



Commission on Veterans Affairs

FY 24 Priorities

April 11, 2023

Wayne Miller, Chair • Robert Koffman, Vice-Chair

The Commission on Veterans Affairs thanks the County Council for the support you have provided over the past 14 years for funding programs that benefit the quality of life for Veterans and their families. We recognize that the COVID-19 public health emergency is placing difficult and unprecedented pressures on programs and services of the County as well as the rest of the country. We recommend the following:

1. **Shelter for Safety at Seneca Landing Special Park Accessible Launch** - Montgomery Parks has completed construction of a new floating launch for non-motorized boats, improving accessibility and safety for kayakers, canoeists, and paddle boarders at Seneca Landing Special Park. It is heavily used daily by the general public, but it especially benefits severely disabled Veterans and others to access Seneca Creek and the Potomac River. Team River Runner facilitates two important treatment modalities: exercise and nature. Many of the Veterans were or are at Walter Reed for treatment and participate in Team River Runner that meets there Sundays. It used to take an hour to get in the water for some and now about 1 minute. We recommend the County Council provide needed funding of an estimated \$100,000 through the Parks CIP for the design and construction of a shelter for the picnic area for all but especially for people who have disabilities, and who have temperature regulation issues, to be safer and more comfortable while using and enjoying the park.
2. **Vouchers for Homeless Veterans and their Families** - We would like to ensure that Health and Human Services / Services to End and Prevent Homelessness remains funded as many of our veterans are impacted and need these services. We continue to be pleased with the County's efforts to end homelessness amongst Veterans and to assist in obtaining permanent housing. The program was highly successful during the Zero:16 campaign. Montgomery County has been the direct recipient of 98 HUD VASH vouchers and an additional 25 ported HUD VASH vouchers from DC and other states. We are in strong support of Bethesda Cares expansion of their outreach to Veterans. We commend the County making a priority of the addition of permanent affordable housing for homeless populations and working to achieve equity through sound housing policy.
3. **Serving Together** - Serving Together was created to coordinate the system of care for Veterans, service members and their families so the entire community can better identify those Veterans and direct them to supports that are in place for them. This organization is a recipient of funding from the County, and we recommend this funding continue. The Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) provides funding for Serving Together programming through a Behavioral Health & Crisis Services (BHCS) General Funds/based budget contract. Contractual services were originally funded, in FY11, by Community Grant award. Last year the total contract went from \$150,000.00 to a \$154,500.00. Thanks to this year's 8% Inflationary Adjustment (\$12,360) the base funding

of the contract will increase from \$154,500 to \$166,860.00. At this point only 6% IA has been executed (\$9,270), and hopefully the additional 2% (\$3,090) will be executed soon.

4. **Warrior Canine Connection** - Warrior Canine Connection enlists wounded, ill, and injured Warriors in a therapeutic mission of learning to train service dogs for their fellow Veterans. To train a service dog, an otherwise isolated Warrior must necessarily re-enter society, experiencing positive interactions with members of the community. Warrior Canine Connection continues to grow. WCC's largest graduating class of 19 assistance dogs was this year. To accomplish this, WCC has served a total of 6,075 Veterans through their Mission Based Trauma Recovery: 600 alone this year. Additionally, WCC was selected by the VACO to provide programming under the PAWS Act signed 8/21. According to the VA, the PAWS Act is an "unfunded mandate". Therefore, WCC needs help to provide these services for Veterans both locally and nationally. Once again, the impact WCC has on the Veteran community merits approval of the \$50,000 Community grant. We recommend that this funding continue.