



Commission on Veterans Affairs



MEETING AGENDA

Tuesday, April 20, 2021

6 p.m. – 7:30 p.m.

Wayne Miller, Chair – Bob Koffman, Vice-Chair

PLEASE NOTE: Given the concerns of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission on Veterans Affairs will be meeting virtually via Zoom.

Join the meeting via ZOOM

<https://zoom.us/j/94753578882>

If you want to call into the meeting, call 301-715-8592, use Meeting ID 947 5357 8882 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, Welcome new members Anneke Vandenbroek, Steve Willis, Susan Pollack, Lisa Schuster - Approval of March 2021 Meeting Minutes – Wayne Miller, Chair**
- 6:05 Audubon Naturalist Woodend Accessible Trail – Alison Pearce, Director of Restoration Audubon Naturalist Society** <https://anshome.org/visit/>
- 6:45 Update on The American Minorities Veterans Research Project (AMVRP) – Dr. Elwood Gray**
- 7:00 Planning for Memorial Day – Wayne Miller and 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.

Commission's Website – www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva
Veterans Network Directory – www.montgomerycountymd.gov/vnd



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs
Meeting Minutes
April 20th, 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 March 2021 Meeting Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken, and the March 2021 Meeting Minutes were unanimously approved. Approved minutes are available online at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva.

III. Audubon Naturalist Woodend Accessible Trail – Alison Pearce, Deputy Director, Audubon Naturalist Society

Website: <https://anshome.org/visit/>

Woodend Restoration: <https://anshome.org/woodend-restoration/>

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

Audubon Naturalist Society (ANS) is the oldest independent environmental organization in the Washington, DC region. Their mission is to connect people in the DC region with nature. A pioneer in linking conservation activities with environmental education, ANS:

- Reaches more than 9,000 children each calendar year through its nature preschool and family, scout, school, and camp programs.
- Offers adults a rich variety of natural history classes, local outings, and national and international travel experiences.
- Works with a network of civic and environmental groups on conservation issues, such as transportation, watershed and rural lands protection, and climate change.
- Has two nature sanctuaries: Woodend (Chevy Chase, MD – 40 acres), and Rust (Leesburg, VA). Rust Sanctuary is a partnership between the Audubon Naturalist Society and NOVA Parks.
- Hosts numerous special events, including author and speaker events, member meetings, and the Bloomin' Birdathon.
- Publishes the *Naturalist Quarterly* four times a year and broadcasts the Audubon eNEWS monthly.

In 2015, ANS engaged with a landscape architecture firm to develop a 50-year master plan for Woodend. Aside of restoration of habitat, ANS has goals to improve the visitor experience to be welcoming to people of every background and people of all abilities. The project for the first five years, titled "Nature for All", will:

- Stabilize the eroded banks of the stream channel,
- Upgrade the main trail to be accessible for people who rely on wheelchairs, walkers or strollers,
- And improve forest, meadow, and pond habitats with thousands of native plantings.

ANS is currently seeking approval from the Montgomery County Board of Appeals to build a Nature Play Space to encourage students, teachers and families to learn and play together outdoors. Like the new trail, many of the features will be accessible for people with disabilities.

Dr. Cynthia Macri, Navy Veteran, and Anna Makela, combat-Veteran, joined ANS to provide input on Veterans and to assist in developing programs. Input included engaging Veterans in all programs and not creating only Veteran-specific programming. ANS is considering inviting Veterans with children to come to Woodend and participate in the Discovery Hunt program which explores the habitats of Woodend. They are also considering developing a workshop for Veterans in their learning garden to learn about native plant and edible plant gardening. Hopefully, Veterans would attend and become interested in other programs and opportunities available.

ANS submitted a grant application to the Chesapeake Bay Trust to develop a program or series of programs specifically for Veterans. The grant application was approved. ANS is developing a chronic disease self-management program. Dr. Macri and Anna are both certified master trainers in this program. The program would be limited to 10 to 12 Veterans and occur over six weeks this upcoming September to October. The group would meet weekly to develop strategies for taking control of one's own health. Melanie Choukas-Bradley author of the Joy of Forest Bathing and nature and forest therapy guide regularly conducts forest bath programs at Woodend. There is an opportunity to add forest bathing to this program and extending it by an additional week or two. Alison asked for feedback on this potential program as well as any other programs. Due to the grant funding, no fees would be associated with the program. Dr. Macri hopes that Veterans who take part in the self management classes become peer leaders.

The floor was opened to questions.

Jameelah Johnson, Commissioner, asked if fishing is available at Woodend and if the trails will be accessible for individuals who are visually impaired. Woodend does not offer fishing. ANS has organized a roundtable of disability experts, including Bill McGrath, Office for Student with Disabilities, Montgomery County Public Schools. The Massachusetts Audubon has developed a design manual which includes using wooden beads on rope edgings with each bead shape signifying a different experience. For example, a round bead may signify there is something to smell at this section or a square bead might indicate to the individual they should stop and listen. ANS is also looking to copy interpretative sculptures that are used at Longwood Garden. The pond railing may include the life cycle of a frog depicted in brass sculptures that can be felt by persons with visual impairments to understand the size and anatomical shape of the frog. One of the biggest challenges is installing accessible surfacing. ANS is not just focusing on mobility challenges but a broad sweep of how to address and accommodate different types of abilities.

Bill Gray, former Chair, asked how many staff work at ANS. Alison in her role as Deputy Director oversees the Restoration Department and all education programs. The Restoration and Property Management is composed of four staff that handle maintenance. The "Nature for All" project work is being done by a contractor. The education department changes based on the time of year. The preschool has been closed due to COVID-19, but will reopen in the fall. Staff grows in the summer when ANS offers a summer camp. Programs that are available to the general public are run by volunteers. ANS offers a Master Naturalist program through a partnership with the University of Maryland. Before becoming a volunteer, the person must receive 60 hours of training in natural history and must complete 40 hours of volunteer work every year to stay certified. They also help as teaching staff for more formatl programs. Volunteers will be trained as roving naturalists to provide assistance at the Play Space and the trail.

Wayne Miller, Chair, asked what programs are available for Veterans who have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injury (TBI). Woodend offers many quiet spaces including rest areas built into the trail where individuals can sit and be meditative. More of these areas will be incorporated in the Play Space to offer quiet, reflective spaces for children and parents. Alison noted that two individuals practice tai chi at Woodend once a week. Wayne manages therapy groups of 10 to 12 Veterans and said Woodend would be a great place to go to hold a session. It would be beneficial, especially for combat Veterans. Wayne asked if Woodend is pet friendly. While pets are not allowed, service dogs certainly are allowed.

Bob Koffman, Vice-Chair, asked how ANS outreaches and advertises to the community, particularly to Veterans. Alison understands there is confusion about ANS and National Audubon Society. ANS is considering changing their name. She is meeting with this Commission to specifically discuss outreach to Veterans. Woodend is close to Walter Reed and other important facilities to Veterans. ANS wants to serve that population better. Veterans are always welcome along with the general public to any of their programs. Alison said ANS could be more intentional in their targeted outreach and more welcoming to Veterans, particularly with facilities that can now serve those who may have mobility challenges. Bob suggested offering photography programs to encourage Veterans to develop a skill set while being immersed in nature.

Dr. Macri said there are a substantial number of adults that have not engaged or considered engaging with nature. She suggested inviting veteran service organizations to meet with ANS at Woodend. Woodend is also located close to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC). Veterans and service members who are in treatment or are going to be discharged could visit Woodend or participate in programs. Dr. Macri added that an active duty service member has founded a program to teach Veterans culinary skills and how to use those skills to build a food truck business. It's a nice connection between growing your own food and cooking.

Fawn Baranko, Public, suggested ASN contact the counseling and behavioral health clinics and providers at WRNMMC.

Anneke Vandebroek, Commissioner, said she will connect ASN with the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic and their outreach and communications staff as well.

Jennifer asked if the trail will be accessible. The trail will be bonded gravel and function like a firm and stable paved trail.

Mike Subin, Commissioner, asked if ANS has considered horticultural therapy. While ANS does not currently offer programs specific to horticultural therapy, it does offer gardening programs that many volunteers have found to be therapeutic. They also offer a learning vegetable garden. ANS would love for Veterans to become volunteers. Alison noted a grant program in the Long Branch community that works with individuals to grow culturally important vegetables for those who cannot find produce native to their own countries. Anna said those serving in Afghanistan experience sensory deprivation is there is not much greenery. Being back in a natural space can be very therapeutic.

Betsy Luecking, Staff, suggested compiling a list of places where Veterans can go to participate in outdoor activities including fishing at Clarksburg and canoeing at Riley's Lock, Lake Needwood, and Great Seneca. Alison added that ANS naturalists have led field trips and frequent the C&O Canal.

Alison encouraged Commissioners to contact her at Alison.Pearce@ANShome.org.

V. Update - American Minorities Veterans Research Project (AMVRP) - Dr. Elwood Gray

Website: <https://americanmvrp.com/>

Dr. Elwood Gray reported the Veterans Coalition Ministry's held a presentation on April 10th celebrating Buffalo Soldiers Day and promoting the African American Health Program. Betsy Luecking, Staff, received a civilian award for her advocacy work on Veterans issues. Dr. Gray noted that the People's Community Baptist Church in Silver Spring has over 500 Veterans in their congregation.

Betsy added that Mike Subin, under the leadership of former County Executive Isiah Leggett, named the Buffalo Soldiers Great Hall at the Silver Spring Civic Building.

VI. Planning for Memorial Day – Wayne Miller and All

Due to current restrictions, the County cannot hold large outdoor gatherings. It was suggested that any event held be pre-recorded and then shared on Memorial Day. The Commission has a Fallen County Heroes website that includes all those killed in action who are recorded as enlisting, being originally from, or having at one time

lived in Montgomery County, Maryland. The website includes all conflicts from World War I to present: www.montgomerycountymd.gov/fallenheroes.

Betsy noted that this Commission has not held events in the past but has encouraged residents to attend events held by local jurisdictions and many visit Arlington cemetery. Wayne said Rolling Thunder will not take place this year.

It was suggested there be a reading of the names, but as there are 443 names it would not be doable.

Betsy asked if the Office of Public Information would scroll our Fallen County Heroes website on the County's homepage. Neil said it is possible and to discuss further after the meeting.

VII. Chair and Vice Chair Report

None.

VIII. Updates / Announcements

Austin Morris, Representative of Senator Chris Van Hollen, reported Senator Van Hollen has co-sponsored the Major Richard Star Act would allow Veterans with combat-related disabilities and fewer than 20 years of credible service to receive retirement pay without reduction and would be concurrent with disability compensation.

Stan Siedel, Maryland Veterans Commission, reported the Maryland Veterans Trust Fund has given out over \$190,000 this year. The Fund is receiving more money from the casinos. 70% of that money was used for rent and mortgages. The income eligibility limit has been increased up to 250% of the federal poverty line. Stan also reported Mission BBQ will be celebrating Armed Forces Week starting May 15th. The [Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey](#) is now available and they would like as much participation as possible.

New Commissioners Anneke Vandenbroek, Susan Pollack, and Lisa Schuster introduced themselves.

Jason Marshall, ServingTogether, introduced himself as the new Program Manager for the Western region. ServingTogether offers service members, Veterans and their families access to a class-leading continuum of providers that runs the gamut from superior mental health, housing, and emergency service providers to employment, financial capabilities, education, volunteering, recreation, and fitness, and more. Jason can be reached via e-mail at jmarshall@every-mind.org. Jason also said he is leading a workgroup that is involved with the Maryland Governor's Challenge to Prevent Service Member, Veteran and their Families Suicide. He may reach out to this Commission as he will be forming a pilot program with the police on emergency calls.

Bob attended the Maryland Suicide Prevention Committee meeting last week. Last year, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) responded to the growing suicide epidemic across the U.S. by requiring all phone service providers to route calls made to 988 to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline crisis center by July 16, 2022. The current traditional-length number, 800-273-8255 (TALK), will then be nationally shortened to the three-digit number like the emergency number, 911. Maryland does not have the funding for the change and is considering a phone tax to pay for it.

Mike suggested that the Commission review the law on service dogs and service dogs in training at next month's meeting. Bob said females consistently have issues accessing facilities with their service dogs. Betsy said the largest number of discrimination complaints are filed by Veterans due to their landlords not wanting an animal in the unit. She also noted that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) does not require proof that service animals be certified or licensed

Adjournment: 7:30pm

Next Full Commission Meeting: Tuesday, May 18th, 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: Josephine Bahn; Elwood Gray; Jameelah Johnson; Robert Koffman; Cynthia Macri; Wayne Miller; Scott Schlesinger; Lisa Schuster; Joanna Starling; Michael Subin; Anneke Vandenbroek; Susan Webman; Michael Wilson

Commissioners Absent: Reggie Mitchell

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

Non-Voting Congressional Representatives Absent: Christa Burton (Congressman Jamie Raskin)

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