



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs
Meeting Minutes
October 19, 2021**

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

I. Call to Order

Wayne Miller, Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting of the Commission on Veterans Affairs (CVA). Wayne asked for all present to say the Pledge of Allegiance. Wayne 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 September 2021 Meeting Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken, and the September 2021 Meeting Minutes were unanimously approved. Approved minutes are available online at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva.

III. inTransition Program Overview: Psychological Center of Excellence – Brenda Campbell LICSW, Contractor, Magellan, Supporting inTransition Program and Resource Center, Psychological Health Center of Excellence (PHCoE) Research & Development Division (J-9), Defense Health Agency

Website: <https://health.mil/Military-Health-Topics/Centers-of-Excellence/Psychological-Health-Center-of-Excellence/inTransition>

The inTransition program is a free, confidential program that offers specialized coaching and assistance for active-duty service members, National Guard members, reservists, Veterans, and retirees who need access to mental health care when:

- Relocating to another assignment
- Returning from deployment
- Transitioning from active duty to reserve component or reserve component to active duty
- Preparing to leave military service
- Any other time they need a new mental health provider or need a provider for the first time

Enrolling with inTransition is easy. Military members can sign up at any time from any location. Alternatively, they can ask for a referral from their health care provider or case manager.

View presentation for more information: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/CVA/DHAINTransitionPresentation.pdf>

Brenda reported Magellan is no longer the contractor for the inTransition Program as of October 1.

Contacts for the inTransition program: Dr. Nick Polizzi, Action Officer, inTransition Program, Nicholas.c.Polizzi.civ@mail.mil

Psychological Health Resource Center (PHRC) serves service members, veterans, family members, clinicians, commanders, or anyone with a question about psychological health in the military. PHRC is a source of psychological health information and resources related to combat stress, depression, reintegration, how to get into treatment, types of treatment for mental health conditions, and many other topics. Services are provided

free by professional health resource consultants, all of whom are master's-level mental health clinicians that understand military culture, are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by phone (1-866-966-1020), online chat, or email (resources@phcoe.org). PHRC is not a treatment or counseling center, but we can help you to access mental health care.

The floor was opened to questions.

Bob Koffman, Vice-Chair, asked if there is a delay or difficulty in accessing services due to COVID-19. Brenda noted that there has been an increase in coaching which is occurring via telephone. Prior to the contract being transferred, there was approximately a three week wait for the first coaching session. At the VA there is an approximately four month wait for services.

IV. Honoring Women Veterans – Follow-Up and Next Steps

Jameelah Johnson, Commissioner, sent an introductory email to Commissioners Cynthia Macri, Susan Webman, and Joanna Starling. The group wants to determine the needs of Montgomery County women Veterans and how to target those resources to meet those needs. This could be achieved by creating and sending out a survey. Jameelah has done some research on the cost of using a survey service that provides charts along with the data collected. Dr. Macri noted that Google Analytics will also provide graphics and charts along with the results.

Kate Wason, Founder, YourNexStage, offered to speak with her colleagues at the University of Alabama who have conducted a national survey of women Veterans on unique transition challenges. The data from the University of Alabama should be available the first quarter of 2022 or earlier. Kate suggested working the University of Alabama as well as Montgomery College and George Mason University to help provide additional support for the proposed Commission survey.

Dr. Macri suggested the survey also tackle the issues of pay and compensation evaluations and disability ratings. Women are not receiving the same compensation rates or disability ratings as men for similar medical issues or diagnoses. Jameelah noted that she was given a lower disability rating as a cancer survivor than of a male counterpart who had a less serious diagnosis. Dr. Macri also noted that the individuals who conduct the pay and compensation evaluations may not be the Veteran or servicemember's primary care physician and not understand the person's entire medical history so they are not able to make an accurate evaluation.

Jameelah will Chair this initiative. She invited all Commissioners and guests to participate in a further discussion. Anneke Vandenbroek, Commissioner, and Kate said they would like to join. Betsy offered to set up a Zoom meeting. She will invite former Commissioner Jane McCarthy to attend.

Wayne asked for an update on installing a plaque or memorial for Montgomery County women Veterans at Memorial Plaza in Rockville. Betsy suggested that a plaque or memorial be installed at the Silver Spring Civic Building at Veterans Plaza. Memorial Plaza is a place to honor those servicemembers who have lost their lives in war. She noted that a memorial would have to be funded by County government and can take time to be approved. Betsy also suggested honoring women Veterans during a designated month similar to how the Commission honors Black History Month in February and Vietnam War and Vietnam-Era Veterans in March. June 12 is designated as Women Veterans Day so perhaps women Veterans could be honored during the month of June. The Commission has display cases at the SSCB where profiles of County veterans are displayed. The Commission already has a website featuring profiles of women Veterans:

<https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/ADS/VETERANS/WomenVeterans.html>

V. Supporting Veterans - Completion of Withdrawal from Afghanistan

Wayne is the Director for the Silver Spring Vet Center. The Vet Center continues to receive referrals every day from the VA Medical Center, other Vet Centers and Veterans organizations. The Vet Center does make referrals to the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic at Easternseals for Veterans who are seeking a diagnosis. Wayne noted that the VA system for processing benefits and claims has slowed down. Wayne has

seen an increase in denial for benefits. He has received several calls from Veterans that were denied benefits for various disabilities and for post-traumatic stress (PTS) and were not notified why the benefits were denied. Some Veterans have been waiting to be approved and can barely pay their bills. Jameelah said she read an article that said there has been a high turnover rate for VA benefit raters so that could be one reason why more benefits are being denied as newer employees are not as seasoned as the older employees.

Jason Marshall, ServingTogether (ST), said ST has seen an overall increase in referrals during the pandemic, mostly relating to housing and employment. He has not seen an increase due to the end of the war in Afghanistan.

Dr. Vandebroek is the Clinic Director for the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic at Easterseals. She said the Clinic definitely saw an increase in calls immediately following the withdrawal from Afghanistan. She would have to review the numbers for September versus the preceding months to determine if the increase was statistically significant. Staff also reached out to clients they knew had trauma associated with their deployments. Dr. Vandebroek noted that the Clinic typically sees an increase in numbers in the fall due to families reacclimating to school schedules.

Betsy said she has communicated with gold star families regarding their family member killed in Afghanistan. She has tried to provide support during this time.

Kate asked if this Commission could contact state legislators to discuss this issue. Wayne said this Commission does have several representatives from state legislators that attend our meetings. Austin Morris, Representative of Senator Chris Van Hollen, said she reports back to Senator Van Hollen after every Commission meeting. She said the majority of Veterans seeking assistance from the Senator's office are from the Vietnam-era. Austin noted that the National Personnel Records has a significant backlog that is severely impacting VA claims processing as well as impacting many other federal agencies. She has also noticed during the pandemic that the Board of Veterans Appeals has been quick with scheduling virtual tele-hearings. However, there is now a significant backlog of cases that have to be reviewed by veteran law judges. These are all issues the Senator will be discussing directly with the VA.

VI. Legislation - ACT for ALS – Austin Morris, Representative of Senator Chris Van Hollen

Accelerating Access to Clinical Therapy for ALS (ACT FOR ALS) Senate Bill 1813 was introduced in the Senate in May 2021. An identical bill (H.R. 3537) was introduced in the House as well in May 2021.

There are individuals living in the U.S. today who have diagnosed with a terminal disease and have been told there is no help for them. This is the case for those living with ALS, yet there is a rich pipeline of proven safe treatments under pre-clinical or clinical studies that exist out of reach for the vast majority of ALS patients who do not know about the treatments or who were not accepted or who are excluded from the clinical trial. There are few options and potential opportunities in investigational therapies are a lifetime away from being approved. The goal of the ACT for ALS bill is to speed patient access to promising therapies. The bill would

- Direct the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) to support research on, and expanded access to, investigational drugs for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, and for other purposes.
- Establish grant programs to address degenerative diseases such as ALS.
 - Grants would be administered and dispersed by the FDA to public and private entities to cover the cost of research and development of drugs that diagnose or treat ALS and other severely debilitating neurodegenerative diseases.
- Direct HHS to establish a public private partnership for neurodegenerative diseases between the National Institutes of Health, the FDA and at least one eligible entity.
- Support research or development related to the prevention, diagnosis, mitigation, treatment, or cure of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or other rare neurodegenerative diseases.
- Require the FDA to publish on its website a five-year action plan that fosters the development of drugs that improve or extend the lives of people with neurodegenerative diseases.

- Authorizes \$100 million for each fiscal year from 2022 to 2026 to fund this new FDA research grants program.

Studies have found that there is an increase risk of ALS in military Veterans. The risk is almost as much as twice of that of the general population.

As of yesterday, there were 33 co-sponsors the Senate Bill. Senator Van Hollen joined as a co-sponsor on October 6. Austin thanked this Commission for bringing the bill to the Senator's attention. The House Bill has 325 co-sponsors.

Dr. Macri suggested adding language that would allow the VA to use non-FDA approved, non-experimental and off-label uses for treatments. Veterans should also be able to access those early treatments and early studies. In the past the VA has been reluctant to use non-FDA approved treatments. Austin will take this information back to the Senator.

VII. Planning for Veterans Day, Exhibit at Rockville Memorial Library

Betsy asked for suggestions and input on what could be put into the display cases at the Rockville Memorial Library. For example, profiles of County veterans and their photos could be included. In the past, Rich Schiffauer had only been putting in items for those who had been killed in action in the Global War on Terror. The Commission also has several display cases located at the Silver Spring Civic Building (SSCB) that also need to be updated for Veterans Day.

The Commission discussed the meaning of Veterans Day. The VA states that "While those who died are also remembered, Veterans Day is the day set aside to thank and honor all those who served honorably in the military - in wartime or peacetime. In fact, Veterans Day is largely intended to thank living veterans for their service, to acknowledge that their contributions to our national security are appreciated, and to underscore the fact that all those who served - not only those who died - have sacrificed and done their duty." Memorial Day is a day for remembering and honoring military personnel who died in the service of their country, particularly those who died in battle or as a result of wounds sustained in battle. It was suggested that the Commission include the meaning and history of Veterans Day in the display cases to help educate the community.

Betsy noted that the Commission did not install any displays at the Rockville Memorial Library last year due to the pandemic. She received emails from parents who had lost their adult children in the Global War on Terror that were very upset that their children were not being honored during Veterans Day last year. .

Betsy has received calls from the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) as they would like to lay a wreath on Veterans Day. She suggested that they contact the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 2562 in Wheaton which will be hosting a ceremony on Veterans Day.

Jameelah suggested working with the school system and having students write letters to Veterans that could be displayed. This could be a good project for elementary school students. This would require coordination with Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) and could be considered for next year.

Kate suggested working with MCPS to have Veterans speak in classrooms on Veterans Day. Bill Gray said in the past Commissioners have done that and many members of Vietnam Veterans of America have spoken to students in elementary and high school and in colleges. Betsy added that due to the pandemic activities such as speaking within the school were put on hold. Wayne said he along with three other Veterans presented virtually on Veterans Day last year for Gaithersburg High School.

Michael Wilson, Commissioner, suggested asking Veterans to donate items such as commendation medals and certificates that could be displayed alongside their picture similar to how Mission BBQ has their displays set up.

Carly Clem, Staff, noted that the Commission currently has many profiles of County Veterans that include photos of them during their service as well as a more recent picture. Given the quick turnaround time for setting up these displays as the Commission has the Rockville Memorial Library cases starting November 1, she suggested using the existing profiles for the displays. The Commission can move forward with the other suggestions next year when there is more time to collect items. Carly noted that Betsy may have items already in her office that could be used in the displays this year. Betsy asked Commissioners who are willing to donate items to contact her.

Betsy reported the Office of Public Information will be sending out a press release to let residents know that the Commission is seeking additions to its Veterans Day virtual tributes website:

https://www2.montgomerycountymd.gov/mcportalapps/Press_Detail.aspx?Item_ID=39352.

Michael Wilson volunteered to assist in setting up the display cases at Rockville Memorial Library. Bill Gray volunteered to assist in setting up the display cases at the Silver Spring Civic Building.

VIII. Chair and Vice Chair Report

None.

IX. Updates / Announcements

Wayne has been asked to speak at a Veterans Day event on November 7 hosted by Jewish War Veterans. He will give a presentation about this Commission and has been asked to sing the national anthem. Wayne will also be singing the national anthem on Veterans Day at Mission BBQ in Rockville at noon.

Elwood Gray, Commissioner, announced the American Minority Veterans Research Project will host a Veterans Community Celebration and Health Fair on Tuesday, November 9, 2021 at the Silver Spring Civic Center, One Veterans Plaza, Silver Spring, Maryland 20910. A formal celebration brunch will take place from 11:00am – 1:00pm in Buffalo Soldiers Hall. The Keynote Speaker is Norvell V. Coots, MD, president and CEO of Holy Cross Health. Please RSVP to the Veterans Community Celebration Brunch no later than November 1, 2021 by contacting Kathy Everett-Gaines at 240-688-6286, keverettgaines@gmail.com.

Betsy asked Commissioners for their input on when the Commission should start meeting in person again. The Commission will discuss again in January and will continue to hold virtual meetings in November and December.

Adjournment: 7:30pm

Next Full Commission Meeting: Tuesday, November 16, 2021 via Zoom from 6pm to 7:30pm. Please view the agenda for information on how to join the meeting. Agenda to be announced.

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