



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs
Meeting Summary Minutes
January 16th, 2018**

I. Call to Order & Introductions

Dan Bullis, Chairman, welcomed everyone to the meeting of the Commission on Veterans Affairs (CVA). Dan 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. A POW/MIA Empty Chair is placed at all official meetings of the Commission as a physical symbol of the thousands of American POW/MIAs still unaccounted for from all wars and conflicts involving the United States of America. A moment of silence was also held for Merlyn Reineke, CEO, Montgomery Community Media, who died on December 22nd, 2017. Merlyn was instrumental in organizing the County's World War II and Vietnam War Veteran recognition events.

II. Approval of Minutes

A motion was made to approve the December 2017 Meeting Summary Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken, and the December 2017 Meeting Summary Minutes were unanimously approved. Approved minutes are available online at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva.

III. Fisher House Program Overview – David Coker, President & CEO, Fisher House Foundation

Website: www.fisherhouse.org

Fact Sheet: www.fisherhouse.org/site/assets/files/2887/fish_onepagefactsheet.pdf

Building A House (Video): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DG_9mJV38

Heather's Story (Video): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SfGzrhWcDHY>

Zachary Fisher was a prominent figure in the New York real estate community and a major philanthropic benefactor for the men and women in the U.S. Armed Forces, as well as numerous other not-for-profit organizations. In 1990, Zachary and his wife Elizabeth began the Fisher House program, dedicating more than \$20 million to the construction of comfort homes for families of hospitalized military personnel. Kenneth Fisher became Chairman and CEO when Zachary Fisher passed in June 1999.

Today, there are 75 Fisher House homes located on 24 military installations and 31 VA medical centers around the world. The 76th Fisher House will be opening at the Orlando VA Medical Center. Six additional houses are also currently being built, including two in the Bronx in New York, with five more scheduled. Fisher House has asked the Secretary of the VA for their top ten list of hospitals that need a home. When that list is completed, they will ask the Secretary for the next ten priority locations.

Houses range in size from 5,000 square feet to 16,800 square feet and can accommodate anywhere between 7 and 21 families at a time. Houses have private bedrooms and baths, and families share a common kitchen, laundry facilities, dining room and living room.

Fisher House has a unique partnership with the DoD and the VA as Fisher House builds the facility and then it is gifted to a DoD or the VA which takes on the responsibility of operation. Staffing is maintained by the DoD or the VA and depends on the size of the house and/or unique challenges. The Fisher House in Charleston, SC requires staff to be present 24/7 as bedrooms had to be on the 2nd and 3rd floors of the house. Smaller houses typically have 2 ½ full-time staff while larger houses can have 12 to 13 staff. All houses have volunteer opportunities. Oftentimes, veteran service organizations, church groups, and community and civic groups will provide meals. Other volunteer opportunities helping with general housekeeping chores, organizing goods drives such as paper product drives, cleaning supplies, laundry supplies, etc. Also, there are often young mothers and fathers in the homes who may feel overwhelmed, volunteers offer babysitting service and help play with the children to give the parents a break

and some quiet time. During the holidays often will help with decorating, children toy drives, and gifts for those staying at the home through the holidays. To be a recurring volunteer, individuals are required to complete a two-week American Red Cross cross.

Since 1990, Fisher House has served more than 307,000 families and provided over 7 million days of lodging, saving them more than \$400 million in lodging and transportation costs. In 2017, Fisher House supported 30,000 families. The average length of stay is nine days and the longest stay is just over three years. Once an individual or family stays at a house, they stay until care has been completed or they are potentially transferred to another house.

The Director of the Medical Center determines who will stay at a Fisher House. Decisions are based on equity, distance the family is traveling, and rank (with the lower rank being accepted over a higher rank).

There are six Fisher Houses located in Montgomery County: one at [Walter Reed at Forest Glen Annex](#) that has seven suites and five at [NSA Bethesda Home of Walter Reed National Military Medical Center](#) that can accommodate 73 families. There is also a Fisher House located at Andrews Air Force Base, one at Fort Belvoir, and one at DC VA Medical Center. The metropolitan area has the largest concentration of houses in the country.

The Walter Reed at Forest Glen Annex house primarily supports those going for oncology services. The average length of stay in 2016 was 35 days. In 2017 the average length of stay increased to 52 days. The longest length of stay is almost three years.

The Bethesda Fisher House supports the National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICoE) that provides treatment to service members with traumatic brain injury. The average length of stay is 13 days and the longest length of stay is going on two years. When the closure of Walter Reed was announced, Fisher House had two houses at the time that could support 15 families. Fisher House negotiated to acquire land to build three more houses to accommodate another 60 families.

By regulation, families are charged \$10 per night to stay at a military house. The Fisher House Foundation pays that fee. When the program started, Zachary Fisher paid for all the houses that were built. After his passing, it became a foundation. Today, the Foundation operates at over \$50 million and the capital program is about \$49 million. The return on investment is the savings to the family. Savings are calculated by using the Federal per diem for lodging. It is estimated that savings are over \$44 million per year.

Fisher House Foundation administers the [Hero Miles program](#) in partnership with the Department of Defense. The program provides round-trip airline tickets to wounded, injured, and ill service members and/or their families who are undergoing treatment at a military or VA medical center; or who are attending an unauthorized event. Flights are made possible through frequent flyer donations made by individual airline passengers.

The [Hotels for Heroes](#) program provides hotel rooms to the families of wounded, injured, and ill military service members who are undergoing treatment at authorized medical centers when a Fisher House is not available or for an unauthorized event. Rooms are made possible through the donation of rewards points by the hotel's rewards members.

Fisher House Foundation is a 501c3 and accepts both personal and corporate contributions. The majority of their support comes from individuals.

IV. Legislation Briefing - Harvey Kaplan, President, Maryland Chapter, Military Officers Association of America (MOAA)

Current bills and resolutions for the 2018 Regular Session: [Armed Forces](#), [Veterans](#), [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) and [Military Department](#).

On November 7th, the Maryland General Assembly Veterans Caucus invited 150 veteran groups to the First Veterans Summit. Held in Annapolis over 50 veterans service organizations showed up to be the voice of the Veteran community. Prior to the Summit, their team reviewed every Veteran bill passed in every one of the other 49 states during 2016 and distilled down the list to 135 distinct ideas. From there five work groups were created:

Health, Education, Jobs, Taxes, and Personal Matters. Summit participants were separated into these work groups and spent the day identifying the top issues in each area. Work groups used the other states issues as a starting point from which to add or subtract from, then prioritize. Each issue was considered for impact on every member of the veteran family, including National Guard, Reserve, Active Duty, spouses, children, disabled, senior, retired and the honorably discharged.

The final result is a Veterans Agenda for Maryland – about 35 issues including suicide prevention, transition assistance, retraining, local resource centers and tax exemptions: www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/CVA/2017MarylandVeteransAgendaWeb.pdf. Senator Steve Waugh will be organizing meeting to brief the members of the Veterans Caucus.

The Maryland Retired Veterans Task Force will be phasing out after the current legislative session. A new group has formed, the Maryland Military Coalition, which is modeled after the national Military Coalition.

Harvey shared the following handout: Military Officers Association of America – Maryland State Council Fact Sheet – The Seven Uniformed Services of the United States: www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/CVA/MOAAFactSheetUnifSvs.pdf

Harvey noted the definition of Veteran depends on the institution. Congress has one set of requirements while the VA uses an algorithm. Also, not every institution considers members of United States Public Health Service (USPHS) or National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) as Veterans. USPHS currently has public service members assigned to 36 nations in the world and NOAA has service members at sea manning ships for the Department of Commerce. NOAA is headquartered in Montgomery County. It is estimated that there are 430,000 Veterans living in Maryland. This figure does not include USPHS or NOAA.

It was asked how many USPHS and NOAA employees are uniform. Harvey said it is estimated 6,500 for USPHS and less than 600 NOAA for active duty. These figures do not include the number of retirees.

It was asked if the U.S. Census includes USPHS and NOAA in their definition of Veteran. The U.S. Census/American Community Survey asks if a person has served on active duty in the US armed services, reserves or national guard and does not include NOAA and USPHS employees.

It was asked when USPHS first became uniformed. The PHS uniform traces its roots back to 1871 when John Maynard Woodworth, the first supervising surgeon (now known as the Surgeon General), organized the service along military lines. For more information, view www.usphs.gov/aboutus/uniforms.aspx

Governor Hogan has introduced legislation to eliminate all state income tax on retirement income received as a result of military service. [HB 482 - Income Tax – Subtraction Modification – Military Retirement Income](#) expands the existing military retirement income tax subtraction modification by exempting 100% of military retirement income from State taxation. The increase is phased in over four years and is equal to the greater of \$5,000 or 25% of eligible retirement income in tax year 2015, 50% in tax year 2016, 75% in tax year 2017, and 100% in tax year 2018 and beyond.

VI. Update on the CBOC and Vietnam War Memorial – Mike Subin

Mike reported the VA canceled a meeting with the developer Minkoff last week and still has not approved the contract or budget. Ken Reichard, Representative of Senator Ben Cardin, suggesting holding a meeting with the VA, Minkoff, Austin Morris from Senator Chris Van Hollen’s office, Mike Subin, and Betsy Luecking to try to resolve these issues. There is concern that if the project continues to stall then it will be defunded.

The Vietnam War Memorial, which will now be placed at Memorial Plaza located on the Government Complex Center Terrace between the new Courthouse annex and the Executive Office Building in Rockville along Route 28, has been assigned a program manager. This same individual designed Memorial Plaza.

VII. New Business

Mike reported the Montgomery County Government African American Employees Association's Black History Program Committee will be hosting a program on February 8th titled "African Americans in Times of War". The Association will honor County Executive Isiah Leggett for his service as a Captain in the Army in Vietnam and for his service as County Executive. The Vietnam Veterans of America will also give a presentation to County Executive Leggett. Mike made a motion for the Commission to give a presentation to County Executive Leggett during the event. The motion was voted on and unanimously approved. The event will be held on February 8, 2018 from 11:30am to 2 pm. at the F. Scott Fitzgerald Theatre, 603 Edmonston Drive, Rockville, MD.

VIII. Announcements

Jim Campbell, Commissioner, reported the Montgomery County Chapter of MOAA will be hosting a luncheon tomorrow at Manor Country Club. A special presentation on hurricanes will be given by Rear Admiral Michael Silah, Director, NOAA Commission Corps. At the February luncheon, special guest speaker Rear Admiral Joyce M. Johnson, DO, MA USPHS (retired) will discuss the history of chocolate.

Bob Koffman, Commissioner, reported the VA is currently seeking [public comments on the Program for Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers](#). VA will use feedback, requested through responses to questions, to guide any future regulatory modifications to support family caregivers of Veterans most in need, while also improving the program under the current law. Comments are being accepted until February 5th.

Stan Seidel, Maryland Veterans Commission, reported [Maryland Veterans Trust](#) fund currently has \$135,000 available for grants/loans. More money will become available as Maryland casinos are now required to attach donation boxes near the exits of video lottery facilities with the proceeds dedicated to the Maryland Veterans Trust Fund. Stan also reported the Women's Veterans United Committee, Inc is holding a Women Veterans On The Hill event on Wednesday, February 7, 2018 from 1:00pm to 3:00pm to discuss Women Health Care Issues, MST and Engagement with the Women Veterans Community.

Hazel Gross, Elks Lodge #15, reported Elks Lodge #15 is trying to raise funds to provide furniture, clothes, etc. for six homeless Veterans that will be receiving housing from the Maryland Coalition.

Bill Bird, Sons of the American Legion Post 86, reported Post 86 will be hosting a breakfast this Sunday, January 21st. The cost is \$8.00 per person.

John Church, Colonel, USAFR (Ret) from Anne Arundel County shared his concerns about Veterans in Anne Arundel County and his desire to have the Anne Arundel County Commission on Veterans Affairs publish an annual report similar to the Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs.

Michael Ball, Serving Together (ST), reported ST is an affiliate of America Serves, a coordinated system of public, private, and non-profit organizations working together to serve Veterans, transitioning service-members, and their families. A partnership with the AmericaServes program will allow ServingTogether to connect multiple existing county-level Veterans collaboratives into one comprehensive network that connects Veterans, service members, and their families to service providers across the entire National Capital Region. A strategy session will be held in DC in March/April and America Serves for the National Capital Region should be up and running by April.

Adjournment: 7:30pm

Next Full Commission Meeting: Tuesday, February 20th, 2018 from 6:00pm to 7:30pm at Health & Human Services Building, 401 Hungerford Drive, 1st Floor 1A Conference Room, Rockville, MD 20850

Respectfully submitted:

Carly Clem, Administrative Specialist I

Betsy Luecking, Community Outreach Manager