



Commission on Veterans Affairs



MEETING AGENDA

Tuesday, December 15, 2020

6 p.m. – 7:30 p.m.

**Wayne Miller, Chair – Bob Koffman, Vice-Chair
VIA ZOOM**

PLEASE NOTE: Given the concerns of the corona virus, the Commission on Veterans Affairs will be meeting virtually via Zoom.

Join the meeting via ZOOM <https://zoom.us/j/97906200805>

If you want to call into the meeting, call 301-715-8592, use Meeting ID 979 0620 0805 followed by #.

If an attendee would like to speak during the meeting, they can raise their hand if on video and Chair will recognize you or you can use the "hand raise" function under the reactions tab at bottom of page. If connecting via a smart phone, tablet or computer, please click on the middle of the page and the functions will be at the bottom of the page. Use the Zoom app to be able to access all functions, including raising your hand. If you are calling by phone, press *9 to raise your hand. Those calling into the meeting can press *6 to mute or unmute their phone.

- 6:00 Welcome, Pledge of Allegiance, Moment of Silence & POW/MIA Remembrance, Approval of November 2020 Meeting Minutes – Wayne Miller, Chair**
- 6:10 Caring for Caregivers of Veterans/Families – Melissa Comeau, Director, Military and Veteran Caregiver Network Service to the Armed Forces, American Red Cross**
- 7:00 Sharing Ways We Care for Ourselves and Others – All**
- 7:20 Updates**
- 7:30 Adjourn**

If you need a sign language interpreter or any other accommodation to participate in this meeting, please contact Betsy.Luecking@montgomerycountymd.gov.

Montgomery County Veterans Affairs Website – www.montgomerycountymd.gov/veterans
Commission's Website – www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva
Veterans Network Directory – www.montgomerycountymd.gov/vnd



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs
Meeting Summary Minutes
December 15th, 2020**

****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 November 2020 Meeting Summary Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken, and the November 2020 Meeting Summary Minutes were unanimously approved. Approved minutes are available online at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva.

III. Caring for Caregivers of Veterans/Families – Melissa Comeau, Director, Military and Veteran Caregiver Network Service to the Armed Forces, American Red Cross

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

Website: <https://www.redcross.org/get-help/military-families/services-for-veterans/military-veteran-caregiver-network.html>

Melissa is a caregiver to her husband who is a combat-wounded Marine. He was transferred to the Wounded Warrior Battalion at Camp Pendleton where he went through rehabilitation and eventual medical retirement from the Marine Corps. Melissa never considered herself to be a caregiver as she thought the term only applied to someone taking care of an aging person. As Melissa came to learn she was a caregiver she looked for support and resources and was connected to the Elizabeth Dole Foundation. She was selected to be a Fellow for the Foundation in 2014 which started her advocacy work meeting with the VA and visiting the Hill to talk to members of Congress about caregiver issues. In 2014, RAND released a report titled "[Hidden Heroes: America's Military Caregivers](#)" which estimated that there are 5.5 million military caregivers in the United States. One of the recommendations from that report was that there needed to be a network of support for these caregivers. One of the best health outcomes for a Veteran is a well-supported caregiver. Caregivers can include spouses/partners, siblings, adult children caring for an aging parent, or a friend or a Veteran caring for another Veteran. On October 1st, 2020, the VA Family Caregiver Assistance Program was expanded to include family caregivers of eligible Veterans who were seriously injured in the line of duty on or before May 7, 1975. MVCN has been helping those caregivers find the right caregiver coordinator within the VA and how to apply for the program. The Military and Veteran Caregiver Network (MVCN) recently began serving Veterans who find themselves in a caregiving role whether it be another Veteran, their spouse, or a special needs child.

The MVCN is an evidence-based peer support program working off the reciprocal peer support model that when you give support you get support. The program began under the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) and MVCN was able to take their knowledge and models to change the scope to caregiving. Melissa explained there is a sense of grief and ambiguous loss with caregiving as well as anticipatory grief if the caregiver is dealing with caregiving at the end of life.

MVCN currently serves over 6,3000 caregivers. The Caregiver Calendar features peer support events, reconnection workshops led by mental health facilitators, educational opportunities, webinars, trainings, conferences, and other events from partner organizations including Blue Star Families, Yellow Ribbon Fund,

Soldiers Angels, and Wounded Warrior Project: <https://www.redcross.org/get-help/military-families/services-for-veterans/military-veteran-caregiver-network/mvcn-calendar.html>. Due to COVID-19, more of these opportunities have been made virtual which makes them more accessible to caregivers, many of whom have been socially isolated long before the pandemic. Programs and services have always been available both community-based and online because so many caregivers are unable to leave their homes due to their caregiving responsibilities.

The Hero Care Resource Directory features over 800 resources for every zip code in America, searchable with military and veteran caregiver filters and updated regularly to reflect the most current services.

All caregivers are screened prior to them joining the online peer support community to make sure they are military or Veteran affiliated. They must submit their Veteran's DD214, a VA caregiver letter, or line of duty documentation. If they currently do not have access to these documents, they can call MVVN and talk to a volunteer who can help them request the documents or find them. The online peer support community currently has over 50 support groups on such topics as benefits and compensation, education and training, children and youth, financial and legal issues, respite, and recreation. MVCN also partners with over 25 other organizations that have their own support groups including the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, American Legion Auxilliary, Operation Family Caregiver, Wounded Warrior Project, and Blue Star Families.

The Peer Mentor Support Program matches trained mentors with caregiver mentees for one-on-one mentorships. Caregivers are matched based on era of service, branch of military, officer enlisted, injuries, wounds, or illness, and caregiver background. Each caregiver is matched with five trained peer mentors they can choose from. Each mentorship lasts one year. Melissa noted that many caregivers are looking for cross-generational peer mentors.

MVCN also offers Peer Support Groups either online or in the community. The groups meet multiple times a week at various times that are convenient for caregivers. They also offer caregiver texts or chats as oftentimes caregivers are unable to leave their care recipient or they are in an environment where it would be inappropriate to talk. Community support groups have been offered in neutral places such as libraries, Red Cross offices, and military bases. Melissa said once the pandemic subsides they hope to offer support groups within VA facilities. Users can participate in the online communities anonymously. This offers privacy to those who want to participate in a way that is comfortable for them. This is very common on the active duty side where caregivers are concerned with their career or possible stigma around a PTSD or TBI diagnosis.

All staff for MVCN have all attended the Whole Health facilitation training offered at the VA. The training focuses on someone's whole health and empowers people through mindful awareness and self-care, recognizing the fundamental importance of healthy nutrition, activity, sleep, relationships, surroundings, and the many other areas of our lives that contribute to our health and wholeness. The VA's Whole Health Library offers 5 to 10 minutes videos that everyone can do in their own homes: <https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/index.asp>. This type of training has worked well for Veterans. MVCN facilitates weekly five to ten-minute self-care groups that teaches whole health to caregivers. These groups are currently offered virtually. Melissa taught Commissioners a breathing technique that is taught in the MVCN caregiver resiliency workshops.

The floor was opened to questions.

Jonathan Alfaro, Commissioner, asked if Melissa has any issues getting information about the program to Veterans. Melissa said MVCN does not have a big social media presence. The Red Cross has a Hero Care mobile app that is given to everyone coming into the military so they can store all their communication information in it. The app also has resources including caregiving which links to the MVCN. They also have a memorandum of understanding with the VA and have worked with them in various forms especially with their peer support. This year MVCN partnered with the VA to deliver Facebook portals and many caregivers came through that program. Caregivers are also referred via the various partnering organizations. Melissa said MVCN will be working with Veteran organizations to let them know the VA Caregiver Program has been expanded to include family caregivers of eligible Veterans who were seriously injured in the line of duty on or before May 7, 1975.

Jonathan asked if MVCN works with the Transition Assistance Program (TAP). He noticed when he was leaving the military many Veterans were nervous about reentering civilian life and this program may help them when transitioning. Also, those programs provide a lot of information in a short time frame and it can be overwhelming. Melissa agreed that TAP should include a component about caregiving. There can be fear during transition due to the uncertainty and the financial changes. There should be more to include family as well as caregivers during that transition process as many spouses, partners or other family members are filing paperwork on behalf of the Veteran. While she has not had that conversation with TAP yet, it has been her goal to discuss this with DoD. She thanked Jonathan for bringing up this topic and reinvigorating her goal.

Bob Norton, Maryland Military Coalition, asked if caregivers have experienced challenges in enrolling in VA caregiver benefits. Melissa said there have been some challenges for caregivers qualifying for the program of comprehensive assistance or not knowing about the general caregiver program. MVCN works to connect caregivers with the right information. All resources are verified and content is curated to go through the source. MVCN has great connections within the VA to help caregivers find their caregiver support coordinator at their local VA Medical Center. MVCN refers caregivers to VA Quick Start guides to help guide them through VA programs. They also encourage caregivers to reach out to their patient advocates for support and appeals and work with other organizations that focus on benefits and compensation. If Melissa sees an issue repeatedly she communicates it to the VA or to the specific VA Medical Center or VISN. She also works to communicate and manage caregiver expectations about the application process.

Bob Norton asked if anything could be done at the county or state level to support caregivers within MVCN and in general. Melissa said she always encourages Veteran service organizations and military affiliated groups to be inclusive of caregivers and to use the word caregiver in their terminology, especially for Veterans events for wounded, ill, injured or aging Veterans. If language says military families or Veteran families it may not appeal to someone who is a caregiver that may be not be a family member but a friend, another Veteran or a neighbor. For example, if it were communicated that caregivers were welcome at the kayaking groups that meet on Sundays at Riley's Lock more Veterans may actually attend as oftentimes it is the caregiver who is seeking out these opportunities. The caregiver may also benefit from being able to kayak.

Michael Wilson, Commissioner, said he has a coworker that has been missing work these last few weeks to care for his father who is a Veteran. He asked what the easiest way was for his coworker to access information about the program. Melissa said the coworker could e-mail programs.mvcn@redcross.org for more information. This year has been extremely hard for caregivers. Caregivers also miss more work than others and sometimes are not comfortable sharing with their employers that they are a caregiver. MVCN offers support groups on employment, workplace support, how to go to human resources, and how to access family medical leave. MVCN also offers caregiver support for all federal employees and have access to federal human resource channels for employees who find themselves in a caregiving role for a servicemember or a Veteran.

Jameelah Johnson, Commissioner, said while she was stationed at Walter Reed she noticed many caregivers were burnt out or overwhelmed. She asked if MVCN offers any relief or provider a break for caregivers. Melissa said MVCN is largely a peer support network. There are resources if a caregiver is seeking respite. The Elizabeth Dole Foundation just launched a multi-million-dollar respite program that offers qualifying caregivers up to 24 hours of free respite care to be used however they want. The VA also offers respite programs. The truth is that emotional, relationship and financial strains are a component of caregiving and MVCN tries to give people the skills, resiliency, education and tools to help them navigate that and to recognize burn out. Peer referral for resources has a higher acceptance rate than provider referral. MVCN works to have strong resources and partnerships to provide easy hand offs and make it easy as possible for caregivers to receive all the different types of support they are going to need on their journey.

Susan Webman, Commissioner, said she knows of a Veteran who is currently providing caregiver services to a wife of a military service member. She asked if this Veteran would be able to qualify for MVCN. Melissa said he would absolutely be welcome and they would make sure he gets all the support he needs as he care for her.

Bill Gray, former Chair, is a Vietnam Veteran who said he is a caregiver for his wife. Melissa said MVCN has partnered with Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA). She asked Bill to contact her directly.

Stan Siedel, Maryland Veterans Commission, asked about Easterseals respite program. Melissa said Easterseals DC/MD/VA offers a fantastic military family respite program. They also offer a webinar series and educational opportunities on caregiving and issues that may arise. Melissa has presented on ambiguous grief and loss.

Cynthia Macri, Commissioner, said her brother travels to Texas once a month and provides care to their father who is a Korean War Veteran. Her father has never signed up for VA benefits. Melissa said there have been some improvements and Veterans can now apply for benefits online. She suggested reviewing the VA Quick Start Guide and encouraging her father to apply for benefits. She also said long distance caregiving is very common and the Network provides support for those situations. There are support groups for adult children caring for their parents as well as an age 50+ group.

Jonathan asked if there are programs that provide donations or gift cards to caregivers. Melissa said there are several programs available. Soldiers Angels and Operation Gratitude sends care packages and appreciation gifts. The VA Caregiver Program offers a stipend to qualifying caregivers.

Bob Koffman, Vice-Chair, thanked Melissa for her presentation and said he has had the honor of working with Melissa on various committees. He also shared an article from ScienceDaily "[Helping pays off: People who care for others live longer](#)".

Betsy Luecking, Staff, asked Melissa to send her a list of places to donate to support caregivers.

Melissa said she would be open to speaking before the Commission again if they would like to go discuss caregiver issues. Commissioners can contact Melissa directly at Melissa.Comeau@redcross.org.

IV. Sharing Ways We Care for Ourselves and Others

Betsy said she has been reconnecting with people.

Jameelah said her family has been hosting bi-weekly Zoom calls to check in on family members. She has also been reaching out to Veterans that she was served with. She added that as of November 11, 2020, [U.S. Military Veterans and Gold Star Families receive free access to national parks](#). She frequently hikes Great Falls in Virginia

Michael said he has been encouraging people to focus on their health and wellness to include exercise and maintaining doctor appointments. He has noticed that some of his friends sit at home which can lead to depression, anxiety and increased alcohol use.

Jonathan said he has spent time on prayer, meditation and yoga to help him stay calm, relax and become more aware of his emotions. He suggested searching for YouTube tutorials on meditation to get started.

Cynthia agreed that meditation has been helpful as she has been using a mindfulness FitBit app. She added that she has been walking Arlington Cemetery. She noted that Veterans and retirees can enter Arlington Cemetery via Fort Myer.

Joanna Starling, Montgomery College, reported Combat2Veterans is offering weekly yoga and meditation sessions for student Veterans. The Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic offers monthly virtual mindfulness and gentle yoga sessions. Joanna and Jason Franklin, Veterans Program Manager, rotate through a list of student Veterans that they call every few weeks. She also said that individuals who join Blue Star Families can receive a free subscription to the Headspace app which focuses on guided meditation and mindfulness.

Wayne reported the Silver Spring Vet Center (SSVC) calls their Veteran participants at least once a week. Veterans are also being taught how to use their grounding skills if they are feeling stressed out. Veterans are asked to call their battle buddies. The SSVC hosts drive-by events including a Veterans Day event and a Christmas parade to be held this Friday.

Betsy asked Carly Clem, Staff, to create a one-page summary of the Homefront show that aired last month: <https://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/CVA/HOMEFRONTDEC2020.pdf>. She will be sending the summary out to her e-mail distribution list. She encouraged Commissioners to be supportive and encouraging to others during this difficult time.

Bob Koffman reported the Moments to REACH campaign was launched this November with the goal of inspiring people from all across our nation to REACH by sharing a story about a time they REACHed to provide support to a loved one or when they REACHed to find help for themselves. Individuals are encouraged to record and upload brief videos. Commissioners to view the website www.reach.gov to view the videos. He encouraged Commissioners to film their own brief two-minute video and share their story of either reaching out to someone for help or someone reaching out to you.

V. Chair and Vice Chair Report

None.

VI. Updates / Announcements

Joanne reported there is an internal email circulating that only 5% of the National Guard that was mobilized at the beginning of the pandemic has received their DD214 and the remaining 95% cannot access benefits including health care and the GI Bill. Some of the National Guard members have contacted Senator Van Hollen's office but were reprimanded for doing so. Kathia Mejía Chévez, Representative of Senator Van Hollen, shared her e-mail (assistance@vanhollen.senate.gov) and asked Joanna to send her more information. Wayne said they are eligible to receive counseling at the Silver Spring Vet Center.

Adjournment: 7:30pm

Next Full Commission Meeting: Tuesday, January 19th, 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

Attendance

Commissioners Present: Jonathan Alfaro; Josephine Bahn; Hannah Dibonge; Elwood Gray; Jameelah Johnson; Robert Koffman; Cynthia Macri; Wayne Miller; Reggie Mitchell; Scott Schlesinger; Joanna Starling; Susan Webman; Michael Wilson

Commissioners Absent: Dan Bolling; James Campbell; Michael Subin

Non-Voting Congressional Representatives Present: Karen Hendricks (Senator Chris Van Hollen); Ken Reichard (Senator Ben Cardin)

Non-Voting Congressional Representatives Absent: Christa Burton (Congressman Jamie Raskin); Vikki Garcia (Congressman John Sarbanes)

Commission Staff Present: Betsy Luecking, Staff Liaison; Carly Clem, Administrative Specialist I