



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs
Meeting Summary Minutes
December 17, 2019**

I. Call to Order

Wayne Miller, Vice-Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting of the Commission on Veterans Affairs (CVA). Wayne 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

A motion was made to approve the November 2019 Meeting Summary Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken, and the November 2019 Meeting Summary Minutes were unanimously approved. Approved minutes are available online at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva.

III. Evaluating the Efficacy of a Service Dog Training Program for Military Veterans with PTSD – Dr. Cheryl Krause-Parello, Professor, Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing; Erika Friedmann, PhD, Co-Principal Investigator and Deb Taber, Research Coordinator, University of Maryland School of Nursing; Rick Yount of Warrior Canine Connection and Cooper the Dog

Research Study Flyer: www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A&D%20Docs/CVA/UMDRsearchFlyer2019.pdf

Warrior Canine Connection Website: <https://warriorcanineconnection.org/>

University of Maryland School of Nursing (UMSN) and Warrior Canine Connection (WCC) have developed a partnership to conduct a study “Evaluating the Efficacy of a Service Dog Training Program for Military Veterans with PTSD”. The study started in 2019 and will run through 2021 with a research grant from the National Institute of Health.

The group is seeking Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) to work with WCC to train service animals for other Veterans. There are currently ten Veterans in the study from the local community, including one Veteran who travels from Pennsylvania to Boyds. The study is looking at how training the dogs for other Veterans reduces stress levels by looking at biological markers and psycho-social measures to quantify the effects of a service dog training program for Veterans who have PTS symptoms. The group would like help from this Commission and experts in the community in recruiting local Veterans to participate in the study. Grant funding is available for up to 60 Veterans. Betsy Luecking, Manager, can distribute a flyer about the study to her distribution list of approximately 4,000 Veterans, and to all the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars locations in Montgomery County. Neil Greenberger, Office of Public Information, can send a press release out to County residents.

The program is for 8-weeks. Participants are compensated for their time. Interested participants can contact Deb Taber (410-706-4233 / 410-706-0659 / dtaber@umaryland.edu) who will then connect them with WCC to determine if they meet their criteria for service dog training. Veterans are randomized into a controlled condition which is an online service dog training program where they learn techniques online. Veterans in this controlled condition group then have the opportunity to participate in the service dog training program afterwards. The other Veterans group is immediately placed in the service dog training program.

The floor was opened to questions.

It was asked if there is a rolling start date. Yes, the start date is based on enrollment date. It was noted that while there are many programs with service dogs for Veterans with PTS, these programs are not authorized for reimbursement. The reason why this study is so unique is because there is no real data to show the effects of having a service dog and training a service dog on Veterans with PTS. Both can be seen as truly therapeutic. The group is working to get funding for another study that would research the effects on the service dog recipients.

It was asked what the enrollment criteria is for participants. The Veteran must have served on active duty on or post-9/11; diagnosed with PTS – either by a physician or self-diagnosed; no allergies to pet dander; negative for animal abuse; and they cannot be experiencing a psychotic episode. No prior experience working with service animals is required. The group recognizes that Veterans with PTS may not want to be formally diagnosed to keep it off their medical records.

It was asked who the staff are at WCC. Rick Young is a licensed social worker who works with Dr. Bob Koffmann who is a psychiatrist. Other staff include marriage and family therapists as well as several other social workers. Rick noted that it is important that this study isn't framed as therapy, but more of a skill building program. The training is therapeutic and the study is designed to prove that.

It was asked how the objective metrics were developed to determine the program's success. The study will use salivary biomarkers as the objective metric. Veterans will give some of their saliva to measure their cortisol, alpha amylase, telomere length, and IgA (stress hormones). Measurements will be taken after week 8 to see if there are any changes. Telomeres protect the vital information in our DNA. Long telomere lengths are related to greater longevity, while shorter lengths are related to aging diseases such as cancer, arthritis and heart disease. The study will find out if training an animal will help to stop shortening the length of telomeres or keep them constant (assist in cellular aging).

It was asked if Veterans were asked about their medical history/comorbid conditions (chronic diseases, diabetes, hypertension), and if the control and study groups were evenly divided to include such conditions. The group will be looking at this and if statistically the groups are not equal. The data is collected at the time of entry and with randomization they hope it is equal, but with this population size that cannot be guaranteed.

Rick Yount, Executive Director, explained how WCC programs are available at VA and DoD hospitals, Veterans Treatment Courts, and in the community. Veterans wait two to three years on average for a well-trained service dog. WCC breeds their own service dogs. WCC dogs are Golden and Labrador Retrievers specially bred for health, temperament and longevity. The WCC Director of Dog Programs researches at least 12 generations of each dog's pedigree to obtain an accurate picture of his or her genetic potential to become a successful service dog for a wounded warrior. Potential service dogs in the WCC program are low-aroused and do not demonstrate aggression towards people or other animals. They possess negligible prey drive. They may not pull on the leash or chase small animals, as this will create an unsafe situation for their handler. WCC dogs are carefully socialized as puppies and gradually exposed to experiences and public places to make them calm and confident in all environments. They have sensitive demeanors and are eager to please. They are also very friendly and promote social interaction for their Veteran trainers.

Training a service dog for a fellow Veteran provides a valuable opportunity for a Veteran suffering from psychological injuries to reintegrate into civilian life. As part of their training, Warriors have the responsibility to teach the dogs that the world is a safe place. Through that process, they must convince themselves of the same.

Veteran trainers are taught to praise and provide treats to their dogs when they experience a startling event, such as hearing a car backfire. Rather than turning inward to focus on their past trauma, the trainers must get outside of their own heads to focus on the dogs and their mission to help another Veteran. Additionally, dogs

offer opportunities for Veteran trainers – who often isolate themselves from society – to experience positive interactions with members of the community. Their training requires emotionally numb Veterans to demonstrate positive emotion and communication in order to successfully teach their dogs. The Veterans are also taught to practice patience when training the dog which in turn helps them to have patience in their own lives. Veterans participating in the program have reported that using these positive emotions to praise their dogs has significantly improved their family dynamics, as their children are able to experience and respond to this positive parenting strategy. Rick began his career as a licensed social worker working with children in specialized foster care. He observed how the training of a mobility service dog mirrored effective parenting. It is all about having a relationship that is consistent and firm and reinforcing when things are done correctly.

Rick demonstrated Coopers ability to pick up a pen from a person at a table and bring it to another person at another table.

Rick said there are VA studies currently studying service dogs trained to block a Veterans back or to stand in front of them to provide protection, or to walk in front of the Veteran to make a perimeter and block people from coming too close. There are service dogs also being studied that have been trained to enter the Veterans home first to sweep the house for potential intruders and bark if any are found. Rick steered away from these studies because WCC does not train service dogs to support symptomatology; they train service dogs to help address symptoms and ultimately break down isolation. The training of the service animal is not the final result of learning the commands but the process and mindfulness of getting there. Being able to control the service dog's attitude is more important than anything.

Betsy asked what commands the service dog is taught to provide emotional support to the Veteran. WCC teaches service dogs to respond to different signs of stress. For example, a bouncing knee is very common and the service dog is taught to put their head on the knee. Or if a Veteran has their head in their hands the dog will touch the Veteran's nose. This will get the Veteran's attention and redirect it to the service dog. The service dog is picking up on these stress cues and engaging the Veteran. The Veteran has been taught how important it is to reinforce behavior and will pet the service dog. Rick said that when a Veteran pets their service dog they release an oxytocin hormone which counters the effects of cortisol (known as the stress hormone). Oxytocin has a calming effect and is sometime referred to as the hormone of cuddling. The service dog also releases oxytocin during the petting.

Beginning with the Honor Litter in 2013, WCC puppies are named for Service Members and Veterans who have made significant contributions to our nation — and in many cases, made the ultimate sacrifice. Warrior Canine Connection welcomes public input on names for future litters. Cooper was named after a dog that was killed in action. By naming dogs after fallen warriors, it shows gold star families that we are not forgetting their family members.

Betsy said as manager of the Commission on People with Disabilities she has seen several demonstrations of service animals over the years, but no one discussed the emotional assistance provided by the service animal. Rick said emotional support is common within the industry and most service dogs requested now are service dogs for PTS. It can create challenges for those Veterans as PTS is mostly a hidden disability and people out in the public may question the Veteran's need a service animal.

Rick learned early on the impact a service dog can have on a Veteran's sleep. He told a story of a Veteran who had PTS and was receiving treatment at the VA Medical Center in Menlo Park, California. A nurse said this Veteran had the worst sleep of any Veteran that had come through the program. As the Veteran seemed calmer with the dog during the day, Rick arranged for the dog to sleep in the Veteran's room one night. The next morning the Veteran said it was the first time he had slept six hours since 2004.

Betsy added there is abuse by the public of using their pets as service animals. Rick said he is focused on creating a campaign to educate businesses on their rights and what is considered a reasonable accommodation. Betsy said a business may ask for a service animal to be removed if the service animal

behaves in a way that poses a direct threat to the health or safety of others or is not under the control of the handler. There is no requirement that the service animal be licensed and the ADA does not require service animals to wear a vest, ID tag, or specific harness. Persons who have a service animal can only be asked in situations where it is not obvious that the dog is a service animal, (1) is the dog a service animal required because of a disability? and (2) what work or task has the dog been trained to perform?

It was asked if WCC is tracking the number of organizations that provide service dogs to Veterans. There are 39 organizations in North America that provide service dogs to Veterans. Through the trade association Assisted Dogs International, WCC co-hosted a conference two years ago in Gaithersburg with America's Vet Dogs, based out of New York. The conference focused on Veterans and PTS. It was a positive and successful conference with 95 organizations in attendance sharing lessons learned.

Cynthia Macri, Commissioner, said what is unique about this program is that Veterans with mental health issues are training the service dogs, guided by professional trainers. Rick said it is a "trojan dog" approach and the training itself is the therapy. Many Veterans feel they do not deserve a Veteran status and through the training of service dogs for Veterans, the program has been able to work on this resistance. Bob Koffmann said there are not many therapies that can work on "moral injury" other than volunteering and sacrificing your time for another Veteran. The value and benefit of this program with a person-dog approach is another way to manage and treat the moral wounds of war by taking care of others.

Rick said WCC is careful to make sure the focus of the mission is to train the service dog for a fellow Veteran. The model is not for the Veteran to train a dog for themselves. If it happens that the Veteran also needs a service dog and develops a connection with the dog they are training, they can work with that Veteran to apply for that particular service dog. This has happened on several occasions. Rick added that a Veteran may train half a dozen different dogs. Bob said that oftentimes a Veteran who goes through the training program has significant reductions in symptoms and no longer feel they need to have a service animal and will withdraw their applications as they have become more confident and more socialized.

Cynthia said when she left the military, the VA transition service only matched what she had done in the military to a civilian skill. She was never asked what she wanted to do. With the WCC program, Veterans can learn they can become dog trainers or work in social work, psychology or psychiatry. Rick said many of their trainers go on to jobs in social work.

The Commission asked to receive an update on this study next year.

IV. Chair and Vice Chair Report

Dan reported he and Cynthia were asked by Senator Van Hollen to be on the interview panel for nominations to the United States Service Academy.

Montgomery County resident Col. (Ret.) Charles McGee is an African-American fighter pilot who was one of the Tuskegee Airmen and a career officer in the United States Air Force for 30 years who flew a total of 409 combat missions in World War II, Korea and Vietnam. Col. McGee turned 100 years old on December 7th. The County had tried to organize an event to honor him, but they were unable to get in touch with him. Col. McGee is scheduled to be a speaker at an event in Silver Spring on February 12th at 2pm. Neil said the County will see if they can take advantage of this scheduled event to honor him for his service. This Commission has discussed recognizing Veteran's accomplishments throughout the year and this will be a great start. Austin Morris, Representative for Senator Chris Van Hollen, said she knows the family and can connect them with Neil. Austin added that Senator Van Hollen included legislation in the FY 2020 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) to authorize the honorary promotion of Bethesda Veteran and Tuskegee Airman Col. Charles McGee. Once signed by the President, Col. Charles McGee will become Brigadier General Charles McGee.

V. Discussion – Military/Veterans Display Cases at Rockville Memorial Library and Silver Spring Civic Building

February is Black History Month and Betsy has contacted a woman who is involved with the Buffalo Soldiers and Tuskegee Airmen to assist the Commission in putting together the display cases at the Silver Spring Civic Building (SSCB) for that month. Betsy has also contacted the NAACP to gather items that would be of interest to be displayed. Betsy suggested rotating items in the SSCB display cases three or four times a year. It will take a lot of planning and Commissioners were asked to assist in locating items to display as well as assisting in setting up the display cases.

Betsy reported that Leanne Doerflinger, mother of Army PFC Thomas Doerflinger who was killed in action in Iraq in 2004, wrote a letter to County Executive Marc Elrich as she was upset the Rockville Memorial Library (RML) did not have a display in November for the fallen soldiers of Iraq and Afghanistan that have been displayed in previous years. Due to changes in staff at RML, the display cases were reserved in error by another organization. The RML Branch Manager has secured the display cases for May and November for future years indefinitely so that this situation does not occur again. Leanne sent another e-mail requesting that a plaque be displayed in the lobby of RML to explain how and why the library was renamed. The RML Branch Manager discussed this with the Director of the Libraries who said we can move forward with creating a plaque. Betsy has sent an e-mail to Commissioners and to family members of fallen soldiers with a narrative explaining why the library was renamed. She asked for edits and suggestions.

Before the meeting Betsy spoke to the parents of Army LTC James Walton, killed in action in Afghanistan in 2008. They were seeking to have the photos of their son returned and did not know they were on display at the SSCB instead of RML. Betsy told his parents what this Commission has worked on including the digital displays at SSCB and RML and the fallen heroes listed on the County's website. Betsy also told them about the County working to have a second Veterans home located in Rockville. Army LTC Walton's mother volunteers at Charlotte Hall but dislikes the drive. She is excited at the prospect of being able to volunteer near her home.

VI. Announcements

Austin Morris, Representative of Senator Chris Van Hollen, reported she spoke with Michael Heimall, VA DC Medical Center Director. VA has ordered the doors for installation. Austin also reported that other items included in the NDAA are provisions to improve privatized military housing at military bases including Maryland's Fort Meade and Aberdeen Proving Ground; provisions to repeal the Widow's Tax; provisions to guarantee paid parental leave for all federal employees; and provisions of the Senator's Valor Medals Review Act. For more information read: www.vanhollen.senate.gov/news/press-releases/van-hollen-statement-on-ndaa-final-passage.

Adjournment: 7:30pm

Next Full Commission Meeting: Tuesday, January 21st, 2020 from 6pm to 7:30pm. Held at Health and Human Services, 401 Hungerford Drive, 1st Floor 1A Conference Room, Rockville, MD 20850

Respectfully submitted, Carly Clem, Administrative Specialist I, Betsy Luecking, Community Outreach Manager