

MONTGOMERY COUNTY COMMISSION ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
MEETING WITH THE HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE, COUNTY COUNCIL
The Commission's Top Two Policy Issues for Fiscal Year 2014 (FY14)

Jerry Godwin, Chair - Dan Bullis, Vice-Chair

October 17, 2013

On behalf of the Commission on Veterans Affairs, we want to thank you for your tireless efforts on behalf of the County's almost 54,000 veterans. Since becoming a commission four years ago, we have achieved much. A few highlights of particular pride include our work to have the Rockville Library renamed to the Rockville Memorial Library and our advocacy to obtain 65 HUD Veterans Affairs Supported Housing (VASH) Vouchers. These vouchers are worth \$13,122 per voucher or \$852,951 per year in housing subsidies for the County's homeless, now housed, veterans. We sincerely appreciate this opportunity to highlight our top two policy issues for FY14: (1) finalizing a federal Community-Based Outpatient Clinic and a state full-time Veteran Benefits Officer; and (2) creating an education and outreach campaign to enroll veterans in the VA health care system and other benefits for which they qualify.

1. We ask for your continued support on behalf of our efforts to finalize both a Department of Veterans Affairs Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) and a full-time Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs Veteran Benefits Specialist (VBS) in the County to provide medical services and assistance in accessing VA benefits/services for our veterans and their families. We asked for your help last year in these two endeavors, and you stepped up to the plate. We are pleased to inform you that at our Commission's May 2013 meeting, Mr. Brian Hawkins, Director of the District of Columbia Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center, announced plans to establish a CBOC in Montgomery County in October 2014. The VA will research sites in Rockville over the next few months to find an appropriate location that will have at least 5,000 square feet of space with the potential for expansion and will be accessible by public transportation. The CBOC will offer a range of critical services including, but not limited to, primary care, mental health care, cardiology, dermatology, audiology, care coordination, and telehealth services.

2. We ask for your help in creating an education and outreach campaign focused on the general public and County veterans and their families to enroll them in the VA health care system and other benefits. This campaign will increase awareness of the benefits and services available to veterans as well as highlight their service to our Nation. What are some steps in FY14 that you can take to help us improve awareness?

- The VA has asked for the County's assistance with increasing the enrollment of our 54,000 veterans in the VA health care system. Our plan is to partner with the Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs in this effort. We ask for your assistance in getting the word out to the 70% of veterans who never use any veteran benefits including VA medical benefits for which almost all veterans qualify. The VA has free preventive tools available ranging from its HealthVet system to its suicide helplines. Enrolling in the VA's health care system ensures that the veteran has same coverage as the standards in the Affordable Health Care Act. We also need to get the word out about the National Library of Medicine website that provides free access to the public on everything from drug identification and side effects to paid protocol studies for all manner of health care problems. The website is found at: <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/>
<https://www.myhealth.va.gov/mhv-portal-web/anonymous.portal?nfpb=true&nfto=false&pageLabel=mhvHome>
- Through your constituent efforts, you can help us spread the word about the CBOC and VBS to ensure veterans throughout the County know where they are located and when their doors are open. Outreach efforts to places like senior centers, Leisure World and Riderwood can provide opportunities to make personal contact with veterans and ensure they know that the VA health care system is there to help.
- We ask that information be provided on County Ride On buses as to how to enroll in the VA healthcare system.

- All County departments and contractors should strive to identify veterans and encourage them to apply for needed benefits and services available from the Department of Veterans Affairs. One way to do this is to ask those seeking benefits: **Have you or an immediate family member ever served in the U. S. Armed Forces, Uniformed Services, National Guard or Reserve?** There is a need to educate County employees, especially first responders, about veteran issues to help them better understand how and where to refer veterans for immediate and on-going help. The County should provide services and benefits until they obtain any VA benefits. The Council should ask all departments to not only ensure their intake workers routinely ask this question, but also train their intake workers on the benefits available and how to refer veterans to our full-time State VBS for help applying for benefits.
- ***Serving Together*** is the County's place to find all programs and services for veterans. They are working to connect the Montgomery County community with veteran events and we ask that you help them to advertise in the libraries their website and information. You can check out the calendar and more at www.ServingTogetherProject.org You can always send calendar events to their Project Coordinator, Rob Welty, at rwelty@mhamc.org.

We will regularly update you on our efforts to achieve these FY14 priorities. The Commission can't do it alone, and we ask for your help in spreading the word about the CBOC, VBS and our outreach efforts. We appreciate any ideas you have. Focusing on this priority next year will be crucial. It will allow us to increase awareness through effective outreach and will lay the groundwork for 2015, the year we will ask the County Executive to designate as "The Year of Montgomery County Veterans and their Families." If there is one thing that military service teaches you, it's the importance of teamwork – standing shoulder to shoulder with the Solider, Marine, Airman, Sailor or Coast Guardsman next to you. Our veterans and their families stood shoulder to shoulder for us; we must now stand shoulder to shoulder for them. They deserve no less.

Thank you for your time.