



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs
Meeting Summary Minutes
July 15th, 2020**

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

I. Call to Order

Dan Bullis, Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting of the Commission on Veterans Affairs (CVA). Dan asked for all present to say the Pledge of Allegiance. Dan 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.

II. Approval of Minutes

A motion was made to approve the June 2020 Meeting Summary Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken, and the June 2020 Meeting Summary Minutes were unanimously approved. Approved minutes are available online at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva.

III. Recognition of Outgoing Chair Dan Bullis, New Chair Wayne Miller and Vice-Chair Bob Koffman

Dan has served as Chair of this Commission for five and ½ years. He thanked the Commissioners for their collective efforts for all that has been achieved over that period of time. He also thanked Ken Reichard, Representative of Senator Ben Cardin, and Austin Morris, Representative of Senator Chris Van Hollen, for attending our meetings and working with us on issues, and for the hard work and support of staff Betsy Luecking and Carly Clem. Dan will continue to be involved with the Commission and encouraged Commissioners to contact him if they need assistance as he is still deeply involved with the American Legion Post 41 as Commander and the Walter Reed Society.

IV. Introduction of New Commissioners – Jonathan Alfaro, Hannah Dibonge, Scott Schlesinger, and Michael Wilson

Jonathan Alfaro served in the Marine Corps and was deployed to Iraq for eight years. He has been working to set up a non-profit to connect Veterans to resources and other Veterans. He also volunteers with the Civil Air Patrol and works with a unit at Parkland Middle School. Since schools closed, he has been working to find ways to have meetings and drills.

Hannah Dibonge works as a pharmacist at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC). She is interested in educating Veterans on their benefits.

Scott Shlesinger is a retired Air Force veteran who served as Administrative Supervisor in the Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He also served as Commandant of a non-commissioned leadership school and owned a pizzeria restaurant and mail-order store. He currently serves as Finance Officer for America Legion Post 268 in Wheaton and is the Founder and Commander for Kemp Mill Jewish War Veterans Post 360.

Michael Wilson is a veteran who spent four years in the Marine Corps and 17 years in Norfolk, Virginia with the North Carolina Army National Guard. He was last deployed to Iraq from 2008 to 2009 and retired from the National Guard in 2010. He worked with the Department of Defense (DoD) for 14 years in support of base realignment and closure efforts and currently works at the National Institute for Standards and Technology (NIST). He is a member of the Gaithersburg-Rockville Maryland Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc, which supports Veterans in the county, namely providing comfort items to soldiers at the Fisher House located at WRNMMC.

V. Fields 4 Valor – Pete Scott, Farmer and Former Counterintelligence Agent

Website: <https://fieldsforvalor.org/https://fieldsforvalor.org>

Handout: <https://montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A&D%20Docs/CVA/F4V2020Program&InfoPaper.pdf>

Fields 4 Valor is a Veteran-founded, Veteran-focused, and Veteran-operated nonprofit and innovative farm founded to combat the often-unseen struggle of food insecurity among military and Veteran families. They are dedicated to growing and donating healthy foods as an important part of easing the financial burden for Washington DC area Veterans and military families who are transitioning to civilian life. Farmer and former Counterintelligence Agent Pete Scott launched the farm in 2016 and runs the farm along-side fellow Veterans and military family members, using sustainable farming practices in an environment that is healing and enriching.

Their innovative, seven-acre farm in Brandywine, Maryland grows fresh produce and makes weekly deliveries of fruits, vegetables, nuts, eggs, honey and other seasonal items to Veterans and their families in need in the Washington, DC metropolitan area — all at no cost. In addition to food donations, they offer life-altering programs for Veterans and their families including culinary classes and beekeeping training along with employment, housing and volunteer opportunities on the farm. When the farm lease started, they found a disabled combat Veteran to move into the farmhouse. She has a degree in horticulture and has been with the farm three years.

Due to the pandemic, the farm had to pivot their plan to have individuals pick up their food from the farm. They have since made connections through Serving Together (ST), Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless (MCCH), and Bethesda Cares and have signed up 27 families for weekly shares. Door-step delivery has been provided since the beginning of June and will continue until Thanksgiving. They are on track to deliver approximately \$1,000 of fresh food to each family over the 26-week season. The seven-acre farm has half an acre in production with four more acres readily available to turn into production. It can be a challenge to find volunteers, funding, supports, and building the infrastructure. The levels of production have suffered this year due to lack of volunteers.

When Fields 4 Valor first started, they were donating food through Operation Homefront in Gaithersburg and Pete would make the deliveries. Through connections made through ST, volunteers pick up all the food donations on Saturday and it is delivered by students from University Services University (USU). Pete noted that recipients have remarked how nice it is to eat vegetables that are not from a can. Fields 4 Valor offers culinary classes taught by a network of chefs. They have also provided recipients with salad spinners, knives and cutting boards.

Pete shared that he spent six months at an in-patient combat PTSD program that changed his life. That is where the idea for this farm began. He also completed a fellowship program through Dog Tag, Inc., which helped him to develop and executive his plan. Pete added that Future Harvest and Acadia both offer farming programs for Veterans and are a source of volunteer farmers for Fields 4 Valor. Pete is working to formalize an apprenticeship program next year. One of the volunteer farmers, Andrew, closed on his own farm after working for a year with Fields 4 Valor. Andrew was able to make a connection with Wounded Warrior and they applied for a grant on his behalf to purchase expensive farming equipment.

The floor was opened to questions.

Does Fields 4 Valor have a Facebook page? Yes - www.facebook.com/fields4valorfarms. They have used social media more this year and even had a cold call from MSNBC who featured them as a story on July 4th.

Has Fields 4 Valor managed a fundraiser through Facebook? They have and their biggest success has been through Giving Tuesday. They received \$50,000 last year mostly through grants from the Newman's Own

Foundation and Veterans United Foundation (VUF). Fields 4 Valor has been invited to apply for another VUF grant, but Newman's Own is currently going through a reorganization and reprioritization.

Do you have a relationship with Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) through ServingTogether (ST)? ST helps distribute food through MCPS. They have a relationship with ST, but not with MCPS.

How should a Veteran contact Fields 4 Valor for food delivery? They should contact Pete at pete@fieldsforvalor.org or 240-423-7205 (V).

It was suggested that the website include a contact information section. They recently found a new volunteer web developer who will be working on the website next year.

Grant opportunities. It was suggested Pete look into COVID-19 relief grants offered by the USDA. These and other federal grants can be found online at www.grants.gov. The National Institute on Health's (NIH) Office of Minority Health and Health Disparities may also have potential grants. Pete said one of the barriers to applying for grants is affording a financial audit or review. Prior to COVID-19, they had a relationship with the restaurant group Founding Farmers that offered their accountant services, but since the pandemic happened that offer has been rescinded. He has a lead for assistance at the College of Southern Maryland, but it is hard to find someone with that type of expertise. Michael Wilson offered to volunteer his grant writing services and expertise.

VI. COVID-19 Self-Care – Bob Koffman, M.D., MPH, Commissioner

Lifestyle Choices to Boost Immunity Handout: https://montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/CVA/LifestyleChoices_Immunity.pdf

Bob is a retired Navy Captain, psychiatrist and preventive medicine physician. He was deployed to Desert Storm and OIF/OEF multiple times. He currently provides care for active duty service members and Veterans at WRNMMC.

Individuals with chronic conditions and those aged 65 years and older are more susceptible to contracting COVID-19. Bob noted that vaccines increase the ability of one's immune system to respond to an invader pathogen virus. He discussed how an individual can reduce their chances of becoming sick and keep their immune system as healthy as possible.

The stress hormone cortisol is increased due to COVID-19 stress and other related stressors. Cortisol is toxic and delays the body's ability to heal. Bob said everyone needs to engage in stress management techniques and tools. The easiest way to lower cortisol levels and augment one's parasympathetic nervous system, which inhibits the body from overworking and restores the body to a calm and composed state, is through controlled breathing exercises. Zinc has also been shown to significantly retard viral replication and growth. It is also important to eat a colorful diet of fruits and vegetables and exercise for at least 30 minutes per day. Lifestyle choices for immunity boosting include getting a minimum of seven hours of sleep a night. Lack of sleep leads to increased cortisol and a decrease in your body's ability heal, recover or repair.

Bob referred to a study that reviewed various stressors and vices that linked smoking to an average of 6.6 years of life lost, diabetes to an average of 6.5 years lost, stress to an average of 2.8 years of life lost, and not exercising to an average of 2.4 years of life lost.

Loneliness is another issue and with social distancing measures in place it has led to social disconnection. The importance of staying emotionally connected is huge especially for the elderly. There is a 29% increase in mortality due to social isolation, 26% increase due to loneliness, and a 32% increase for individuals who live alone. Connectivity and avoiding isolation that accompanies COVID-19 is key.

Jameelah Johnson, Commissioner, said that a vegan diet, deep breathing, yoga and sleep helped her during her cancer diagnosis, and she has been cancer free for 23 years now. Bob said he cannot underscore the importance of exercise and activity as it adds quality as well as years of life.

V. PREVENTS / Reach Campaign – Bob Koffman, M.D., MPH, Commissioner

Handout: https://montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A&D%20Docs/CVA/PREVENTSVSO_MSO_Roundtable.pdf

Website: www.va.gov/PREVENTS

Website: www.wearewithinreach.net

On March 5th, 2019, President Trump signed an Executive Order to create a plan known as the President's Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide (PREVENTS). This is the first federally sponsored suicide prevention effort. The goal of PREVENTS is to prevent suicide — among not just Veterans but all Americans. By adopting a holistic public health approach, PREVENTS is acting on the knowledge that suicide prevention is everyone's business, and that by working together, locally and nationally, we can prevent suicide. The PREVENTS task force is partnering with stakeholders from multiple sectors, including nonprofits, state and local organizations, Fortune 500 companies, and government leaders, to implement best practices to improve health and prevent suicide. PREVENTS offers organizational and individual options for desired levels of engagement. Pledge Supporters, Strategic Partners, and Ambassadors will work in collaboration with PREVENTS to ensure message and mission alignment. Bob is one of 15 Ambassadors who will be meeting with organizations, non-profits, for-profits, academic institutions, and federal, state and local governments. There will be a toolkit made available for communities to use. Bob said his service dog Ron has been anointed as the first PREVENTS service dog.

PREVENTS will prevent suicide within the Veterans community – and lead the way in preventing suicide for all Americans – by employing a public health approach to empowering every individual through a nationally driven, community-implemented four-part integrated strategy (communications, research, programs and policies) and ten recommendations for implementation and evaluation. View the handout for details on the ten recommendations. Virtually every non-profit and organization is going to be asked to sign pledges and proclamations. Governors will be asked to sign state proclamations to create specific programs. Bob will discuss the County's effort with Betsy. This is an opportunity to reach out to the 42,000 Veterans that live in Montgomery County and identify programs at the County level that can help and save lives.

The program extends to all citizens, but the primary focus will be on Veterans. Bob noted that Veterans are 1.5 times more likely to die by suicide than anyone else and the chances are even higher for Vietnam Veterans compared to OIF/OEF Veterans. Between 20 to 22 Veterans a day take their own lives nationally. . He added that a recent study indicated that service members who have had two years or less of active duty and deployed at least twice had a significantly greater risk of suicide.

Cynthia Macri, Commissioner, is a member of the Governor's Commission on Suicide Prevention. She said there is a lot of personalization about suicide and risk scoring needs to include more individual factors. She also said the PREVENTS campaign does not recognize the need to prevent someone from being at risk of suicide. A person is more likely to be successful if they can change their own behaviors and it is important to engage with the person in a non-negative way. There are several non-profits that have evidence-based programs that involve self-management of disease. Cynthia would like to have further discussions with Bob. Bob said outreach and education and the way we tackle each of these different outrisk groups and demographics is unique. Cynthia added that approximately 1/3 of Veterans receive their care from the VA Health System. 70% of Veterans live in rural areas with limited access to healthcare. She added that Veterans who receive their care in the VA Health System have a 60% to 70% better chance of survival than if they are excluded from that system.

Betsy asked how people can stay connected during challenge times like these. This Commission heard a presentation from a Veterans group in Alexandria that hosts fun community events such as 5Ks that involve Veterans and non-Veterans to bring them together. She asked Commissioners to think of concrete ways to help people feel connected, particularly Veterans. She noted that several years ago the County began asking everyone who comes in for services or into corrections if they have served in the military so that they can better be connected to the services and benefits they are eligible for

Susan Webman, Commissioner, asked Bob to provide updates on the PREVENTS campaign on a regular basis.

VII. Chair and Vice Chair Report

Wayne reported that the Commission will next meet on Tuesday, September 15th, 2020 from 6pm to 7pm via Zoom. Instructions to join the meeting will be included in the agenda. Betsy said Commissioners can contact her if they would like to meet virtually in August to discuss any issues.

VIII. Updates / Announcements

Stan Siedel, Maryland Veterans Commission (MVC), reported Fred Shinbur has retired as Chair of MVC. KT Taylor will be the new Chair.

Adjournment: 7:00pm

Next Full Commission Meeting: Tuesday, September 15th, 2020 via Zoom from 6pm to 7pm. Please view the agenda for information on how to join the meeting.

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

Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs Attendance Report October 2019 – July 2020

| VOTING MEMBERS | | | | OXCTOBER | NOVEMBER | DECEMBER | JANUARY | FEBRUARY | MARCH | APRIL | MAY | JUNE | JULY | ABSENCES |
|---|---|---|--|----------|----------|----------|---------|----------|-------|-------|-----|------|------|----------|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Volunteer Form on File with Risk Management V = Coronavirus (COVID-19) P = Present / A = Absence / P* = Ex-Officio Member Alternative Attended C = Conference Call / M = Military Active Duty / E = Excused W = Waived Absences by County Executive / R = Waiver Requested | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 1. | Alfaro, Jonathan <input type="checkbox"/> | Veteran | 1 st term expires 10/31/2022 | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | P | 0 |
| 2. | Bahn, Josephine <input type="checkbox"/> | General Public | 1 st term expires 10/31/2020 | P | A | P | A | P | V | V | C | C | P | 2 |
| 3. | Bolling, Dan <input type="checkbox"/> | General Public | 2 nd term expires 10/31/2020 | P | P | P | C | A | V | V | A | A | E | 3 |
| 4. | Campbell, James <input type="checkbox"/> | Military Officers Assn. of America | 2 nd term expires 10/31/2020 | P | P | P | P | P | V | C | C | C | E | 0 |
| 5. | Dibonge, Hannah <input type="checkbox"/> | General Public | 1 st term expires 10/31/2022 | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | P | 0 |
| 6. | Gray, Elwood <input type="checkbox"/> | Veteran | 1 st term expires 10/31/2021 | E | E | E | P | P | V | C | C | A | P | 1 |
| 7. | Johnson, Jameelah <input type="checkbox"/> | Director Designee – Dept. of Health & Human Services | 1 st term expires 10/31/2021 | P | P | A | P | P | V | C | C | A | P | 2 |
| 8. | Koffman, Robert <input type="checkbox"/> | Veteran | 2 nd term expires 10/31/2022 | C | P | P | A | P | V | C | C | C | P | 1 |
| 9. | Macri, Cynthia <input type="checkbox"/> | Veteran | 1 st term expires 10/31/2020 | P | P | P | P | P | V | C | C | C | P | 0 |
| 10. | Miller, Wayne <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Disabled American Veterans | 3 rd term expires 10/31/2021 | P | P | P | P | P | V | C | C | C | P | 0 |
| 11. | Mitchell, Reggie <input type="checkbox"/> | Veteran | 1 st term expires 10/31/2022 | A | P | A | P | P | V | C | C | C | E | 2 |
| 12. | Schlesinger, Scott <input type="checkbox"/> | Veteran | 1 st term expires 10/31/2022 | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | P | 0 |
| 13. | Starling, Joanna <input type="checkbox"/> | Ex-Officio Representing Montgomery College | 2 nd term expires 10/31/2021 | P | P | P | P | P | V | C | C | A | E | 1 |
| 14. | Subin, Michael L. | Ex-Officio Representing County Executive | 4 th term expires 10/31/2020 | P | A | A | A | P | V | C | C | C | E | 3 |
| 15. | Webman, Susan <input type="checkbox"/> | General Public | 1 st term expires 10/31/2021 | P | P | P | P | P | V | C | C | C | P | 0 |
| 16. | Wilson, Michael <input type="checkbox"/> | Veteran | Partial term expires 10/31/2022 | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | P | 0 |

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 | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | C | E | 0 |
| 2. | Garcia, Vikki – Office of U.S. Congressman John Sarbanes | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | C | E | 0 |
| 3. | Morris, Austin – Office of U.S. Senator Chris Van Hollen Hendricks, Karen – Alternate | P | P | P | A | P* | V | C | C | C | P | 1 |
| 4. | Reichard, Ken – Office of U.S. Senator Ben Cardin | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | A | P | 1 |