



**Commission on Veterans Affairs  
Meeting Agenda**

**September 30, 2025**

**6 p.m. – 7:30 p.m.**

**Join via Zoom**

<https://montgomerycountymd-gov.zoom.us/j/7390017153?omn=81787608877>

**Michael Wilson, Chair  
Chris Thomas, Vice Chair**

**If you want to call into the meeting**, call 301-715-8592, use Meeting ID 739 001 7153 followed by #.

**If a Commissioner 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 June 2025**

**6:05 Homelessness – John Mendez, Executive Director and former Commissioner, Bethesda Cares**  
<https://web.greaterbethesdachamber.org/NONPROFIT-ORGANIZATIONS/Bethesda-Cares,-Inc-1676>

**6:40 FY27 Commission Priorities and Strategic Plan – Discussion/Vote – Michael Wilson**

**7:00 Operation Green Light and Veterans Day – Chris Thomas and Betsy Luecking**

**7:05 Chair & Vice-Chair Updates – Michael Wilson and Chris Thomas**

**7:10 Updates from Commissioners**

**7:15 Community Speaks**

**7:20 Speakers for Upcoming Meetings**

**7:30 Adjourn**

**ADA Reasonable Accommodations:** Sign language interpreter services and other auxiliary aids or services will be provided upon request with as much advance notice as possible, preferably at least five (5) full business days before the meeting. To request any reasonable accommodation to participate in the meeting, please contact Carly Clem in advance at [carly.clem@montgomerycountymd.gov](mailto:carly.clem@montgomerycountymd.gov) or call 202-853-1109. In all situations, a good faith effort will be made to provide accommodation. For any additional questions or concerns, please contact Betsy Luecking, Staff Liaison at [betsy.luecking@montgomerycountymd.gov](mailto:betsy.luecking@montgomerycountymd.gov) or please call 240-418-4865, MD Relay 711.



## **Commission on Veterans Affairs September 30, 2025 - Meeting Minutes**

### **Meeting Location**

Meeting held virtually via Zoom.

### **Attendance**

#### **Members Present**

- Grace Caulfield
- Bernard Chesman
- Elwood Gray
- Miguel Sapp
- Scott Schlesinger
- Michael Subin
- Christopher Thomas, Vice-Chair
- Michael Wilson, Chair
- Joseph Eyong – Representative of Office of U.S. Congressman Jamie Raskin
- Charlise Richardson – Representative of Office of U.S. Senator Chris Van Hollen

#### **Members Not Present**

- Drew Garza
- Jameelah Johnson
- Veronica Pei
- Joanna Starling

#### **Staff Present**

- Betsy Luecking, Staff Liaison
- Carly Clem, Program Specialist II
- Jen Hodge, Local Behavioral Health Authority
- Tara Clemons Johnson, Legislative Analyst, County Council

#### **Guests**

- Ken Reichard
- Jevina Lindsay, Maryland's Commitment to Veterans
- Donny Williams, ServingTogether
- Gary Palmer, Military Officers Association of America
- Rebecca Patterson
- Bill Gray, former Chair
- Shameen Anthanio-Williams
- Jane McCarthy, former Commissioner
- Deshola Adeyemo

## Guest Speakers

- John Mendez, Executive Director, Bethesda Cares

## Call To Order

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 p.m.

## Welcome, Pledge of Allegiance, Moment of Silence & POW/MIA Remembrance

Chris Thomas, Vice-Chair, welcomed everyone to the meeting of the Commission on Veterans Affairs (CVA). He asked for all present to say the Pledge of Allegiance. He 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.

## Review and Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes

A motion was made to approve the June 2025 Meeting Minutes and the August 2025 Strategic Planning Meeting Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken and the June 2025 Meeting Minutes and the August 2025 Strategic Planning Meeting Minutes were unanimously approved. Approved minutes are available online on the [Commission's website](#).

## Meeting Minutes Agenda Items

### 1. Presentation - Rise in Veterans Homelessness – John Mendez, Executive Director, [Bethesda Cares](#)

There used to be 200,000 homeless veterans throughout the U.S. Most were Vietnam veterans living in shelters and on the streets. Currently, there are between 35,000 to 38,000. In 2007 and 2008, the G.W. Bush Administration began working with Congress in a bi-partisan way to fund permanent housing vouchers for veterans. The previous way to solve the problem was to provide emergency shelters and transitional programs, but homeless veterans would cycle between emergency room, shelter and the transitional program. There was no significant decrease in veterans' homelessness for 8 years until HUD-VASH vouchers. These vouchers are part of a program by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to provide housing assistance and support services for homeless veterans and their families. These vouchers are a form of Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) rental assistance that combines case management and clinical services provided by the VA to help veterans secure and maintain safe, affordable, permanent housing. To get a voucher, a veteran typically needs to contact their local VA medical center to be assessed and referred to the program, as they must meet eligibility requirements such as being homeless, capable of independent living, and agreeing to receive services.

The first allocation of HUD-VASH vouchers came out in 2018 and by 2012, the number of homeless veterans was reduced down to between 50,000 and 60,000. Permanent housing is the solution to getting veterans off of the streets or out of shelters. They belong in the community with the supports that they need.

The permanent housing model doesn't just work well with veterans – it works for anyone with a significant disability or behavioral health challenge. Bethesda Cares has applied those same types of principles to other homeless populations in various ways.

The Commission on Veterans Affairs has been a strong advocate for HUD-VASH vouchers and working with Congressman Van Hollen's Office to secure allocations for Montgomery County. In 2015, the County veteran homeless population reached the single digits and was considered a functional zero, which means that, at any point in time, the number of veterans experiencing sheltered and unsheltered homelessness will be no greater than the current monthly housing placement rate for the veteran population.

Since 2022, it has been hard getting permanent housing vouchers funded in Montgomery County. Local funding from the County Executive and County Council has emphasized emergency shelters. As a result, the homelessness population for the general population and veterans has skyrocketed. During the last point-in-time count, 50 veterans were identified as experiencing homelessness. Homeless veterans actively on Bethesda Care's list may shift between 15 to 35 names, but the number is higher than it was just 3 to 5 years ago.

It is cheaper for the County to invest in permanent housing vouchers and place people in the community rather than an institutionalized setting such as a shelter. John has been speaking with various public officials including Councilmember Gabe Albornoz, Chair of the Health and Human Services Committee, and has been advocating for the County to change the funding format to support permanent housing vouchers which are a greater investment in our community.

The floor was opened to questions and comments.

- a. In 2015, the Commission on Veterans Affairs met with Councilmember George Leventhal and reported that there were 13 to 15 homeless veterans who did not qualify for the HUD-VASH vouchers as they had received less than an honorable discharge. As part of the County's Fiscal Year 2016 budget, the County Council approved an appropriation in the amount of \$500,000 to provide housing and supportive services to functionally end Veteran homelessness in the County. The funding is recurring every year and is available to Veterans who have received less than an honorable discharge and are therefore not eligible for VA programs. At the time, Montgomery County was the only county in the U.S. to provide its own funding for homeless veterans. John reported the appropriation amount has increased over the years as well as funding set aside for Bethesda cares. This Commission has been an early adopter of the benefits of permanent housing vouchers.
- b. Are only honorably discharged veterans able to receive HUD-VASH vouchers? Veterans are eligible if they have an honorable discharge, a general discharge or other than honorable discharge. Veterans are not eligible if they have a dishonorable discharge or a bad conduct discharge (from a general court-martial). If a veteran is eligible for VA healthcare, they are typically eligible for HUD-VASH vouchers.
- c. Is the number of homeless Vietnam era veterans increasing? When John began working for Bethesda Cares 25 years ago, Vietnam veterans were in their late 40s and early 50s. Many were able to get through the system over the years and take advantage of HUD-VASH vouchers in 2008/2009. Now the veterans most often entering homelessness are those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan who are aging into their 40s now. There are many veteran service organizations such as Wounded Warrior Project that build homes for veterans.
- d. Is there a difference in the approach to a Vietnam veteran who received very little from the VA versus the Iraq and Afghanistan veteran? Younger veterans prefer to text while older veterans prefer a phone call. Staff at Bethesda Cares work with each veteran using their preferred method of communication.
- e. Does the County have a comprehensive plan that addresses homelessness in general? How many other organizations are asking the County to address homelessness? There are a collection of different organizations each with their own mission. Some only focus on emergency shelters, some only focus on street outreach, and some only focus on permanent supportive housing. They are all competing for funding from the County. That competition can get in the way of the plan, which features evidence-based goals.
- f. Is the decision for the County funding emergency shelters versus permanent supportive housing based on stretching the funding to reach more people? Permanent supportive housing is the cheapest option with the strongest return on investment. Emergency shelters are the more expensive option. Three years ago, the general homeless population was less than 600 people and today it is over 1,500 people.
- g. Isn't the upfront cost of procuring housing high? There is no need to build new housing. Permanent supportive housing vouchers are subsidy vouchers. Bethesda Cares has partnered with 82 landlords

which have over 1,000 affordable unit vacancies. These landlords are willing to take the veterans with the subsidy voucher into their community. But there are no vouchers available to help fill those vacancies.

- h. It was asked if John could share slides with data and information with the Commission.
- i. Senator Van Hollen had advocated for the County to receive over 100 HUD-VASH vouchers. The key is to put pressure on the federal government.
- j. Homeless veteran's issues remain a top priority of the commission.

## **2. FY27 Commission Priorities and Strategic Plan – Discussion/Vote**

The responsibility of establishing a Veterans Treatment Court is limited to the judge who is interested in starting the program. Judge Sherri Koch, Montgomery County Circuit Court (MCCC) and Jenna Davis, Director of MCCC Problem-Solving Courts, will be establishing a planning implementation committee that could include a member of the Commission on Veterans Affairs. Grace Caulfield, Commissioner, will be the representative. It is not the responsibility of the Commission on Veterans Affairs to implement a Veterans Treatment court but only to support what Judge Koch would ask the Commission to do.

Michael Wilson, Chair, reviewed the draft FY27 priorities. It was recommended that the term 'veteran service organization (VSO)' be replaced with a broader term as some organizations are not certified to be a VSO.

A motion was made to accept the FY27 priorities as written with the VSO term adjustment recommendation. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken and the FY27 priorities were unanimously approved.

## **3. Operation Green Light and Veterans Day**

On November 4, a joint proclamation for Operation Green Light and Veterans Day will be presented by County Council President Kate Stewart and County Executive Marc Elrich. The event will start at 9:30 a.m. and will be held at the County Council Office Building, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor Hearing Room, Rockville.

Beginning on November 4, Department of General Services will light Memorial Plaza behind the Executive Office Building with green lights through November 11.

Montgomery County Department of Transportation will be hosting an Operation Green Light press event on November 10 to unveil the Operation Green Light and Veterans Day bus wrap, which will be the same design as last year. The event will be held from 10:45 a.m. to 11:45 a.m. at Memorial Plaza at the Executive Office Building, 101 Monroe Street, Rockville.

- a. The Commission discussed asking MCDOT to use the bus wrapping for longer than a month.
- b. It was suggested asking fire stations to display green lights.

Other Veterans Day events happening around the County:

- Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion and Jewish American War Veterans will be co-hosting a ceremony on November 11 at 11 a.m. at the Wheaton Veterans Park. U.S. Navy Captain (Medical Corps) Cynthia Macri (Ret.) Cynthia Macri, former Commissioner, will be the keynote speaker.
- American Minority Veterans Research Project (AMVRP) will be hosting their annual free brunch on November 11 from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. at Silver Spring Civic Building. Glenhaven School choir and band will provide entertainment. AMVRP will highlight military veterans and their families. It was suggested that a Commissioner could give a presentation.
- Scott Schlesinger, Commissioner, also serves on the Maryland Veterans Commission. He can be contacted to request a Veterans Day proclamation from the Governor's Office for any event.

#### **4. Commissioner Updates**

Chief Warrant Officer 3 Andrew Kraus, son of Mission BBQ founder Bill Kraus and Maryland resident, died in a helicopter crash near a military base in Washington state. It was suggested that the Commission send a letter of condolence to Bill Kraus. Mike Subin, Commissioner, will draft a letter to be signed by the Chair.

#### **5. Speakers for Upcoming Meetings**

In light of the Bethesda Cares and data that was pretty daunting, I had talked to part of Easterseals Homeless Veterans Integration Program - maybe the Director could come and talk to the Commission. They are available in November. Pretty incredible program in light of the data in MC. Be beneficial for us to have this as a resource.

#### **Next Meeting**

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday October 21, 2025 from 6:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.

#### **Adjournment**

The meeting was adjourned at 7:25 p.m.