



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs
Meeting Summary Minutes
November 18th, 2014**

I. Call to Order & Introductions:

Jerry Godwin, Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting of the Commission on Veterans Affairs (CVA) which was held at Flower Valley Elementary School. Jerry asked for all present to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance and to remain standing for a moment of silence for all of those who have given their lives and those who have been wounded for our country in the different conflicts in which our country has been engaged.

II. Approval of Minutes:

Mike Subin, Commissioner, made a motion to approve the October, 2014 Meeting Summary Minutes. Marie Wood, Commissioner, seconded the motion. A vote was taken and the October, 2014 Meeting Summary Minutes were unanimously approved as written. Approved minutes are available online at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva.

III. Presentation of the History of the Commission and its Priorities in 2015 – Top Policy Issues for the Council – Jerry Godwin, Chair; Dan Bullis, Vice- Chair; and Bill Gray, former Chair

The Commission on Veterans Affairs was established by County legislation in 2008 to advise the County Executive and County Council on the coordination and development of the County's policies affecting veterans and their families. The purpose of the Commission is to research, assemble, analyze and disseminate information and educational materials relating to activities and programs that will assist in meeting the needs of veterans and their families; institute and conduct educational and other programs, meetings, and conferences to promote the rights and opportunities for veterans; advise the County Executive and the County Council on the status of programs and services in the State and County related to the needs of veterans and their families; and assist in planning appropriate public acknowledgement of the contributions made by veterans and assist in planning commemoration activities recognizing the contributions made by veterans.

Highlights and achievements of the Commission include:

- We continue our efforts to combat veteran homelessness through our support of Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) vouchers. Through the advocacy efforts of the Commission, County Executive Isiah Leggett, and Congressman Chris Van Hollen the County has received 80 VASH vouchers over the last four years, each worth \$13,122 or \$1,049,760 per year in housing subsidies.
- We take seriously our duties to publically recognize our veterans. They should be thanked for service to their Nation in uniform and also for continued service as public servants, students, employees, and cherished neighbors. The Commission worked with both the Rockville Memorial Library and the Silver Spring Civic Building at Veterans Plaza to install flat screen televisions that are dedicated to scrolling the names and pictures of County residents killed in action in combat dating back to World War II. In addition the Silver Spring Display includes information for Veterans and all active military.
- In 2010 the County enacted a hiring preference for people with disabilities, veterans and disabled veterans. Since this preference was implemented the County has hired 98 veterans, including four disabled veterans. In November 2012 voters overwhelmingly approved Question A, which allows for a non-competitive special hiring authority for persons with severe disabilities, including disabled veterans, similar to Federal Government Schedule A.
- Last month Jerry attended the County Council Health and Human Services (HHS) Committee and presented the Commission's top two policy issues for fiscal year 2015. The top two policy issues are for the Council work with us to increase access in the County to health care for veterans, including asking the DC VA Medical Center

extending their shuttle bus service to Montgomery County; and for the Council work with us to increase outreach to the general veteran population regarding programs, services and recognition events; and this includes supporting veterans at Montgomery College and the Universities at Shady Grove.

IV. Veterans Education & Benefits Collaborative and Dedication of Memorial Plaza – Mike Subin, Commissioner

In 2013 County Executive Isiah Leggett announced the launch of the Montgomery County Veterans Education and Benefits Partnership. The initiative provides improvements to education, social services, career development, benefits support and counseling to U.S. armed forces' veterans enrolled at Montgomery College campuses, the Universities at Shady Grove (USG) and Montgomery County's Johns Hopkins campus. In addition, the USG opened the Office of Veterans Resources to provide additional support for veterans and their families. Mike reported that prior to the opening of the USG Office of Veterans Resources only ten veterans were known to be attending USG. Now they are aware of approximately 250 veterans. Montgomery College's Combat2College program provides academic and social opportunities, as well as support services for veterans, and active/reserve service members.

Betsy Luecking, Staff, reported that in observance of Veterans Day, the new Memorial Plaza located on the Government Complex Center Terrace between the new Courthouse annex and the Executive Office Building in Rockville along Route 28 was officially dedicated and the eternal flame unveiled. The ceremony was an opportunity for the County to show its appreciation and support for those people who put their lives on the line, domestically and abroad, to ensure our continued safety.

Among those participating was retired Navy CDR Everett Alvarez Jr. of Potomac, who was the first U.S pilot to be downed and detained during the Vietnam War and spent over eight years in captivity, making him the second longest held American POW, after U.S. Army Colonel Floyd James Thompson.

The plaza is part of the Judicial Center Annex construction project that began in 2011 and involved an addition to, and renovation of, the existing Judicial Center. The plaza and green spaces were redesigned to invite public use of the space. The area features a water fountain, new trees, benches and a Memorial Walkway to receive the plaques that were relocated from the original Memorial Garden to allow for the construction of the annex.

At the dedication County Executive Isiah Leggett and Council President Craig Rice presented Commission on Veterans Affairs Chair Jerry Godwin with a proclamation declaring that 2015 shall be the year of "Montgomery County's Veterans and Their Families".

V. Introduction and Presentation – Ed Chow, Secretary, Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs

Secretary Chow reported on the accomplishments of the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) over his last five years in office:

- The MDVA Cemetery Program System is the busiest VA cemetery system in the country. For the first time, all five cemeteries in Maryland are receiving yearly grants for improvement and maintenance, ranging from \$700,000 to \$4,500,000.
- Charlotte Hall is home to over 400 veterans and is rated four stars by both Medicaid and Medicare. MDVA's partner Health Management Resources of Maryland, LLC (HMR) is going to incorporate in their contract at no expense to the State a pharmaceutical service, electronic records management, and a service representative to work with Veterans at Charlotte Hall. HMR will also be reducing the State's participation in the contract by \$11K a month – a \$120K per year savings once the Charlotte Hall census reaches 415 veterans.
- MDVA is currently working with the Maryland Department of Human Resources (DHR) to identify veterans throughout the state currently using state Medicaid. MDVA has transferred 347 veterans from the state Medicaid program to the Veterans Affairs (VA) Aid and Attendance Program saving the state approximately \$6,000,000. (\$2,000,000 savings from Charlotte Hall)

- The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services received a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) grant totaling \$3,800,000 for assistance toward the cost of expanding their emergency generator power capacity. The grant provided 65% of the funding required. A State of Maryland grant totaling \$2,100,000 funded the remaining 35% of the project. The State receives an energy credit for testing the generator every month that results in a credit of \$10,000 to \$15,000 every year. The State also receives an energy credit for using the generator in the summer that results in a credit of approximately \$25,000 every year.
- Five years ago the average age of a Commissioner on the Maryland Commission on Veterans Affairs was 65. Since then nine younger aged veterans have been appointed between the ages of 29 and 41. More women have also been appointed with 20% of the 70 Commissioners being female.
- MDVA is also working with the Department of Public Safety by helping incarcerated veterans sign up for the benefits and services they are entitled to. There has been a reduction of returning incarcerated individuals from 50% to 43%, or 670 people. It is unknown how many of these individuals are veterans.
- Approximately 25% of veterans belong to Veterans Service Organizations such as American Legion (AL), Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and Disabled American Veterans (DAV). MDVA is working on outreaching to the other 75% of veterans. Secretary Chow has formed a faith-based advisory group to assist him with reaching out to veterans in the faith-based community.
- MDVA has partnered with AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) and working with senior centers to identify surviving spouses of Vietnam veterans who contracted one of the 15 maladies from Agent Orange and died as a result from one of those maladies. Surviving spouses can file a claim for benefits on behalf of their deceased spouse.
- Secretary Chow increased the Outreach and Advocacy department by three staff without an increase in budget.
- MDVA has reached out to all the Congressional offices within Maryland and offered assistance and outreach. These offices have also been able to provide MDVA with data and information concerning veterans services and programs. Congressman Van Hollen's office helped to identify that veterans in Montgomery County were going to Frederick County to file their claims. Due to this information, MDVA has newly hired VBS staff for Montgomery County to better serve veterans and their families.
- Secretary Chow announced that MDVA has just hired a new full-time VBS for Montgomery County.
- The MDVA Outreach and Advocacy e-mail distribution list started out with approximately 1,200 people. It was increased to approximately 23,000 people. You can sign up to receive e-mails from the MDVA at <http://veterans.maryland.gov>.
- When Secretary Chow began five years ago, MDVA was averaging 2,695 claims per year. MDVA is now averaging 5,737 claims per year. 80% of these claims are fully-developed, which means veterans and their families receive a quicker claim approval from the VA. The dollar amount from the claims has increased by 24%, from \$15,000,000 to \$25,000,000.
- Operation Hire was an initiative in alignment with the O'Malley-Brown Administrations GOAL of full employment of Maryland veterans by the end of calendar year 2015. Operation Hire began June 1 and continued through September 9. The campaign challenged Maryland employers to incorporate or expand upon established veteran hiring initiatives. The final participant tally totaled 184 State Agencies, local jurisdictions and private sector businesses. As a result of this initiative, almost 400 veterans were hired within the 100 day period.
- Back then the MDVA was averaging 5,600 contacts per year. Now the MDVA is averaging 102,000 contacts a year. Claims received by the MDVA have also gone up 78% from an average of 2,700 claims per year to 4,700 claims per year. In 2012 the MDVA moved into the Fully Developed Claim (FDC) mode. The FDC program is an optional new initiative that offers Service members, Veterans, and survivors faster decisions from VA on

compensation, pension, and survivor benefit claims.

- In 2011, MDVA held its first veteran-owned business conference had 215 veteran-owned businesses in attendance. Due to the conference's success, ARINC Defense Systems Engineering Services co-hosted a cyber conference with MDVA for Maryland veteran-owned small businesses, which was attended by 90 businesses. Both events did not cost MDVA any money.

The floor was then opened to questions:

1. How many veterans reside in Montgomery County?

There are approximately 435,000 veterans living in the State of Maryland. Montgomery County has the third largest veteran population at approximately 44,648.

2. What is MDVA doing to outreach to military service members who are being discharged?

The Department of Defense (DoD) Transition Assistance Program (TAP) is a mandatory curriculum for service members transitioning to civilian life. MDVA has asked DoD for the DD214s of those veterans exiting service and returning to Maryland. DoD has not been forthcoming with this information due to privacy issues. For those veterans that MDVA does know about, a packet of information is sent to them.

3. Does MDVA provide assistance to widows who wish to visit their loved ones in their final resting places?

Secretary Chow said this issue has not been brought up before, but he will discuss it with his staff. Dan Bullis, Vice-Chair, reported that American Legion Post 41 is able to assist with these types of requests.

4. Will a Veterans Court be established in Montgomery County?

State legislature passed a law to convene a task force to study whether to establish a special court to hear cases concerning military veterans and active-duty personnel who suffer from mental illness, post-traumatic stress syndrome, alcohol and drug abuse, or problems readjusting to civilian life. The task force recommended that a veterans court be established at the circuit court level in Prince George's County. MDVA will monitor the success of the veterans court before proceeding to establish them in other counties. Secretary Chow noted that Prince George's County helped to fund the veterans court.

V. Fire Safety - Jim Resnick, Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service

On Veterans Day Montgomery County Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) offered ride alongs for veterans. It was a way to outreach to veterans who may be interested in becoming a volunteer or applying for a career position with FRS. The youngest veteran to participate was 24 years old and the oldest veterans was 84 years old. Ride alongs are available any day of the year.

FRS offers free home safety evaluations and will provide assistance with installation of pre-purchased smoke alarms or batteries at the time of the visit. Free smoke alarms are available for seniors and low-income homeowners.

The Silver Spring Fire Department received a grant to purchase 500 SafeAwake smoke alarms. Once an existing smoke alarm is activated, the SafeAwake alerts you by its included bed shaker and loud audible alarm. These smoke alarms are free for deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

Jim encouraged everyone to fill out a File of Life card that you keep on your refrigerator. The completed information in the file provides emergency medical personnel with quick access to important information, such as medical conditions, medications taken, allergies, medical history and emergency contact information. The ability to access this information can save valuable time, enabling quick assessments of medical situations by emergency medical personnel. To obtain a free File of Life card please call 240-777-3000 (V).

Jim noted that if you call 911 and make a request to be taken to Walter Reed or the VA Hospital in DC, the medical services team will do their best to take you the hospital of your choice as long as it is not a medical emergency.

VI. Chair and Vice-Chair Report:

Jerry Godwin, Chair, asked Commissioners to continue to review the materials regarding the County establishing a preference to Veteran Owned Businesses.

At a VA Capitol Health Care Network (VISN 5) briefing on November 10th it was announced that in the planned capital projects waiting for FY16 Strategic Capital Investment Plan (SCIP) Application Approval is a new Montgomery County Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) with an estimated 11,700 square foot lease space. Ann Humphrey, Representative of Congressman Van Hollen, noted that the review process should be completed by February, 2015.

VII. Unfinished Business: Deferred due to time constraints.

VIII. New Business:

Roland Kauffman, Commissioner, shared his concerns that Montgomery County Public Schools are open on Veterans Day. He suggested that the schools close so students can attend Veterans Day events. Bill Gray, Commissioner, noted that he and several Commissioners speak at schools on Memorial Day and Veterans Day, as well as several other times throughout the year. A member of the public stated that he has been part of a yearly Veterans Day program that is held at Laytonsville Elementary School.

IX. Roundtable: None.

Adjournment: 8:00 p.m.

Next Full Commission Meeting: **PLEASE NOTE DIFFERENT MEETING LOCATION** - Tuesday, December 16th, 2014, from 6:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. at Rockville Memorial Library, 21 Maryland Avenue, Rockville.

Respectfully submitted: Carly Clem, Administrative Specialist I; Betsy Luecking, Program Manager II