



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs
Meeting Minutes
December 20, 2023**

****MEETING WAS HELD VIRTUALLY VIA ZOOM****

Call to Order

Wayne Miller, Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting of the Commission on Veterans Affairs (CVA). He asked for all present to say the Pledge of Allegiance. He recognized prisoners of war and asked 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.

The County's Commitment to Veterans and Their Families – James C. Bridgers, Jr., Ph.D., MBA., Director, Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (MCDHHS)

Jameelah Johnson, JM-HL, MPH, MBA-HCM, BSB, Medical Records Manager, MCDHHS, Ex-Officio Commissioner Representative for CVA, introduced Dr. Bridgers.

Dr. Bridgers reported that he received his official retirement orders from the Department of the U.S. Army last week and has officially retired within the U.S. Army Reserves.

Dr. Bridgers discussed MCDHHS services that are available across the lifespan from birth to death and the family systems that the department supports. MCDHHS provides a spectrum of services that reflect each individual and continues to advocate and support services for veterans, servicemembers and their family members. County leadership is committed that all residents have access to services and programs.

This Commission provides a link to the veterans in our community as well as provides knowledge of the services needed. The County looks at the continuum of care for veterans, servicemembers and their families across the lifespan and engages in partnerships to support those mechanisms. Partnerships include Department of Recreation and Montgomery Parks to increase a connection to our community and to help servicemembers transition.

Dr. Bridgers encouraged Commissioners to become involved with their Board of Elections to help shape decisions and policies at the local, state and federal level that help veterans and their families.

MCDHHS currently has 300 vacancies and is in need of clinicians, psychologists, and psychiatrists.

He acknowledged that the coronavirus is still present and the need to receive the most recent vaccinations.

MCDHHS will be debuting a new electronic resources to connect residents to services faster. The community connect portal will provide a single-entry point to many of the programs administered within MCDHHS and allow residents to apply for multiple programs as well as determine level of eligibility for additional services. Public testing will begin within the next few days. The department will want feedback to ensure the application is accessible, understandable and user-friendly.

The floor was opened to questions.

- **How can the Commission assist in relaying this information to the community?** By sharing it with your network and forwarding it to friends, battle buddies and family members.

- **Regarding the vacancies, the length of time it takes for an individual to obtain a degree in psychiatry or psychology and begin to practice is between 12 to 20 years. Addiction counselor certification can be achieved in two years from a community college. It was suggested that a program for transitioning servicemembers, reservists, guardsmen, and their family members be established that directed them into these supportive ancillary certification programs to address the behavioral and mental health gap in services.** Dr. Bridgers spoke at the Welcome Back Center last night which is a partnership with Montgomery College and internationally trained clinicians, nurses and medical students who need state certification. In attendance were 37 nurses, 1 psychiatrist, 3 medical students and other individuals who had received the equivalent of PHD training and other addiction specialties. The challenge with training international students is retaining them in the HHS provider network. He noted that the County's partner LEXUS MC Hospital Systems is equally in need of clinicians, nurses and psychologists. The County has been working with the Maryland Department of Health and peer support trained individuals to help mitigate access. Telehealth services are great, but sometimes more of an interpersonal connection is needed to help folks heal. Dr. Bridgers would like to continue this discussion with Dr. Macri and possibly convene a workgroup to address these issues. Dr. Macri suggested facilities such as Shady Grove Adventist or Holy Cross sponsor students during clinical supervision in positions.
- **It was suggested that the County outreach to local military bases and hospitals such as Walter Reed and advertise at TAPS class as they are a source of untapped talent that could fill much needed positions with County government.** Dr. Patrice McGhee, Chief, Aging & Disability Services, MCDHHS, said Montgomery County Office of Human Resources could potentially hold a recruitment event for military servicemembers. This suggestion will be looked into further.

Discussion on Operation Green Light and Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) Proposal

MCDOT would like to become more involved in the County's Operation Green Light initiative next year. They have suggested lighting buses with green lights, bus cards that would honor veterans, or wrapping buses with photos of local veterans that would include names and dates of service. They are also willing to design a website and link it via a QR code on their bus advertisements.

There has also been renewed interest by Commissioners to work with cities and towns in the County on hometown hero banners that could be displayed on lamp posts. The city of Corning, New York offers a Hometown Heroes Banner Program, and it was recently brought to our attention that Poolesville may have a program in place. Betsy suggested the Commission research the topic of hometown hero banners further and have a more in-depth discussion at the next meeting.

Chair and Vice Chair Report

Wayne appointed Dr. Macri to serve on the DC VA Medical Center Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) Advisory Board in Gaithersburg. The appointment is for a one-year term.

Approval of Minutes

A motion was made to approve the November 2023 Meeting Summary Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken and the November 2023 Meeting Summary Minutes were unanimously approved. Approved minutes are available online at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva.

Updates / Announcements

Betsy reported Xavier Teasley, Assistant Director, VA Gaithersburg Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC), shared that currently 4,709 veterans are enrolled at the Gaithersburg CBOC. Of that number, 1,115 are female veterans. The Gaithersburg CBOC has seen an overall veteran enrollment increase of 29% in the last two years, as well as a 28% increase of women veteran enrollment. Betsy will invite Dr. Michael Heimall, Medical Center Director, DC VA Medical Center, to provide an update at the February

Commission meeting on the proposed VA Bethesda Community-Based Outpatient Clinic including parking for the new facility and updates on the new hospital.

Audrey Severn, Representative of Senator Chris Van Hollen, reported that she has sent an inquiry to the Department of Veterans Affairs regarding the approved 20 HUD-VASH Vouchers that have been set aside for Montgomery County. She will report back to the Commission with any updates. It was reported at last month's meeting that the current number of homeless veterans at any given time is between 10 to 20 and these new vouchers will help bring those numbers down. Betsy suggested that Jameelah share this news with Dr. Bridgers when she next meets with him.

Dr. Macri reported Nature Forward (formerly Audubon Society) applied for another grant to provide free programming at Woodend Nature Sanctuary in Chevy Chase. Three forest bathing sessions for veterans will be scheduled in March 2024, May 2024 and September/October 2024.

Mike Subin reported a story was published in The Greater Olney News featuring Wayne and James Renza. When Wayne was injured during his tour in Vietnam, James was the medical corpsman that attended to him and saved his life. Wayne did not know James' name at the time and James did not know what happened to Wayne. The two men were recently reunited 50 years later. The story has gone viral and the Secretary of the VA will be sharing it in his annual message to the employees of the VA. Article – "The Scars of War and the Miracles They Bring": <https://greaterolneynews.com/news/the-scars-of-war-and-the-miracles-they-bring/>.

Betsy has emailed information to Commissioners regarding County Council [Bill 45-23, Property Tax Credit - Individuals 65 and Above, Retired Military Service Members, and Disabled Military Service Member](#). The Bill would expand and extend a county property tax credit, while implementing a progressive income scale for eligibility. The Council has scheduled a public hearing on January 23 at 1:30pm. The State of Maryland passed property tax exemption legislation for veterans who have a disability in 2020. The legislation allows for the following: 50-74% disability allows for a 25% exemption; 75-99% disability allows for a 50% exemption; and 100% disability remains a 100% exemption. Montgomery County has only adopted a 100% disability exemption. Betsy asked Commissioners if they want to recommend the County adopt all the disability exemptions. Mike and Ken will work on draft testimony to submit to the County Council. Betsy also noted that the County offers a tax credit for homeowners that have lived in their homes 40 years or more. Ken Reichard, Representative of Senator Ben Cardin, noted that the maximum assessed value of the home does not allow for many residents to take advantage of this property tax credit.

Next Commission Meeting

The next Commission meeting will be held January 16. Lynn Nash, Military Officers Association of America (MOAA), will be presenting on upcoming legislation within the Maryland General Assembly and the County's proposed Property tax credit for retired veterans.

Adjournment: 7:15pm

Respectfully submitted: Carly Clem, Program Specialist II; Betsy Luecking, Community Outreach Manager

<p align="center">Montgomery County Commission on People with Disabilities Attendance Report January 2023 – December 2023</p>
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Attendance Policy: A Voting Member may miss up to 3 meetings within a one year rolling period. Voting Members who miss more than 3 meetings in that period or who miss 3 consecutive meetings will be automatically removed. Waivers may be requested for absences caused by extenuating circumstances.

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