



Commission on Veterans Affairs

Testimony on FY 26 Operating Budget

April 8, 2025

Michael Wilson, Chair

The Commission on Veterans Affairs wishes to thank the residents of the County and the County Council for their combined support for Veterans for funding programs that benefit the quality of life for Veterans and their families. We recommend the following:

Vouchers for Homeless Veterans and their Families - We commend the County for making a priority of the addition of permanent affordable housing for the homeless veteran population. HUD-VASH is a collaborative program which pairs HUD's Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance with VA case management and supportive services for homeless Veterans. However, not all Veterans qualify for VASH vouchers due to receiving less than an honorable discharge and are therefore not eligible for VA programs. We appreciate the overall increase in funding for affordable housing and homelessness services and recommend that the appropriated \$650,000 with a 3% inflationary increase per year to serve those not eligible for VA programs. We also recommend the full funding of the Bethesda Cares contract with the inflationary of \$958,476. The program also has maintained a 100% housing retention rate for veterans who had moved off the streets or out of shelters into their own apartment units.

Serving Together – The County provides funding for Serving Together through Behavioral Health & Crisis Services. Veterans can work closely with a professional care coordinator who is knowledgeable about the resources and program eligibility for service members, veterans, and military families. We recommend that the County continue to fund this program with a 3 1/2 % increase in FY 26 \$182,333.42.

Warrior Canine Connection - This program works with recovering Warriors to train dogs to act as service dogs for other wounded Warriors. This program is based out of Walter Reed and has a training location in Boyds. The County provided a Capital Cost Share Grant, and they were awarded \$500,000 from the 2024 and 2025 budget cycles. The funds are to be used to help design and construct a puppy breeding and enrichment center. We would ask consideration of any additional funding that may be needed.

The VA has been directed to reduce its workforce by some 80,000 workers, many held by Veterans. Montgomery County is home to 36,589 Veterans. We ask that the County assist with providing support to those may be losing their job.

We want to thank the Council for the passage of Bill 6-24 Property Tax Credit for Disabled Veterans, and we were pleased to receive the application from Councilmember Natali Fani-Gonzalez office this week that staff distributed to Veterans. The due date of April 15 for this credit has been extended to May 1 so Veterans who are eligible can apply.

The Commission is collaborating with the Maryland Military Coalition and the Military Officers Association of America to work to establish a Veterans Treatment Court in Montgomery County. We would appreciate your support of this effort.

The Council supported funding for the establishment of an accessible kayak launch that was built by Parks at Seneca Creek at Riley's Lock. Parks collaborated with Team River Runner and the Commission on this highly used project that serves Veterans and the general public. Parks recently established another adaptive launch at Black Hill Regional Park, and it is now operational. Thank you for your support of this.

In closing, the Commission again thank you for your continued support.