



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs
Meeting Minutes
September 21, 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 June 2021 Meeting Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken, and the June 2021 Meeting Minutes were unanimously approved. Approved minutes are available online at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva.

III. Honoring Women Veterans – Kate Watson, Founder, YourNexStage Inc.

Website: <https://yournexstage.org>

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

Vision: Ensure that every military woman, past, present, and future finds a welcoming space and supporting services to meet her needs

Purpose: Function as a sustained bridge over the military civilian divide. Create opportunities for success in transition with emphasis on: employment; housing; physical and mental health; education; financial and legal support; benefits access; and community engagement.

Please review PowerPoint for information.

The floor was opened to questions.

Anneke Vandenbroek, Commissioner, is an Army Veteran and the Clinic Director for the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic at Easterseals. She noted that women Veterans are more likely to access services via telehealth as they do not have to rely on childcare. Anneke will connect with Kate and discuss how they can work together.

Gloria White Gardner, Veterans Committee Chair, Montgomery County Branch of the NAACP, is a Navy Veteran and neuropsychiatric nurse. She has concerns about the status, concerns and issues of women Veterans particularly black women and women of color. Available data available is also not broken down by race or ethnicity. Gloria is in contact with many women Veterans in Montgomery County who have had difficulty receiving services at the outpatient clinic and the DC VA Medical Center. Gloria will connect with Kate and discuss how they can work together. Kate noted Dr. Althea Green, an African American Command Sergeant Major, USA (Ret.) who teaches issues around minority health at Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, is on YourNexStage's Board of Directors, as well as Dr. Evelyn Lewis, an African American Commander, USN (Ret.).

Cynthia Macri, Commissioner, served in the Navy for 35 years. She agreed that data is needed that is disaggregated by race and ethnicity. She noted that it is different for women transitioning from military into the civilian sector. Women tend to be pushed into employment that is female-centric whereas in the military they were performing a wide range of jobs that men were also performing. Dr. Macri added that women Veterans are never recognized as Veterans when being addressed (either by rank or degree).

Dr. Macri said Veterans' organizations are competing for the same grant funding with some organizations not able to receive grants. Veterans' organizations that receive grant funding are also not working with other Veterans organizations. Cynthia reported the Montgomery County Asian American Health Initiative is currently soliciting grant applications. The request for proposal is encouraging organizations that are applying to develop proposals with partner organizations.

Jameelah Johnson, Commissioner, noted there are issues of compensation from the VA between men and women. Women are not receiving the same compensation rates or disability ratings as men for similar medical issues or diagnoses. She only received 30% disability compensation when she was diagnosed with stage 3 cancer and had to fight for years to receive 100% compensation.

Kate asked Betsy to put together a group of women to further discuss these issues and concerns.

Betsy suggested Commissioners participate in the VA's virtual roundtable discussion on diversity, equity and inclusion in VA healthcare that is being held tomorrow, September 22.

IV. Veterans Resources - Completion of Withdrawal from Afghanistan – Wayne Miller and Bob Koffman

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKpsMG9YBA8>

Wayne serves as the Director at the Silver Spring Vet Center. He noted there were similarities between how the war in Afghanistan ended and how the war in Vietnam ended. It has brought on issues of anger, fear and mistrust as well as nightmares, intrusive thoughts and memories. It has been difficult to connect with Veterans who served in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many were deployed multiple times and had to manage coming home to civilian life for a period of time before being deployed to a war zone again. Multiple deployments have made it difficult for employment and managing family life with partner dynamics, roles changing or not seeing their children for long periods of time.

Wayne also noted that before COVID-19, the Vet Center would encourage Veterans to get out of their house and go out into the community. Meetings are now offered virtually. Virtual options can be helpful for Veterans as well to connect with their battle buddies who may live in other states.

The Silver Spring Vet Center has received numerous referrals and has seen a substantial increase in individuals seeking services. Wayne noted that there is no wait time for individuals to complete an intake. The Vet Center offers both individual and group sessions. Individual sessions are offered based on the Veterans needs. Sessions can be once a week, bi-weekly, once a month, or once a quarter. The Vet Center also offers evening hours which allows Veterans the opportunity to participate after work or family obligations.

Betsy noted it's good that people are seeking assistance and do not feel stigmatized about asking for help. She said she has heard from people who have served at every level in the military who have been deeply troubled by how the war was ended. This Commission has been working to get information out about available behavioral health, counseling and wellness supports. She has been sending out resources via her email distribution list which currently has approximately 5,000 members.

V. Introduction of New Veterans Benefits Specialist (VBS) for Montgomery County – Dave Skisano, VBS, Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA), and Phil Munley, Director, Veteran Service Program, MDVA

View Key Contacts for Contact Information:

www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/CVA/KEYCONTACTSFORTHEVAANDOTHERRESOURCES.pdf

David Skisano has been hired as VBS for Montgomery County. The MDVA Service and Benefits Program provides assistance to the men and women who served in the Uniformed Services of the United States, their dependents, and survivors in obtaining benefits from the U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs, Dept. of Defense, State of Maryland and other programs for veterans and their families.

David is a Navy Veteran and his previous work experience included the Baltimore County Office of Workforce Development working with veterans on re-employment and training, the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation working as an instructor/facilitator and also with Montgomery County Fire and Rescue as a Firefighter/Rescuer. David's office is located within the Gaithersburg Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration Service Center Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs 15 Metropolitan Grove Road, Gaithersburg, MD 20878. No walk-ins are being taken at this time. Call or email David to schedule an appointment – 301-987-8412 (V), davidj.skisano@maryland.gov. Phil noted that the office utilizes plexiglass and hand sanitizer. Masks are not required but encouraged.

Phil reported MDVA has hired Roslyn Jones as the new Women Veteran Inclusion Program Manager. She has been charged with advocating for women Veterans and other traditionally underserved veteran populations, along with their families. Her role will be to provide outreach and education on federal and state VA benefits earned through military service and to collaborate with the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, state and local governments, and the community to raise awareness of the needs of Maryland's women, minority, and other underserved Veteran populations. Roslyn can be reached at 410-260-3971 or email Roslyn.Jones1@maryland.gov.

VI. Discussion and Vote on FY23 Operating Budget Priorities of the Commission

The Commission discussed FY23 operating budget priorities to be submitted to the Director of Health and Human Services by October 1. Items to consider include:

- Continuing to fund programs that provide mental health services and support additional funds.
 - Betsy asked Jen Hodge, Local Behavioral Health Authority, for information on how much funding the County provides ServingTogether. This amount could be included in the priorities.
- Supporting the County's efforts to end homelessness.
- Support the community grant given to the Warrior Canine Connection.
- Support Montgomery Parks and Team River Runner at the accessible launch at Riley's Lock if additional funds are needed to install a shelter.

A motion was made to adopt these items for the FY23 operating budget priorities. The motion was seconded. Commissioners Mike Subin and Bob Koffman abstained from voting on Warrior Canine Connection due to their involvement with the organization. The motion was approved. Wayne will present these priorities before the County Council in October.

Jameelah suggested sending a survey out to the community asking how we can better support women Veterans and to identify their needs. She and Joanna Starling, Commissioner, volunteered to assist in designing a survey. Betsy said she could send the survey out via her email distribution list. The survey could allow women Veterans to voluntarily disclose their name and contact information which could be used to create a women Veterans contact list.

Betsy noted in this Commission's enabling legislation this Commission has been tasked with assisting in planning appropriate public acknowledgement of the contributions made by Veterans and assist in planning

commemoration activities recognizing the contributions made by Veterans. She asked Commissioners for suggestions on how to recognize veterans. Wayne suggested installing a monument or plaque to honor women Veterans (living and deceased) in Montgomery County. Betsy reported this Commission has created a website featuring profiles (photos and biographies) of women Veterans: www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/ADS/VETERANS/WomenVeterans.html.

Betsy reported that she shared the list of Montgomery County servicemembers who were killed in action while serving in Afghanistan with a County Councilmember who was hosting an event to honor Afghanistan refugees. The Councilmember was going to include the list of those killed in action during their presentation.

Mike Subin, Commissioner, will be meeting with Catherine Leggett next week and will discuss with her this Commission's interest in installing a plaque or memorial to women Veterans at Memorial Plaza in Rockville. Betsy noted that Memorial Plaza currently has signs installed paying tribute to loved ones lost to drugs or substances contaminated with fentanyl. It was not the intent of Memorial Plaza to host any non-military or Veteran-related tributes or memorials. Mike will discuss this issue with Catherine and he will also discuss these issues with David Dise, Director, Department of General Services, whose office oversees Memorial Plaza.

VII. Chair and Vice Chair Report

Wayne reported the Commission will next meet on Tuesday, October 19 from 6pm to 7:30pm. Zoom link to be announced.

VIII. Updates / Announcements

Austin Morris, Representative for Senator Chris Van Hollen, reported Senator Van Hollen recently introduced bipartisan legislation to award Congressional Gold Medals to the 13 American servicemembers who lost their lives during the terrorist attacks in Kabul, Afghanistan on August 26. Senator Van Hollen also wrote to Secretary Denis McDonough calling on the VA to swiftly develop outreach to Veterans of the Global War on Terror, especially those who served in Afghanistan, to provide them with mental health resources. This was in response to a report that identified calls to Veteran suicide hotlines have increased. Senator Van Hollen met with Secretary McDonough at the Montgomery County VA Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) last week to discuss support services available to Veterans including mental health, substance abuse, and suicide prevention.

Rick Yount, Warrior Canine Connection (WCC), reported on August 26 President Biden signed the PAWS for Veterans Therapy Act. Under the law, the VA will partner with nonprofit organizations for a pilot program in which veterans will be able to train aspiring service dogs. The dogs will learn how to shield a veteran from an overwhelming crowd or wake them up if they're having a nightmare, lawmakers said. At the end of the program, the veteran trainers may adopt their canine pupils. WCC will be celebrating their 9th service dog graduation this Saturday. It is their largest graduating class to date. The graduation will air virtually at 11am with an in-person reception held afterwards. WCC has four litters of pups to name. Rick suggested that women Veteran names be submitted as one way to honor them.

Bill Gray, former Chair, reported Quilts of Valor has awarded approximately 280,000 quilts to servicemembers or Veterans who have been touched by war. These quilts are made by volunteers. Bill and Wayne along with a number of other members of Vietnam Veterans of America have received a quilt. He encouraged Commissioners who are interested in receiving a quilt apply to the local Quilts of Valor. Wayne reported the Silver Spring Vet Center will be awarding 13 quilts on November 10 (Marine Corps birthday).

Adjournment: 7:30pm

Next Full Commission Meeting: Tuesday, October 19, 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