



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs  
Meeting Summary Minutes  
September 17, 2019**

**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 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.

**II. Approval of Minutes**

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

**III. Homeless Veteran Updates – Nili Soni, Continuum of Care Coordinator, Services to End and Prevent Homelessness (SEPH), Interagency Commission on Homelessness, Montgomery County, Maryland, Department of Health and Human Services, and Chapman Todd, Campaign Manager**

**PowerPoint:** <https://montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/CVA/HomelessVetsUpdateSept2019.pdf>

The Interagency Commission on Homelessness (ICH) was established by the County to act on behalf of county residents experiencing homelessness and to provide advice, counsel, and recommendations to the County Executive and County Council. In September 2015, Nili and Chapman spoke before this Commission about the County's Zero:2016 campaign to end Veteran and chronic homelessness in Montgomery County. For the purpose of the Zero:2016 campaign, the County gave a much broader definition of a Veteran to be any individual experiencing homelessness who has served on active duty in the United States Military, regardless of discharge status. The active duty requirement is not time restricted, which means that it applies to any length of service beyond training or boot camp. This definition includes persons who are not eligible for some homelessness programs and services provided through the VA. It was important in the beginning to identify Veterans who were not being served by or eligible for VA services and how to define a Veteran within the program so they could be served.

Montgomery County effectively ended homelessness for Veterans by the end of 2015. The number is a functional zero meaning that homeless Veterans will still enter the system, but there is enough permanent housing available in the County to house them quickly. Montgomery County was one of the first of four jurisdictions in the country to sustain a functional zero and is still only one of ten jurisdictions in the country to achieve that. This success is due in large part to the advocacy and support of this Commission, Veterans groups, Senator Van Hollen and Senator Cardin, the County Council and the County Executive. Chapman has spoken to peer groups across the country about Montgomery County's success. Betsy Luecking, Staff, noted that most jurisdictions throughout the country do not have a Commission on Veterans Affairs that can advocate on behalf of Veterans within government. When speaking to other jurisdictions about the success of Montgomery County's Zero:2016 campaign, Chapman has said if the county or city does not have a Commission on Veterans Affairs that should be their priority. It is important to have a Commission such as this to advocate at the highest level.

Using the same successful structure from the Zero:2016 campaign, ICH is leading Inside/Not Outside - a community-wide effort dedicated to ending chronic homelessness for individuals in Montgomery County by the end of 2018. @HomeTogether is a community-wide effort aimed at ending homelessness for families with children by 2020.

Since Zero:2016 began in 2015, the County has permanently housed 156 Veterans through rapid rehousing or supportive housing. There are other Veterans that may come into the system, but potentially reunite with family or find other living arrangements. When a Veteran comes in the system, they are assessed to determine their acuity level. The hardest Veterans to serve were those that had been homeless for many years and needed intensive supports and long-term rental subsidies. The County responded very quickly to those Veterans to get them housed and has built a sustainable system to the County at a functional zero. At this stage going forward, the focus is more on short-term homeless Veterans. The majority of Veterans that are out on the street have most likely already engaged with ICH.

ICH made an intensive effort to work with the backlog of Veterans within the system. Additional resources from the County provided the necessary funding. In the first year, 53 Veterans were housed, including those who had been homeless for a long time. Nili expects this number to average between 25 to 30 Veterans coming into the system ever year. This number would be expected to increase if the economy suffers, but the framework is in place now to provide services to those Veterans.

In terms of types of housing placements, 45 of the placements (29% total) are in County-funded permanent supportive housing. VA HUD funded permanent supportive housing makes up 35 of the placements (23% total). Nili said that the fact that a quarter of all placements are from County-funding is extraordinary and no other jurisdiction can show similar data of a County funding more than the VA. As part of Montgomery County's Fiscal Year 2016 budget, an appropriation by the County Council in the amount of \$500,000 was approved to provide housing and supportive services to functionally end veteran homelessness in the County. An additional \$150,000 was appropriated bringing the total to \$650,000. The funding is reoccurring every year. This Commission effectively communicated with former Councilmember George Leventhal to advocate for this funding.

24 Veterans (15% total) have self-resolved their homeless status by staying or living with family. 17 Veterans (11% total) have been placed in SSVF, which is a Federally-funded rapid rehousing program. In terms of gender, out of 160 homeless Veterans, 139 are male and 21 are female. Nili pointed out that there are very few Veteran families that are homeless. The data skews towards single individuals. Nili said only 8 Veterans (5% total) have returned to homelessness as part of this initiative. She said this is a gold standard and no other community in the United States has achieved this rate of return. There were 10 Veterans who returned to homelessness that were housed prior to the start of Zero:2016.

Nili discussed data that shows the length of time it takes for a Veteran to be housed. ICH aspires to house a Veteran within 45 days, but the average length of time as of this month is 60 days which is standard. The functional zero list averages 6 to 7 Veterans and ICH is aware of everyone on that list at any given times. Nili said they are seeing similar data for chronic homelessness.

For some Veterans, the County has worked for them for many, many years and they are still not housed because it is hard for them to trust a government entity. For this reason, ICH has shifted resources to non-profits such as Bethesda Cares to serve those Veterans as they may feel more comfortable getting services there.

ICH is starting to review Veterans cases to determine if those Veterans no longer need intensive services and moving them into another program. Permanent Support Housing is very costly and moving them into HUD VASH would be a cheaper option.

Dan asked what happens after the Veteran is housed and how long the Veteran can receive housing supports. Veterans in permanent supportive housing also receive a subsidy and case management. Veterans can stay

in that program as long as they need it. If a Veteran no longer needs on-going case management they can be moved into less intensive services. Rental assistance is typically provided for six months but has been provided for up to two years. The goal is to build community support some homeless individuals do not have to rely on the system. ICH is ensuring systems are in place to end homelessness permanently.

Betsy asked how this Commission and other Veterans can assist ICH in their mission. Nili said to continue advocating. The County has served 23 Veterans so far this year and they expect to continue to see an average of 25 to 30 Veterans per year coming into the system. There's still a need for HUD-VASH vouchers. Betsy noted that Dan will be meeting with the County Council Health & Human Services (HHS) Committee next month. It is important to educate the four new Councilmembers on the need to continue the \$650,000 funding. County Executive Elrich is a former Councilmember and is aware of the issue. Nili also recommended individuals continue to give or donate especially to ICH's two main non-profit partners including Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless (MCCH) and Bethesda Cares. When a Veteran is placed in housing, they need furniture and other household items. Bethesda Cares works with Veterans to provide furnishings.

Dan asked if the HUD-VASH vouchers were remaining consistent. Nili said the number of vouchers received from the VA has dropped, with 14 vouchers this year. More vouchers are needed to sustain the program. Betsy noted that Montgomery County had previously not received any vouchers because the VA had deemed that the County was too wealthy. It wasn't until the County and Senator Van Hollen and Senator Cardin made the case for the need. Montgomery County has been the direct recipient of 98 HUD VASH vouchers and an additional 25 ported HUD VASH vouchers from DC and other states. Chapman said the Federal government needs to continue providing support along with the County.

It was asked who makes the first contact when an individual is identified on the street. All referrals should be made to ICH to be handled by HHS. Nili noted that ICH advocated with the VA to have outreach staff in Montgomery County. In June/July of 2015, Fatmata Kamara, VA Outreach Social Worker, began working with Montgomery County Veterans. Fatmata is also available at the Gaithersburg VA Community-Based Outpatient Clinic every Wednesday from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Oftentimes, Fatmata is already aware of the Veteran that is being referred. Bethesda Cares and Every-Mind also provide outreach. John Mendez with Bethesda Cares has reached out to homeless Veterans in the event that the Veteran does not want to engage with the VA.

Bob Koffman, Commissioner, asked about the prevalence of homelessness in the non-Veteran population. Every year the County conducts a point-in-time count that gives a snapshot of how many people in the County are homeless at that time. This is the first year the County saw an almost 23% reduction in the homeless system. The County does not have long-term homeless on the streets. At any given time, there are 370 individuals that are homeless and 55 families. The County tries to rapidly rehouse families.

Bob also asked about panhandlers and how to refer them. Referrals can be made via the 24-hour Homeless Information Line at 240-907-2688 (V) or e-mail [outreach@montgomerycountymd.gov](mailto:outreach@montgomerycountymd.gov). Because of these new initiatives the outreach team has tripled and services have been expanded.

Nili told a story of a Veteran who had been homeless, living in Bethesda for 40 years who refused services. When he went to jail for trespassing, the County stepped in to work with him and invited him to use the bathroom facilities at Cordell Place in Bethesda. The Veteran began visiting the facilities and gaining trust with the County. The Veteran has now been living in Cordell Place for four years without signing a lease. The County offers master leases and sometimes hotel stays if that is how they can get the homeless individual into services.

Chapman added that panhandlers could be Veterans who are housed but have limited income, they could not be Veterans, or they could be Veterans from other jurisdictions. Outreach workers would want to engage with that individual to find out the real situation. Also, not every panhandler is homeless. The County also conducts a regular count every three months. The next count is occurring September 23<sup>rd</sup> with a 3-day, 2-night canvassing of the entire geography of the County.

Wayne Stinchcomb, Silver Spring Vet Center, asked about the referral process. Referrals should be given to ICH to maintain coordinated entry, not directly to the provider. They maintain a list that is reviewed with providers every two weeks. There is a concern because Montgomery County is attracting Veterans from different jurisdictions and ICH has to be mindful of resources. During the last point-in-time count, more than half of Veterans were identified as being not from Montgomery County. Those Veterans are connected back to their jurisdiction, but they can still choose to be here and to panhandle.

It was asked what the age demographics have been trending – younger or older. Nili said in the beginning it was older Veterans, and they do continue to come into the system. 40% of all Veterans served are age 60 and older. Last year they saw a lot of people coming out of institutions such as jails, nursing facilities, and long-term care. The majority of homeless Veterans the County encounters served prior to Iraq and Afghanistan. Although, there are concerns about Veterans from OIF, OEF and OND returning and what that inflow will look like. Nili added there are peaks especially around the winter months and especially after the holidays in January and February of newly identified Veterans.

Mike Subin, Commissioner, asked about the number of Veterans becoming homeless after being released from the Department of Correction & Rehabilitation (DOCR). Nili has seen a decline after discussing with DOCR about them contacting ICH if a Veteran is being released. The issue stems more from the State prison system. Nili reported County Executive Elrich has formed a new Committee to discuss the decriminalization of homelessness. The Committee will meet tomorrow.

Dan asked if Nili and Chapman would be willing to present at local American Legions (AL) or Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) to engage with the community. Chapman said they can. He is involved in a project at AL Post 139 in Arlington, VA. In 2016 AL Post 139 partnered with Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing to redevelop part of their site into an affordable housing complex for Veterans. Chapman would like to share this idea with other ALs and with VFWs. More information: <https://apah.org/the-terwilliger-family-foundation-pledges-1-5-million-for-apahs-innovative-american-legion-post-139-housing-project/>.

#### **IV. Armed Services Art Partnership (ASAP) – Valerie Smith, Program Manager**

**PowerPoint:** <https://montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/CVA/ASAPSept2019.pdf>

For more information, please contact Valerie at [val@asapasap.org](mailto:val@asapasap.org), 202-730-8206 (V).

Dan reported that ASAP will be painting a mural at American Legion Post 41 in Silver Spring.

#### **V. Chair and Vice Chair Report**

Dan reported that over the summer he, Harvey Kaplan, and Dave Petersen met with County Executive Elrich to discuss the opportunity for a second Veterans home in Montgomery County. Red Gate Golf Course has become an option that County Executive Elrich is in favor of, but ultimately the City of Rockville will have to make that decision. Mayor Bridget Donnell Newton and Councilmember Beryl Feinberg are in support, while Councilmembers Virginia Olney and Mark Pierzchala are against it. There is a current vacant seat on the Council. The issue most likely will not be resolved until the election in November. Dan encouraged Commissioners that live and vote for City of Rockville to speak with those Councilmembers.

The County Council HHS Committee will be hosting Boards, Committees and Commissions for a breakfast on October 10<sup>th</sup>. Dan will be in attendance.

The annual Tribute to American's Veterans Concert will be held on Wednesday, November 6<sup>th</sup> at the Silver Spring Civic Building starting at 6:00 p.m. More information to come.

Dan thanked Neil Greenberger, Public Information Office (PIO), for sending out a press release about the new Toastmasters for Veterans with Bernadette Garrett and Bonnie Maidak of Toastmasters District 36 based in the Washington Region. Mike Subin noted he recently taped an episode of Home Front featuring Bernadette.

Blair High School recently held a reunion and honored two Blair students that were killed in Vietnam. They want to present a flag to this Commission and have asked that it be displayed in the Veterans cases at the Silver Spring Civic Building.

County Executive Marc Elrich will attend the Commission's November 19<sup>th</sup> meeting.

#### **VI. Discussion on Expedited Permits to Install Exterior Hand Railings – Jim Campbell, Commissioner**

Jim contacted the Department of Permitting Services (DPS) about installing a handrail on the front step entrance to his house. The cost of the railing is \$250.00 and the cost of the access enhancement permit is \$286.66. Jim made a motion for this Commission to suggest to the County Council that permitting costs should be adjusted to allow Veterans, especially those with service-connected disabilities, have an expedited and less costly process to obtain an access enhancement permit. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken and the motion was unanimously approved. Mike Subin said he would contact DPS tomorrow about this issue. Betsy and Mike later talked and it was decided that Betsy follow up with permitting. It ended up because of only 2 steps, he does not need a permit.

#### **VII. Announcements**

Bob reported that Warrior Canine Connection (WCC) will be hosting their 2019 Graduation Ceremony on Saturday, September 28 at 11:00 a.m. in Gaithersburg, Maryland. A dozen or more dogs will be graduating to be united with their Veteran. The event will be catered by Mission BBQ. Attendees are asked to RSVP for the event. Bob also reported that WCC is accepting name nominations for the new puppy recruits. Names are accepted on behalf of a Veteran, living or dead, and they particularly are looking for female Veterans.

Mike reported he was contacted by an individual who works at Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) and who was told they could not bring their service dog-in-training to the school. Mike sent a letter to the superintendent of that school and the issue was resolved.

Wayne Miller said the VA released new regulations on Monday that Vet Centers can only allow certified service dogs in their facilities, not service dogs-in-training.

**Adjournment:** 7:50pm

**Next Full Commission Meeting:** Tuesday, October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019 from 6pm to 7:30pm. Held at Health and Human Services, 401 Hungerford Drive, 1<sup>st</sup> Floor 1A Conference Room, Rockville, MD 20850

Respectfully submitted:

Carly Clem, Administrative Specialist I

Betsy Luecking, Community Outreach Manager