



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs
Meeting Summary Minutes
March 19, 2019**

I. Call to Order & Introductions

Dan Bullis, Chair, 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.

II. Approval of Minutes

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

III. Update on Veteran Activities at the State Level – George W. Owings, III, Secretary, Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs

Bio of Secretary Owings: <https://montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/CVA/SecretarysBioApril2015.pdf>

Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs Programs and Services: <https://montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A&D%20Docs/CVA/MDVAServicesHandout.pdf>

There are currently 80 Veterans-related bills in the Maryland General Assembly ranging from retirement income, homelessness, and spousal support. You can view current legislation at <https://veterans.maryland.gov/state-legislation/>.

The Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) Outreach and Advocacy Program is managed by Denise Nooe, Deputy Director, and Dana Burl, Director. Together they attended 229 events last year. The MDVA website was visited 118,318 times. The e-newsletter surpassed 100,000 subscribers.

During the 2017 Maryland Legislative Session, Senate Bill 441 created the [Maryland Veterans Service Animal Program and Fund](#) in the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs. The bill was approved by Governor Hogan and took effect July 1, 2017. The Program educates veterans and the community about Maryland based service and support dog programs and the benefits such dogs may provide to Veterans living with a disability. Donations to the fund are disbursed by MDVA to participating service animal programs to reimburse for costs associated with training and placing a service dog with a military veteran. Governor Hogan added \$150,000 into the budget for this program. On March 18th, Hero Dogs received \$10,000 – the first grant awarded since the program became law. [SB0105 – Maryland Veterans Service Program – Therapy Horses](#) is currently in the Maryland General Assembly and would allow entities that use trained therapy horses for interaction with Veterans to be included in the program.

The MDVA Services and Benefits Program processed 4,827 disability and pension claims and in FY18 brought \$29 million new money into Maryland.

The Maryland Veterans Trust Fund distributed \$87,500 in grants last year. The Fund has a permanent funding source through slot revenue received from Veteran Service Organizations under the State Lottery. The Fund also received \$89,407 from Maryland casinos.

The MDVA Cemetery Program had 3,389 internments last year throughout the five state cemeteries. Maryland has the high honor and distinction of burying more Veterans than any other State cemetery in the country. Larger states such as California and Texas have national cemeteries with available space. The national cemetery in Baltimore has space and there is no entry at the Annapolis cemetery. MDVA is constantly adding new land to their cemeteries and five currently have expansions.

Maryland State Veterans Home Draft Program Proposal: <https://montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/CVA/MDStateVeteransHomeDraft2019.pdf>

Secretary Owings met with County Executive Marc Elrich, Melanie Wenger, Director, Office of Intergovernmental Relations, and Tina Benjamin, Office of the County Executive, to discuss the placing a new Maryland Veterans Home in Montgomery County. There is currently only one Veterans Home in Charlotte Hall in St. Mary's County. It has 454 beds and currently has a wait listed. Of those beds, 186 are for skilled nursing and assisted living. Maryland is unique because it allows spouses of eligible Veterans to be admitted to Charlotte Hall. There is a large population of the Veteran community that cannot access this home due to the location.

MDVA had looked at property where the Rosewood institution was located, but they are reserving that property for additional cemetery space. Secretary Owings said Montgomery County would be an ideal location due to the Gaithersburg Community-Based Outpatient Location (CBOC) and other services located in the County. Secretary Owings thinks Montgomery County would be a magnet and would be easily accessible to counties in the East and West. The minimum amount of land needed for the home is 20 to 25 acres. The home would consist of several one-level buildings that have at maximum 120 beds and would have all the services available that the Charlotte Hall home has. The Federal Government will be paying 65% of the project at \$40,583,934 and Maryland will pay 35% of the project at \$21,852,889.

The VA has said that Maryland is 654 beds short as today for meeting the needs of the community. There are approximately 370,000 Veterans in Maryland and only 151,000 are currently receiving services.

Dan has already sent a letter to County Executive Elrich about establishing a Veterans home in Montgomery County. County Executive Elrich responded positively and has already assigned a staff person to identify possible plots of land. It was noted that out of the 300,000 acres in Montgomery County one-third is not-buildable and are considered to be in the agricultural reserve.. Secretary Owings said MDVA will not take any park land for this project. Michael Subin, Commissioner, added that Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) hold large tracts of land for future school developments. Sometimes these lots are no longer needed. The issue is MCPS would need to donate the land to the County.

Stan Siedel, Maryland Veterans Commission, suggested that the County develop a press release about this issue and have MDVA send it out to see if there might be a private donor in Montgomery County.

At this point Secretary Owings is not working with any other county on developing a Veterans home. He is waiting to see how this project progresses and if land can be found in Montgomery County.

Map – Projected Number of Veterans in Maryland by County for 2019: <https://montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/CVA/ProjectedVetsMD2019.pdf>

The largest concentration of Veterans in Maryland is in Prince George's County, followed by Anne Arundel County, Baltimore County and Montgomery County. There are over 200,000 Veterans in those four Counties and a Veterans home in Montgomery County would be able to easily serve them.

Phil Munley, Director, Service and Benefits Program addressed the issue of having the MDVA VBS housed at the Gaithersburg CBOC. The VA would not allow the VBS there full-time as they then they would have to allow VBS' from the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, etc. Phil has reached out to the VA to see if it would be possible for the MDVA VBS to be allowed at the Gaithersburg CBOC on an outreach basis – one or two days a month. He has not heard back. Phil clarified that MDVA is a State agency completely separate from the VA and the Federal Government. The VA views MDVA as a service organization.

Secretary Owings understands the struggle Montgomery County has had keeping a Veterans Benefits Specialist (VBS). Montgomery County has had seven VBS' over the course of the last several years. The current VBS for Montgomery County is on loan from Prince George's County can hire a full-time Montgomery County VBS. Phil thanked Montgomery College and Joanna Starling for providing the space. It was asked if other counties are having the same problem. Phil stated that the level of turnover is not the same due to the differential in pay in Montgomery County. Carroll County hired three part-time personnel to handle claims. They are paid by Carroll County and MDVA trains and accredits them. Their claims are submitted to MDVA for processing. MDVA closed their job listing for a Montgomery County VBS today. Secretary Owings said they have selected 9 of the best qualified candidates and interviews will begin shortly.

A motion was made to write the Director of the DC VA Medical Center and request that the MDVA VBS be housed at the Gaithersburg CBOC. The motion was amended for the letter to be sent jointly from the Commission Chair and County Executive Marc Elrich. The amended motion was seconded. A vote was taken, and the motion was unanimously passed. Secretary Owings suggested including Senators Cardin and Van Hollen as well as the Congressional Delegates. Ken Reichard, representing Senator Cardin, said he would bring the issue back to Senator Cardin and Ken will reach out to the two Congressional Delegates. Austin Morris, representing Senator Van Hollen, will also discuss with Senator Van Hollen.

Secretary Owings has reached out to the Restaurant Association of Maryland and asked restaurants to set aside space for a POW/MIA table in honor of our prisoners of war and missing comrades. He has not received a response back.

The floor was opened to questions.

It was suggested that the land that housed the old fire academy off Route 28 be reviewed. Mike Subin stated the sale of the proceeds of that land were used to purchase the land and construct the new public safety training facility.

Elwood Gray, Commissioner, suggested reaching out to the mayors and administrations of the incorporated cities, towns and villages in the County about available land.

Herb, Public, suggested that MDVA set up information tables at assisted living and nursing homes throughout the County for Veterans who live there and do not have access to resources. Herb is grateful for the new Gaithersburg CBOC but would like to have more specialty care available. He also noted that he has had a hard time making a dental appointment at the DC VA Medical Center. Herb was on hold for over an hour and eventually hung up the phone. Meredith Bruce, Commissioner, noted that VA nurses and doctors are retiring at an all-time high. Staff at the DC VA Medical Center is diminished, and they do not have sufficient staff to send to the CBOC. There is a big push for VA to become privatized and the VA is currently not actively pursuing hiring replacements. Equipment is also outdated and there are only a few staff available for information technology services. Cynthia Macri, Commissioner, noted that women Veteran's health issues are complex and specific needs and services are not being met at the VA. Women Veterans are a growing population. Wayne Miller, Vice-Chair, added that the Silver Spring Vet Center has a licensed clinical social worker that works at the Gaithersburg CBOC every Thursday providing readjustment counseling to Veterans.

IV. Chair and Vice-Chair Reports

Dan Bullis, Chair, reported he visited Riley's Lock at Seneca's Landing and is coordinating with a non-profit to install a few benches after the accessible launch is built. He suggested the Commission plan an off-site meeting at Leisure World in the upcoming months. He also suggested the Commission sponsor a resource fair

featuring Veteran-related businesses in the County. Cynthia suggested inviting medical professionals to provide screenings at the resource fair.

V. Announcements

Jameelah Johnson, Commissioner, asked about providing furnishings to homeless Veterans. Hazel Gross, Elks Lodge 15, said they are constantly furnishing Veteran apartments from referrals from the Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless. The need for furnishings, bedding and mattresses is ongoing. Bedding and mattresses must be new.

Blair Eig, Chief Medical Officer, Holy Cross Hospital (HCH), reported the Holy Cross Military and Veterans Health Program at the Kensington location is now offering compensation and pension exams. Individuals will need to go through the VA benefits office to schedule the exam. HCH is looking for Veteran volunteers to visit Veteran patients at the hospital. Volunteers will need to be trained. Blair reported HCH is providing military competency training for all staff to help recognize Veterans when they are admitted and to ask about possible exposures during their military service such as Agent Orange and burn pits. Brochure:

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

Stan announced on March 29th Mission BBQ will be giving a free sandwich to Vietnam Veterans. He suggested this Commission recognize the work Mission BBQ has been doing for Veterans. SoldierFit in Frederick will be screening the movie "Thank You for Your Service" on March 29th from 5pm to 9pm. Frederick County Government recently introduced a Veterans Advisory Council (VAC). Frederick County is currently hiring for a Veterans Advisory Council Administrator for the new VAC.

Bill Gray, former Commissioner, announced two Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans events. The Hospice of Chesapeake will host their fifth annual Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day on March 29th in Linthicum Heights. The Gilchrist Second Annual Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Ceremony will be held Saturday March 30th in Baltimore. Wayne Miller will be singing.

Scott Schlesinger, Jewish War Veterans, reported World War II Veteran Herman Segal, who was in the Battle of Normandy, the Battle of the Bulge, and who liberated Dachau, lives in Silver Spring.

Hazel announced Team River Runner and Calleva will be having their season opening paddling program at Riley's Lock on Sunday April 28th. Betsy noted that building for two accessible launches has been approved and building will begin later this year.

Phil announced the VA is now accepting claims for "blue water" Vietnam Veterans who are now considered to be have been exposed to Agent Orange. Congress has passed a measure that requires the VA to automatically assume about 90,000 veterans who served in ships off the coast of Vietnam were exposed to Agent Orange for benefits purposes. The VA has the ability to appeal this decision, but Phil is encouraging those Veterans to file their claims now. He also announced the VA will no longer be sending yearly automatic employment verification letters to Veterans. They will now only be sent to Veterans who reported income during the last year to the IRS. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) is no longer providing compensation and pension exams. Those exams are now contracted out and are managed by VA Regional Offices. In 2016, the VA awarded 12 contracts between 5 firms totaling \$6.8 billion to process the exams with the intention of providing faster claims decisions.

Michael Wilson, Gaithersburg-Rockville Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, announced the Chapter will be donating sundry bags to Fisher House at Walter Reed in Bethesda on April 6th. This is the second year for this community project.

Harvey Kaplan, Montgomery County Chapter Military Officers Association of America (MOAA), announced on April 10th MOAA's across the country will be visiting Capitol Hill and meeting with all ten Congressional offices. They will be discussing a widow's tax for surviving spouses of the seven uniformed services; pay raises for

active duty, Public Health Services (PHS), and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) personnel; and combatting the erosion of medical benefits.

Dave Peterson, Montgomery County Chapter MOAA, announced there will be a hearing tomorrow on [HB0081 / SB0816 – Property Tax Credit – Surviving Spouse of Veteran](#). The bill is sponsored by Delegate Wilkins and Senator Smith. It would allow for a surviving spouse of a member of the uniformed services of the U.S. and who is at least 65 years old and not remarried to be given a property tax credit. Dave also announced that Rear Admiral Joyce Johnson will be presenting tomorrow at the Montgomery County Chapter MOAA monthly luncheon.

Wayne Miller, Vice-Chair, reported the Silver Spring Vet Center has a memorandum of understanding with Wounded Warrior Project (WWP) and they are now providing claims assistance to post-9/11 Veterans on the 1st and 3rd Friday of every month.

Adjournment: 7:35pm

Next Full Commission Meeting: Tuesday, April 16th, 2019 from 6pm to 7:30pm at the Department of Health and Human Services, 401 Hungerford Drive, 1st Floor Conference Room, Rockville, MD 20850

Respectfully submitted:

Carly Clem, Administrative Specialist I

Betsy Luecking, Community Outreach Manager