



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs
Meeting Minutes
February 20, 2024**

****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.

Update on the DC VA Medical Center – Michael S. Heimall, FACHE, Medical Center Director, Washington, D.C. Veterans Affairs Medical Center

Website: <https://www.va.gov/washington-dc-health-care/about-us/>

The PACT Act was signed into law by President Biden in August 2022. The PACT Act expands and extends eligibility for VA health care for veterans with toxic exposures and veterans of the Vietnam, Gulf War, and post-9/11 eras; adds more than 20 presumptive conditions for burn pits, Agent Orange, and other toxic exposures; adds more presumptive-exposure locations for Agent Orange and radiation; requires VA to provide a toxic exposure screening to every veteran enrolled in VA health care; and helps the VA improve research, staff education, and treatment related to toxic exposures.

VA has a new proposal that would give expanded presumptive benefits to veterans who served in locations where Agent Orange was tested, used, or stored outside Vietnam, including locations in Canada, India, and military locations in 12 U.S. states, including Montana. As part of the Federal Register process, veterans, advocates and the general public have 60 days to comment on the proposal.

Updates on initiatives and services at the DC VA Medical Center, from 2023 to present:

- Hosted several PACT Act outreach events at various VA Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC) across the area as well as an online townhall with Congressman Jamie Raskin. At these events, 49,000 veterans were screened for toxic exposures with almost 24,000 veterans requiring follow-ups. 99% of those follow-ups were completed within 30 days.
- Providing care to 800 new veterans a month. Veterans are entering the system for a number of reasons including the expanded eligibility, staffing challenges at Walter Reed and Fort Belvoir, and veterans over age 65 relying on TRICARE. The DC VA Medical Center will need to hire 8 primary care providers as well as 24 support staff to assist those doctors to manage the new intake from the PACT Act. Patient-Aligned Care Teams serve between 900 to 1,200 veterans. The Montgomery County CBOC will need another Team as well as replace some existing providers.
- Still need assistance with providing outreach to the community. 128,000 veterans are enrolled in VA healthcare, but only 78,000 veterans use the VA healthcare system.
- Began a transplant partnership with MedStar Georgetown Transplant Institute. The DC VA Medical Center manages all preoperative care to include screening veterans, being properly listed for donations and outpatient follow-up. Georgetown University Medical Center conducts the surgeries. So far 20 liver and kidney transplants have been done through the partnership. Neurosurgery services are available at Walter Reed.
- Emergency Department received a level 3 accreditation as a geriatric emergency department providing health care to older veterans on a recurring basis.

- Installed a new cardiac mapping system to augment structural heart program. Only one of 11 Medical Centers in the U.S. and only one in the VA and in the DC area to have one.
- The VA appointed Suzana Iveljic as the new Deputy Director of the Washington DC VA Medical Center in April 2023.
- PACT Act is funding the replacement of the Prince George's County CBOC. Bids were evaluated in late January/early February and a contract is expected to be rewarded in April. The location for the clinic will be in southern Prince George's County / Camp Springs where the current clinic is located and will be three times larger than the existing clinic. It will offer specialty care services including radiology and mammography.
- In 2024, the VA will be planning future capital infrastructure needs, developing a master plan and determining how to use the current space at the DC VA Medical Center that will inform the design for a new Medical Center. A master plan should be delivered in May. The VA is conducting a feasibility study in March to determine the best way to recapitalize the existing DC VA Medical Center or if there is a need to replace it as well as the size of the facility and services that could be moved to the Montgomery County CBOC.
- Three CBOCs will be established in Northern Virginia. This should increase more capacity at the Montgomery County CBOC. Working on funding in 2025 for a CBOC in Prince William County / Manassas, Virginia. Beyond 2025, CBOCs will be established in Loudoun County / Leesburg, Virginia, and Fairfax, Virginia in partnership with Fort Belvoir. An evaluation will be done after new CBOCs have been built.
- Proposal to build a 30-chair stand alone dental CBOC in Prince William County due to the amount of dental care referrals to the community in Northern Virginia. 97 dental chairs would be needed to provide care to 100% service-connected veterans across the market.
- Recommendation as part of the Mission Act to add a second CBOC in Bethesda. Will be having some discussions with Walter Reed regarding space. It is expected the new CBOC would be operational in 2029/2030.
- Budget for 2024/2025 is unclear and is currently based off advanced appropriation from Congress. Healthcare services are not affected if there is a government shutdown. The 2024 appropriation may be smaller than previous years. It is not expected that services will be expanded significantly. Investments will need to be made for additional primary care and mental health teams to keep up with demands.
- Social work team is tracking fewer than 300 homeless veterans per day. Working with partners to place veterans into transitional housing and stable housing using vouchers. DC had over 2,000 homeless veterans per day 15 years ago. The VA housed over 60,000 veterans nationwide last year. DC housed 300 veterans last year. Only 8 veterans became homeless again and all 8 were back in stable housing by the end of the year.

The floor was opened to questions.

- **Michael Wilson, Commissioner, invited Mr. Heimall and the DC VA Medical Center to participate in a community health event that the Gaithersburg-Rockville (MD) Alumni Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Incorporated is hosting on March 2.**
- **Will physical therapy services be expanded?** It currently takes up to 30 days for an appointment. The Montgomery County CBOC was not build with physical therapy services in mind. An exam room was converted into a small physical therapy clinic to meet the need. It is not expected for these services to expand this year but if the opportunity arises to expand space physical therapy is a service the VA is always looking to expand. Virtual physical therapy remains an option.
- **Suggestion that the PACT Act cover exposures that women veterans have experienced.** Examples including IUD implants or other long-term contraception required or strongly recommended during their military service. Presumptive conditions are identified by claims data. Mr. Heimall encourage women veterans to file claims. The more claims received, the more the VA will determine possible connections to service, even if claims are denied.

- **Suggested that the PACT Act cover radiation exposure experienced by VA doctors, and if it is now how that is being screened.** Radiation exposure is recognized under the PACT Act.
- **Physical therapy in the community was limited to 15 visits. Community care operates like an insurance company or TRICARE.** Third party administrators ensure services are not provided longer than needed, although additional services can be reauthorized. The next round of contracts for community care is expected to be structured differently.
- **Silver Spring Vet Center would like to partner with the Montgomery County CBOC and assist in providing outreach materials.**
- **Will the VA be using ketamine as an emerging therapy to treat resistant depression?** The VA does have several providers that have the ability to provide ketamine treatments. Dr. Lee is looking at a larger neurostimulation center where the VA can offer state of the art modalities and partner with research program. Ed Wick, Chief of Inpatient Psychiatry is applying for VA sponsored grants for MDMA research. Bob Koffman, Vice-Chair, noted that he is certified and is a consultant for MDMA assisted facility.

The Silver Spring Vet Center (and Other Vet Centers) – Wayne A. Stinchcomb, MDiv, CPLC, Veterans Outreach Program Specialist, Army Veteran, Silver Spring Vet Center, Department of Veterans Affairs

PowerPoint presentation: www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/CVA/SilverSpringVCPresentation_02162024.pdf

Website: www.va.gov/silver-spring-vet-center/

Wayne Stinchcomb reviewed the PowerPoint presentation.

Floor opened to questions and comments.

- Betsy Luecking, Staff, reported she often refers calls to the Silver Spring Vet Center.
- It was noted that the Post-Traumatic Stress (PTS) counseling sessions held have been very beneficial to veterans who participate.
- Michael invited Wayne Stinchcomb and the Silver Spring Vet Center to participate in the health fair held March 2.

Chair and Vice Chair Updates – Legislation Follow-up

The County Council Government Operations and Fiscal Policy Committee will be holding a worksession on February 22 to discuss [Bill 45-23, Property Tax Credit - Individuals 65 and Above, Retired Military Service Members, and Disabled Military Service Members](#). Betsy asked Commissioners to provide feedback and recommendations to be submitted to the County Council. Dr. Macri said the Montgomery County bill is complicated and does not benefit military retirees over a certain income. The bill does not take into account house assessments increasing but not due to improvements. It was also suggested that a veterans with a certain disability rating be eligible regardless of income. Betsy reported noted that Calvert County also has a property tax credit bill being considered that would focusing on two credits: 50% tax credit for veterans with 75 to 99% service-connected disability or surviving spouses; and a 25% tax credit for 50 to 74% disability rating. It would only apply to Calvert County property taxes. Veteran must make less than \$100,000 per year and must own the home. Surviving spouses are eligible if they do not remarry. It will not include Gold Star Spouses at this time to provide an opportunity to research “overlap” with existing tax credits for surviving spouses of military personnel who died in the line of duty. They are using Anne Arundel County forms as a model.

Councilmember Natalie Fani-Gonzalez is hosting a dinner on Sunday February 25 at VFW Post 2562 in Wheaton to discuss upcoming legislation she will be proposing that will provide a permanent tax break for veterans.

The Maryland General Assembly currently has 70 bills proposed that would affect or benefit veterans. House Bill 55 would alter the existing Maryland Commission on Veterans and establish a Maryland Commission on Veterans and Military Families, staffed by the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs. Betsy asked if Commissioners would consider a similar change to this Commission. Dr. Macri reported the state Commission understands the desire to be inclusive but also raised objections as military family contributions are vastly different than those made by veterans. She also said it also would continue to perpetuate the assumption that women are military spouses or caregivers and not veterans.

Commissioner Updates

Wayne and Commissioners Elwood Gray and Jameelah Johnson were interviewed by NBC Washington about the Commission's veteran tributes for Black History Month. View video:

<https://www.nbcwashington.com/discover-black-heritage/76-years-since-desegregation-of-us-military-black-veterans-honored/3544122/>.

Bob would like the Commission to provide information about the PACT Act extensions to the public. He was asked to share information so that it can be posted on the Commission's website.

March 29 is Vietnam War Veterans Day. The Silver Spring Civic Building display cases will be updated by Bill Gray, former Chair, and Carly Clem, Staff, next week to feature profiles of Vietnam War and Vietnam Era veterans. Profiles are also available online: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/ADS/VETERANS/Vietnam.html>

Commission Planning for Next Meeting

Commissioners were asked for suggestions for speakers for the March 19 meeting.

A discussion was had regarding in person meetings. It was noted that in person meetings are beneficial for networking and perhaps in person meetings could be held quarterly. It was suggested that an in-person meeting be held in September or October. At this time, the room where the Commission would meet does not have the technology available for hybrid meetings. Virtual meetings do save travel time and enables people who live far away to attend.

Adjournment: 7:30pm

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

Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs Attendance Report

March 2023 – February 2024

VOTING MEMBERS			MARCH	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER	JANUARY	FEBRUARY	ABSENCES
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Volunteer Form on File with Risk Management P = Present / A = Absence / C = Conference Call / M = Military Active Duty P* or C* = Ex-Officio Member Alternative Attended W = Waived Absences by County Executive / R = Waiver Requested													
1. Bahn, Josephine	General Public	2 nd term expires 10/31/2023	A	C	A	C	A	C	A	A	A	A	7
2. Gray, Elwood	Veteran	2 nd term expires 10/31/2024	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	0
3. Johnson, Jameelah	Director Designee – Dept. of Health & Human Services	2 nd term expires 10/31/2024	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	A	1
4. Koffman, Robert	Veteran	2 nd term expires 10/31/2022	C	C	C	A	C	C	C	C	C	C	1
5. Macri, Cynthia	Veteran	2 nd term expires 10/31/2023	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	0
6. Miller, Wayne	Disabled American Veterans	3 rd term expires 10/31/2021	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	0
7. Mitchell, Reggie	Veteran	1 st term expires 10/31/2022	C	A	A	C	A	A	C	A	C	A	6
8. Pollack, Susan	Public - RESIGNED	1 st term expires 10/31/2023	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
9. Schlesinger, Scott	Veteran	1 st term expires 10/31/2022	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	0
10. Schuster, Lisa	Public - RESIGNED	Partial term expires 10/31/2022	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
11. Starling, Joanna	Ex-Officio Representing Montgomery College	2 nd term expires 10/31/2021	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	0
12. Subin, Michael L.	Ex-Officio Representing County Executive	4 th term expires 10/31/2020	C	C	A	A	C	C	A	C	C	A	4
13. Vandenbroek, Anneke	Veteran	1 st full term expires 10/31/2025	C	A	C	C	C	C	C	C	C	A	2
14. Webman, Susan	General Public	1 st term expires 10/31/2021	A	C	C	A	A	A	A	A	C	A	7
15. Willis, Steven	Veteran - RESIGNED	1 st term expires 10/31/2023	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
16. Wilson, Michael	Veteran	1 st full term expires 10/31/2025	C	C	C	A	C	C	C	C	C	C	1

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.

Non-Voting Congressional Representatives													
1. Burton, Christa – Office of U.S. Congressman Jamie Raskin Eyong, Joseph - *Alternate			C	C	C	C	C*	C*	C*	C*	C*	C*	0
2. Garcia, Vikki – Office of U.S. Congressman John Sarbanes			A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	10
3. Reichard, Ken – Office of U.S. Senator Ben Cardin			C	C	A	C	C	C	A	C	C	A	3
4. Severn, Audrey – Office of U.S. Senator Chris Van Hollen Eisenstat, Diana - *Alternate			X	X	X	X	C	C	C*	C	C	C	0