



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs
Meeting Minutes
November 21, 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.

Approval of Minutes

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

Veteran Homelessness in Montgomery County – John Mendez, Executive Director, Bethesda Cares, Inc.

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

John introduced Paloma Arroyo-LeFebre, Strategy and Collaboration Counselor for Zero for All Campaign. She will work on veterans funding and projects.

John visited the Gaithersburg VA Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) last week and met with Fatmata Kamara, VA Outreach Social Worker, to discuss the process to access vouchers as well as general care offered by the CBOC.

John said that the number of homeless veterans in Montgomery County is not as high as previously reported. The current number of homeless veterans at any given time is between 10 to 20 consistently, but still not at a functional zero. Functional zero means there are enough housing options for the number of veterans that are experiencing homelessness. The functional zero number is around 6. Bethesda Cares is working with the County's Services to End and Prevent Homelessness (SEPH) and non-profit providers to bring the number of homeless veterans into the single digits again. Prior to the Veterans Zero:2016 campaign, the number of homeless veterans in the county at any one time was between 50 to 60 veterans. The County has maintained a consistent low number since launching that campaign 8 years ago. John has concerns about the total number of veterans that have been housed in 2023 as fewer than 5 veterans have worked through the system into a rapid rehousing scenario. There are a number of vacant HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) vouchers that need to be filled. More options also need to be created to ensure there are vouchers for veterans. John asked the Commission to support additional staff be hired by the Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) to ensure HUD-VASH inventory vouchers are being processed and managed. Currently, HOC does this with no additional administrative support. At this time, HOC manages 108 vouchers for veterans in Montgomery County. Additional staff support would help HOC better collaborate with the total continuum of care partners. HOC is currently drafting a job description and will be approaching the County Council and/or County Executive to support this new position that would specifically focus on veterans and HUD-VASH vouchers. The County has housed approximately 200 to 250 homeless veterans over the past 10 years.

The County has received 98 HUD-VASH vouchers between the years of 2010 to 2016 years, each worth \$13,122 or \$1.2 M total per year in housing subsidies. The County has received an additional 25 ported HUD-VASH vouchers from DC and other states.

Diana Eisenstat, Representative of Senator Chris Van Hollen, reported the VA has approved an additional 20 vouchers for Montgomery County. This will increase the total inventory to approximately 130 HUD VASH vouchers managed by HOC and will help to reduce the current number of homeless veterans.

This Commission has done a phenomenal job advocating for this population and was instrumental in working with former Councilmember George Leventhal, who added \$500,000 to the Fiscal Year 2016 budget to provide housing and supportive services to functionally end veteran homelessness in the county. The funding is reoccurring every year and is available to veterans who have received less than an honorable discharge and therefore are not eligible for VA programs. John reported he met with Council President Evan Glass during his second year with the Council to discuss this issue. At that time, Council President Glass added an additional \$350,000 to the existing \$500,000 budget item.

The key to ending homelessness, especially veteran homelessness, is affordable housing. Unfortunately, there is no affordable housing stock coming online.

The floor was opened to questions.

- **Does Bethesda Cares assist with temporary assistance with mortgage or rent?** Veterans are eligible for general population assistance programs as well as assistance programs just for veterans. The County offers the Rental Assistance Program (RAP) and the Short-Term Housing and Resolution Program (SHaRP) which provide housing subsidies and/or security deposit and first months rent, in addition to HUD VASH Vouchers and Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) available through Friendship Place. The Maryland Veterans Trust Fund is also available but has very low-income eligibility limits.
- **What agencies should be contacted if you come across a homeless veteran?** ServingTogether is a starting point. The Department of Health and Human Services has a contract for them to provide information and referral. Contact them at 1-855-738-7176 to speak with a Care Coordinator. You can also contact David Skisano, Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs, as he can help with benefits – 301-987-8412, davidj.skisano@maryland.gov.
- **Does Bethesda Cares provide home furnishings?** There is some funding available within their contracts and they also hold special fundraisers through A Wider Circle to raise funds to provide gently used furniture as the VA cannot technically fundraise as an entity. Bethesda Cares does try to have furniture moved in the same day the veteran signs their lease and gets their key.

Montgomery College TRIO Educational Opportunity Center Post-Secondary Services to Veterans Residing in Montgomery County – Beverly Coleman, Director, TRIO Educational Opportunity Center

Website: www.montgomerycollege.edu/educational-opportunity-center

The Educational Opportunity Center (EOC) program is sponsored by a TRIO grant from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Post-secondary Education and Montgomery College to serve participants in seven sections of Montgomery County-- Takoma Park, Silver Spring, Wheaton, Kensington, Aspen Hill, Rockville and Gaithersburg.

The purpose of EOC is to provide assistance to individuals that have a desire to enter or re-enter college or a vocational program. Education Specialists provide information, guidance/advising and application assistance with regard to career decision-making, college or vocational admissions and applying for financial aid.

The goal is to help individuals enroll in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, GED programs,

technical programs, or two or four-year colleges and universities and to assist in the process of obtaining the necessary financial aid to meet tuition costs.

While participants are evaluated for eligibility on an individual basis, general requirements include the following: U.S. Citizen, national or meets the residency requirements for Federal student financial assistance; Montgomery County resident; age 19 or older (high school seniors and high school non-completers not being served a U.S. Department of Education funded Educational Talent Search, who are primarily low-income and first generation); potential First-generation college student, meaning neither parent has a four-year college degree; and low income individual (based on federal guidelines).

The MC-EOC program provides information, guidance/advising and application assistance for enrollment in post-secondary education wherever the student chooses to enroll (vocational school, two-year or four-year institution). Individualized services include academic advising; admissions counseling; career advising; financial aid counseling and FAFSA application assistance; financial literacy advising; official practice GED test; and scholarship search. Services are available in English and Spanish and are available in-person or remote. To schedule an appointment or register for a workshop: complete an [intake form](#); contact the office by phone 240-567-5644; or email mceoc@montgomerycollege.edu.

Joanna Starling, Montgomery College, reported approximately 200 veterans currently attend Montgomery College.

Discussion on Encouraging Younger Veterans to Get Involved in Veteran Service Organizations

It was suggested to advertise on social media such as Instagram as that is how the younger generation finds out information. Younger people are interested in becoming entrepreneurs. Beverly noted that there are entrepreneurship programs at Montgomery College and University of Maryland and TRIO does assist students with enrollment into those programs.

Recap on Operation Green Light

The County's Memorial Plaza was lit up in green from November 6 through November 12. Betsy Luecking, Staff, was contacted by the Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT) as they are interested in participating in Operation Green Light next year. They suggested lighting buses in green and asked for input from Commissioners. Suggestions include signage to educate the general population about Operation Green Light; use photos of real County veterans; advertisements for local American Legions and Veterans of Foreign Wars to assist with increasing membership; advertise services that are beneficial to veterans; include permanent advertisements for veterans; use green lights at bus stops and have signage about Operation Green Light at the bus stop; and offer free bus rides for veterans (during November or always). It was also suggested trying to work with municipalities again to install banners on lamp posts that feature veterans. Betsy has had conversations in the past but there was no interest at the time. The Commission will discuss a plan of action at the next meeting.

Chair and Vice Chair Report

The Commission will meet next on December 19. Dr. James Bridgers, Director, Department of Health and Human Services will be our guest speaker.

Updates / Announcements

Scott Schlesinger, Commissioner, reported that the Jewish War Veterans Day Program held last Sunday was well attended.

The American Minority Veterans Research Project will be hosting an event on November 28 in recognition of POWs and MIAs. It will be held at the Silver Spring Civic Building.

Adjournment: 6:59pm

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