



Commission on Veterans Affairs



MEETING AGENDA

Tuesday, October 20, 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. The meeting will begin at 6:00pm. We anticipate that the call will last approximately about an hour or so, give or take.

Join the meeting via ZOOM <https://zoom.us/j/97506057996>

Or, call into the meeting: If you want to call into the meeting, call 301-715-8592, use Meeting ID 975 0605 7996 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.

- 6:00 Welcome, Pledge of Allegiance, Moment of Silence & POW/MIA Remembrance, Approval of September 2020 Meeting Minutes – Wayne Miller, Chair**
- 6:10 October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month – Anthony M. Butler, Senior Regional Local Veteran Employment Representative, MD Veteran Program - Montgomery County, Division of Workforce Development and Adult Learning, Maryland Department of Labor**
- 6:45 Veteran Homelessness Update – John Mendez, Executive Director, Bethesda Cares**
- 7:00 VA Mission Act Health Care Services – Maureen Ivusic, Creator at "Chocolate and Chi" Tai Chi for Veterans Certified Instructor**
- 7:10 Top two policy procedures and budget items for FY22 and Saving plan for FY21**
- 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
October 20th, 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 September 2020 Meeting Summary Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken, and the September 2020 Meeting Summary Minutes were unanimously approved. Approved minutes are available online at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva.

III. Veteran Homelessness Update – John Mendez, Executive Director, Bethesda Cares

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

[View Zero:2016 Campaign Report](#)

Zero:2016 is an initiative to end Veteran homelessness by the end of 2015, and chronic homelessness by the end of 2016. When the [Zero:2016 Campaign](#) began five years ago, this Commission was very involved and supportive of the initiative. Since the beginning of the campaign, the County has maintained strong approaches to keeping the numbers of homeless populations down. Bethesda Cares is one of the County's partners that helps with Veterans homelessness through supportive housing referrals, housing subsidies and homeless street outreach.

Montgomery County achieved functional zero for Veterans experiencing homelessness as of the end of December 2015. As part of Montgomery County's FY 2016 Budget, an appropriation in the amount of \$500,000 was approved to provide housing and supportive services to homeless Veterans in the County. The County also received federal support. Earlier this year John met with Councilmember Evan Glass and representatives from the offices of Councilmember Gabe Albornoz and Councilmember Andrew Friedson to discuss additional funding. Councilmember Glass pushed for a \$350,000 funding increase that was unanimously passed at the end of July 2020. The County procurement office is currently in the process of sending those funds to Bethesda Cares. Those funds will be used to help as many as 10 to 14 additional Veterans who are homeless and in need of supportive housing resources. These funds will also help Bethesda Cares master lease units which will help Veterans who cannot make it through the landlord interview get into housing and off the streets. John thanked Councilmember Glass for pushing the \$350,000 special appropriation through the County Council.

The overall census on Veterans homelessness continues to look solid. The numbers do spike every now and then but the County mostly has homeless Veterans in the single digits. That was not the case prior to the Zero:2016 campaign. When John first spoke before this Commission there were anywhere from 120 to 150 homeless Veterans in the County.

Bethesda Cares has a homeless prevention program for Veterans. This program helps the Veteran work on their addiction and substance abuse issues and make sure they do not lose their housing. The County has also appropriated \$20,000,000 from the Rent Relief Program that is being administered through Health & Human Services (HHS). Veterans are eligible for this program as long as their loss of income is related to COVID.

John opened the floor to questions.

Betsy reported this Commission will be meeting with the HHS County Council Committee on November 3rd to present their priorities for FY22. The Commission supported the additional \$350,000 in funding this past April. Betsy asked what funding Bethesda Cares will be requesting in FY22. John said the \$350,000 special appropriation is attached to a Bethesda Cares contract that will be renewed every year. The total amount that Bethesda Cares receives is \$647,000. John said this Commission has been very supportive and responsive about homeless Veterans issues. Montgomery County is one of the national leaders when it comes to solutions on Veterans homelessness. Jurisdictions across the country look to Montgomery County for best practices and evidence-based research. Montgomery County has been so successful because of the local dollars invested by the County and the support from this Commission.

Jonathan Alfaro, Commissioner, asked about the causes of homelessness for Veterans. John said it is a combination of issues. Typically, when a Veteran comes back from their tour of duty or service they have some primary supports in their community, such as their mom or dad or brother or sister. Over time, that primary support system can erode and they could lose their housing. They may also have an addiction issue and they are not following up with the VA for their medical care. Those issues tend to compound.

It was asked what the demographics are of the homeless population in Montgomery County. John said it largely mimics the County demographics. There are more minority Veterans than the general population. Most Veterans who are homeless are single and they are dealing with mental health trauma or substance abuse. There are programs in place to assist Veteran families with children so they do not end up on the street.

Michael Wilson, Commissioner, asked if the number of minority Veterans is disproportionate to the overall representation of the County. John said this is true for the entire homeless population. There is a disproportionate number of minorities that are homeless compared to the general demographics for the population who are not homeless. Stan Siedel, Maryland Veterans Commission (MVC), said this issue is currently being addressed by the Interagency Council on Homelessness (ICH). John explained that the chronic homeless population can be anywhere from 60% to 70% minority populations, primarily African-American and some Latino.

Michael asked how the Montgomery County homeless population compares to surrounding counties such as Prince George's County. John said Prince George's County does not have point-in-time counts and there may not be data available to compare. Stan added that demographic cross-county data has not been compared.

Betsy thanked John for his hard work. She noted that John is a Veteran and he used to be a Commissioner.

Commissioners can contact John at John@BethesdaCares.org.

IV. VA Mission Act Health Care Services – Maureen Ivusic, Creator at "Chocolate and Chi", Tai Chi for Veterans Certified Instructor and VA Community Care Provider

Maureen is a spouse of a Veteran and a VA Community Care Provider for the Tai Chi for Veterans program. She has been doing tai chi for over 20 years. She has met with Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and American Legion posts to present on Tai Chi for Veterans (TCV). Most Veterans do not seem aware of the new VA Community Care Network (CCN) that was provided by the VA Mission Act. Maureen would like to assist this Commission in educating Veterans of this expanded benefit and providing a clearer format explaining the program.

Through the VA CCN, VA medical staff can authorize and schedule care from a community care provider with the Veteran's approval. Licensed health care providers will work together with VA physicians and practitioners to provide medical, surgical, Complementary and Integrative Health Services (CIHS), Durable Medical Equipment (DME), pharmacy, and dental services to eligible Veterans who are unable to receive care at local VA medical centers. VA staff will refer Veterans directly to community providers and will directly schedule community care appointments for Veterans through their local VA Medical Center. Veterans can also choose to schedule their own appointment with support from local VA staff. Optum has taken over as the healthcare provider in our region. Optum's VA CCN is separate from TriCare, which is used by current Active Duty and

retired military service personnel. Complementary care focuses on pain management and reducing medications as well as helping with depression, anxiety and overall health.

Cynthia Macri, Commissioner, asked how Maureen became a VA CCN provider. She said it would be helpful if there was information on how to navigate Optum. Optum is the VA Community Care Network. Maureen said the Mission Act provides complementary therapies to Veterans and their caregivers. Those complementary therapies have been identified by Optum. At this time, Optum does not include yoga, but does include Tai Chi. TCV is aligned with Tai Chi International which is a partner with Optum and is the exclusive provider that trains tai chi instructors for TCV. TCV was able to become a VA CCN provider through rigorous training which includes Veterans cultural training and PTSD training.

It is Maureen's understanding that the Mission Act is very clear on what constitutes complementary therapy and who can partner with Optum as a Community Care Provider. When a primary care provider refers a patient to a complementary therapy, such as tai chi, acupuncture or chiropractic, the primary care provider can look in the Computerized Patient Record System (CPRS), find the appropriate code, and make the referral. She noted that most of these therapies are offered through the integrative program at the DC VA Medical Center (DCVAMC), but these providers in the VA CCN are available if that Veteran is not able to access the program at the DCVAMC. Maureen added that she is the only tai chi instructor for Montgomery County. TCV has one instructor in Frederick County, one instructor in Howard County and one instructor in Virginia. TCV would like to expand their network and provide training to other providers in the area so they can offer more tai chi and expand access to Veterans. Maureen does offer a free online class.

Stan suggested that Maureen connect with the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic and Serving Together. Maureen said the Gaithersburg Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) is aware of her services. Wayne said he posts information about services such as tai chi and yoga at the Silver Spring Vet Center (SSVC), but they are not able to directly refer individuals because the SSVC is non-medical. Cynthia recommended Maureen also connect with Unite Us which is an initiative to provide coordinated care of health and social service providers that work collaboratively to meet people's needs. The referral network works with health plans, health systems, state and local governments, philanthropy, and community-based organizations. Cynthia said Unite Us is a platform that is very Veteran-centric and is available throughout the Maryland, Virginia, and DC region.

Betsy suggested that Cynthia and Bob Koffman, Commissioner, include information about TCV as they work on their suicide prevention activities.

Betsy asked Maureen to provide a one-page document that explains the Mission Act and the various complementary therapies available including TCV services. She would like to share this information with her e-mail subscription list of over 5,000 subscribers as well as with VFWs, ALs and other veteran service organizations. It could potentially be included in monthly newsletters sent out by elected officials. Maureen will also share her tai chi schedule. Maureen has a group of six to eight people that she works with in Poolesville. She is available to provide in-person or telehealth services. Online tai chi is available for Veterans nationwide and Veterans can choose the class that's right for them. Bob said there is tremendous opportunity to bring Veterans together nationwide for group activities like tai chi. Maureen offers a free class on Thursdays at 1pm. It can be streamed on Facebook or Zoom. Anyone can attend the free online classes. The program taught is called Taijifit and this method takes the movements but takes out the formatting so it's all levels. It is very easy but comprehensive. The goal of the program is for the Veteran to get out of their mind, get rid of stress and get into the movement. Some qui gong movements are incorporated, but the VA does not recognize qui gong as a separate therapy. David Dorian Ross, who is a Navy Veteran, developed the Taijifit program.

V. Top Two Policy Priorities and Budget Items for FY22 and Savings Plan for FY21

The Commission testified before the County Council in April 2020 recommending funding of programs that promote mental health and wellness and suicide prevention. The Commission also included support

of Bethesda Cares expanding their outreach to Veterans and the additional funding of \$350,000. The Commission supported Warrior Canine Connection in receiving a \$50,000 community grant and supported the accessible launch at Riley's Lock. Given the Commission's discussions held over the last several months,

Betsy suggested one policy issue would be to promote mental health and physical wellness. The activities of Warrior Canine Connection and funding for parks and recreation could support that issue.

Jameelah Johnson, Commissioner, recently read an article about the issues people are experiencing due to the pandemic including loneliness and feelings of being disconnected. She suggested supporting mental health efforts through Zoom such as tai chi or paint and sip to help engage Veterans. Betsy said it has not been an easy time for anyone with social isolation. Physical activities do provide connectedness to other people. She suggested sending out a bi-weekly or monthly newsletter with tips or information on things to do and proactively promote remote connectedness.

Wayne agreed that mental wellness should be included. He asked if the Homefront show had been scheduled. Neil Greenberger, Office of Public Information, is still waiting to hear back from staff. He will reach out to them tomorrow.

Bob reported on October 5th President Trump signed an on [Executive Order on Saving Lives Through Increased Support For Mental- and Behavioral-Health Needs](#). The Executive Order establishes a working group that must come up with plans within 45 days to increase mental health support and behavioral health needs. This Executive Order is specifically designed to address the impact COVID-19 is having on Veterans mental health.

Maureen said one of her colleagues who works with a Veterans homeless shelter in Pittsburgh is going to provide a large monitor and computer workstations so the shelters can have access to online programs. She suggested this idea be included as one of the Commission's priorities. Betsy said she will follow-up with John and Bethesda Cares. She noted that HHS has been discussing entering into a partnership with an internet provider to provide computers to persons with disabilities who are isolated. This could also benefit people who are homeless.

Wayne said he has been having trouble reaching the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) Veteran Service Officer (VSO) for Montgomery County. He added that some of the Veterans he sees have been waiting the whole pandemic to talk to someone or to receive their benefits. Joanna Starling, Montgomery College (MC), said while the MC campus is closed they are completing construction on the administration office where the VSO is located. Once construction is completed and MC opens the VSO will move into a larger office at the same location. Joanna said MDVA has posted the job listing for the Montgomery County VSO position. At this time VSOs Gary Brown and Joseph Thornton have been helping manage Montgomery County cases. She noted that since all VSOs are currently teleworking, a Veteran can call any VSO location for assistance. Betsy will reach out to MDVA Secretary George Owings and Phil Munley, Director, Service and Benefits Program, tomorrow for more information. Stan is meeting with Secretary Owings tomorrow and will also discuss this issue with him. [More information and list of offices](#).

Betsy said that the Behavioral Health service area of the county created a Suicide Task Force and she has requested that reps from the Commission on Veterans Affairs be included. Veterans need to be at the table. She added that a [new Suicide Prevention category](#) has been added to the online Veterans Network Directory. Other resources can be found under [Behavioral Health, Counseling & Wellness Supports](#).

Michael said when discussing quality of life for Veterans in Montgomery County it should include economic opportunities including help Veterans start their own businesses. He reported there is a new small business program called Project Opportunity (PO) that offers a free entrepreneurship training program designed solely for Veterans, active duty, reserve personnel and military spouses who want to start their own business or expand their current small business (www.project-opportunity.com). Michael has been attending PO sessions in Prince George's County every week. They also offer sessions in Southern Maryland. He would like to have sessions offered in Montgomery County. Betsy said the Montgomery County Chamber Community Foundation (MCCCF) offers a Veteran Institute for Procurement (VIP) free training program for Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Businesses (SDVOSB) and Veteran-Owned Small Businesses (VOSB). Ken will invite Barbara Ashe, MCCCF President and VIP National Director, to speak about the program at the Commission's November meeting. The MCCCF VIP program has been nationally recognized. Betsy will also invite Anthony M. Butler, Senior Regional Local Veteran Employment Representative, MD Veteran Program - Montgomery County, Division of Workforce Development and Adult Learning, Maryland Department of Labor, to speak at

the November meeting. He was supposed to speak tonight but had technical issues. Stan will also invite someone from PO.

Betsy will draft the policy priorities and send them to Commissioners to review.

VII. Chair and Vice Chair Report

None.

VIII. Updates / Announcements

Michael reported the Gaithersburg-Rockville (MD) Alumni Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Incorporated will be holding their 2nd Annual Mens Health Symposium on Saturday, November 7th from 10am to 1pm. The event will be held virtually. There will be a breakout session with Kimoela Cato from the DCVAMC providing information on Veteran health resources for veterans.

Stan reported the MVC will be hearing a presentation from Fields for Valor tomorrow. He and Secretary Owings did a site visit to the farm in September.

Betsy reported the photo she took of the Navy Veteran using the accessible launch at Riley's Lock is on the front page of the Montgomery Parks annual report. She has also submitted the photo to a national photography organization.

Adjournment: 7:20pm

Next Full Commission Meeting: Tuesday, November 17th, 2020 via Zoom from 6pm to 7:30pm. Please view the agenda for information on how to join the meeting.

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

Attendance

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

Commissioners Absent: Dan Bolling; Hannah Dibonge; Michael Subin

Non-Voting Congressional Representatives Present: Vikki Garcia (Congressman John Sarbanes); Ken Reichard (Senator Ben Cardin)

Non-Voting Congressional Representatives Absent: Christa Burton (Congressman Jamie Raskin); Austin Morris (Senator Chris Van Hollen)

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