Idaho veterans home administrator Rick Holloway is trustees' pick for Holyoke Soldiers' Home superintendent

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HOLYOKE — Pending a final nod by Gov. Charlie Baker, Rick Holloway, administrator for a state veterans home in Boise, Idaho, will head east as the new superintendent of the Soldiers' Home in Holyoke.

Holloway prevailed over another finalist, Robert Engell, a Longmeadow resident and administrator of the Overlook Masonic Health Care Center in Charlton. Members of the selection committee agreed both candidates were qualified, but more than one said they saw Holloway as the more “transformational” of the two.

“Clearly Rick Holloway is head and shoulders above any other candidate ... based, in part, on the pure depth of the answers he provided,” said Brig. Gen. Sean T. Collins, one of seven trustees of the Holyoke Soldiers' Home.

In addition to the trustees, three community members including Eric Segundo, director of veterans services for the town of Ludlow; Mary Moscato, a long-term care executive; and Pam Quirk, a retired longtime nurse at the Soldiers' Home, weighed in on the choice. Only Moscato cast a vote for Engell.

Cheryl Lussier Poppe, secretary of the state Department of Veterans' Services, also was part of the selection committee but recused herself from Thursday's vote.

“Be assured that whoever is selected and appointed will receive full support from me

and the Department of Veterans' Services,” Poppe said.

The public vote came two days after Engell and Holloway [participated in public interviews](#) conducted by the search committee.

It came nearly one year to the day when former Holyoke Soldiers' Home Superintendent [Bennett Walsh was suspended](#) during the early weeks of the coronavirus pandemic. COVID-19 made a deadly crawl through the state-run home and ultimately claimed the lives of at least 77 veterans. Dozens more tested positive, along with more than 80 staff members.

Walsh, who led the home after his hire in 2016, never returned to the facility. The state sent in an emergency response team and the National Guard to quell the outbreak and treat the sick and dying. In the aftermath, Walsh, a retired U.S. Marine, was accused of being an ineffective leader who flubbed the response to the outbreak at a dreadful expense to the residents, their families and staff.

Walsh has countered through his attorneys that state officials failed to help until the virus had already taken hold, then absolved themselves of blame.

After Thursday's meeting, Holloway said during an interview that he was drawn to the opportunity after watching the plight of the Holyoke Soldiers' Home play out in news reports.

“When I saw what was happening there, it pained me to see the staff and the residents going through that, and then to have that number of residents pass away was just heartbreaking,” Holloway said.

“The staff didn’t ask for what happened to them, and the residents and families certainly didn’t,” said Holloway, who during his interview said he advocates for hiring talented staff, then “getting out of their way and let them do their jobs.”

Holloway, 62, has been a licensed nursing home administrator for 30 years. Among the consistent, retrospective critiques of Walsh: he had an impressive battlefield record but no health care background.

While Holloway is not a veteran — as has been the norm for superintendents of the Holyoke Soldiers’ Home — his father and grandfather were.

Holloway battled his own outbreak at the Idaho State Veterans Home in Boise months later than the surge at the Holyoke Soldiers’ Home. Fifty-six residents tested positive and nine died, he said. The Boise outbreak began on Oct. 17.

“Within a couple weeks or so we were at 28 (positive cases). It was scary,” Holloway said, adding that key to a turnaround there was the antiviral drug Remdesivir, the same prescribed to former President Donald Trump when he contracted the virus. “It turned our mortality rate down from 38% to 4.”

Holloway said the terms of a potential contract have not yet been worked out, but he looks forward to offering a deserving facility, residents and staff a strong leader. Holloway also once owned a string of nursing homes, which he sold. He also helped turn around another set of nursing

homes from financial insolvency and closure.

The path to choosing a permanent superintendent to run the Holyoke Soldiers’ Home was complicated by a battle between the trustees and Baker’s administration over who has hiring authority. After a lawsuit was filed, a Hampden Superior Court judge ruled the trustees have the sole hiring authority under state law, although the position is technically a gubernatorial appointment.

“I look at this as a watershed moment for the board of trustees,” said member Kevin Jourdain. “This vote in and of itself is historic.”

Jourdain made the motion for a separate trustees vote to choose Holloway; the vote in support was unanimous. The trustees will now formally recommend Holloway to the state Executive Office of Health and Human Services.

[Story source: MassLive.com](https://www.masslive.com)