



Commission on Veterans Affairs



Meeting Agenda

April 16, 2024

6 p.m. – 7:30 p.m.

Wayne Miller, Chair – Bob Koffman, Vice-Chair

Join the meeting via Zoom

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/86382440624>

If you want to call into the meeting, call 301-715-8592, use Meeting ID 863 8244 0624 followed by #. **If an attendee would like to speak during the meeting**, you 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, Welcome of New Members, Pledge of Allegiance, Moment of Silence & POW/MIA Remembrance, Approval of March 2024 Meeting Minutes – Wayne Miller, Chair**
- 6:10 Bill to Reduce Property Taxes for Veterans with Severe Disabilities (Bill 6-24) which is currently pending a hearing date – Councilmember Natali Fani-Gonzalez, Montgomery County Council**
- 6:30 Why Psychedelics for Veterans? Why now? – Robert Koffman, MD, MPH, Captain, MC, USN (ret.), Vice-Chair, Veterans Affairs Commission**
- 7:00 Chair and Vice Chair Updates**
- 7:15 Commissioner Updates**
- 7:25 Commission Planning for Next Meeting – Wayne Miller**
- 7:30 Adjourn**

ADA Reasonable Accommodation: If you need a sign language interpreter or any other reasonable accommodation to participate in this meeting, please contact carly.clem@montgomerycountymd.gov or 202-853-1109.

****See Commission duties on next page**

Duties of the Commission on Veterans Affairs

The Commission duties include:

1. research, assemble, analyze and disseminate information and educational materials relating to activities and programs that will assist in meeting the needs of veterans and their families;
2. institute and conduct educational and other programs, meetings, and conferences to promote the rights and opportunities for veterans;
3. advise the Executive and the Council on the status of programs and services in the State and County related to the needs of veterans and their families; and
4. assist in planning appropriate public acknowledgement of the contributions made by veterans and assist in planning commemoration activities recognizing the contributions made by veterans.



Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs Meeting Minutes

April 16, 2024

****MEETING WAS HELD VIRTUALLY VIA ZOOM****

Call to Order

Wayne Miller, 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.

Welcome, Pledge of Allegiance, Moment of Silence & POW/MIA Remembrance, Approval of March 2024 Meeting Minutes – Wayne Miller, Chair

A motion was made to approve the March 2024 Meeting Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken and the March 2024 Meeting Minutes were unanimously approved. Approved minutes are available online at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva.

Bill 6-24 - Reduce Property Taxes for Veterans with Severe Disabilities– Councilmember Natali Fani-González, Montgomery County Council

Bill 6-24: <https://apps.montgomerycountymd.gov/ccllims/BillDetailsPage?RecordId=2829&fullTextSearch=6-24>

Councilmember Fani-González is Chair of the Economic Development Committee and serves on the Planning, Housing and Parks Committee. She is married to a former U.S. Marine who has a 100% disability rating but noted that they would not personally benefit for this bill as they do not qualify.

Bill 6-24 would: (1) establish a property tax credit for disabled veterans; (2) set the amounts of the property tax credit; (3) set eligibility criteria to qualify for the property tax credit; (4) require the continuation of the credit for the surviving spouse of the disabled veteran; and (5) generally amend the law regarding property tax credits.

Under Bill 6-24, a property tax credit would be available to an honorably discharged veteran who is at least 50 percent disabled, as certified by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and whose federal adjusted gross income does not exceed \$100,000. The property tax credit granted under the bill would equal:

- 50% of the County property tax imposed on the dwelling house if the disabled veteran's service-connected disability rating is at least 75% but not more than 99%;
- 25% of the County property tax imposed on the dwelling house if the disabled veteran's service-connected disability rating is at least 50% but not more than 74%.

This credit is authorized under Section 9-625 of the Tax-Property Article of the Maryland Code which allows counties to establish new properties and authorizes a new property tax credit for honorably discharged veterans with limited income who are severely disabled. The proposed bill cannot go beyond state law.

A public hearing will be scheduled at a later date in mid-June. It would then proceed to a Committee work session at the end of June or July and have a final vote by the full County Council by the end of July before August recess.

While the VA does assigns disability ratings at 10% increments, the County had to follow the state's increments noted in its legislation. If Bill 6-24 passes, Councilmember Fani-Gonzalez suggested identifying

a sponsor within the Maryland General Assembly that would correct state legislation so that it would follow federal law.

The floor was opened to questions.

- **What is the rationale for the income to not exceed \$100,000 federal gross adjusted income?** That amount is in the state enabling law and the County cannot go beyond that amount. If this bill were to pass, advocacy at the state level would be needed to increase that amount.
- **Would the homeowner need to submit paperwork from the VA to verify disability rating?** Yes, the homeowner would submit a VA form or letter stating the disability rating which would be sent to the County and then on to the state.
- **Women veterans are disproportionately affected as they are most likely to be married to other veterans and would not be eligible for this property tax credit due to retirement income not meeting the threshold.** Councilmember Fani-Gonzalez will look into this issue.
- **What will the budget impact be for this bill?** It is estimated by Council staff that the first year will cost approximately \$3 million. This number is based on initial demographics from U.S. Census data and VA data. Councilmember Fani-Gonzalez acknowledged that this data may not be fully accurate. The County will have to wait and see how many people apply.
- **Can veteran disability license plates be made available to veterans who are not 100% disabled but are disabled at a lower rating?** License plates are issued by the Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration which is a state agency. Councilmember Fani-Gonzalez will investigate this issue but noted that state law may have to be passed.
- **This bill has the potential to attract more veterans to live in Montgomery County and could have a positive economic impact.**
- **Is there consideration for property tax breaks for veterans living in socially and economically impacted areas? Council needs to consider the whole issue of socioeconomic impact.** This bill targets every veteran regardless of where they live in Montgomery County. There are limitations due to state law.
- **Wayne invited Councilmember Fani-Gonzalez to visit the Silver Spring Vet Center.**

Why Psychedelics for Veterans? Why Now? – Robert Koffman, MD, MPH, Captain, MC, USN (ret.), Vice-Chair

PowerPoint Presentation: www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/CVA/Minutes/MCCVA_KoffmanPresentation.pdf

Dr. Koffman reviewed a PowerPoint presentation. Sunstone Therapies is operating a psychedelic-assisted therapy center and therapy trials housed at Shady Grove Adventist. Psychedelic-assisted therapy is an emerging therapeutic approach that combines the controlled use of psychedelic medicines, such as psilocybin, MDMA, and LSD, with professional psychological support. Psychedelic therapy aims to facilitate profound and transformative experiences to address mental health issues like depression, anxiety, PTSD, and addiction. The primary focus of the trials is to explore the safety, efficacy, and therapeutic potential of psychedelic medicines in a safe and supportive environment. We aim to provide participants with a healing experience while contributing to the advancement of psychedelic science.

The population of Americans that have used psychedelics is 10%. Approximately 80% of veteran use of psychedelics is almost exclusively underground – either abroad or illegally. Dr. Koffman mentioned there is harm that can come from underground and non-clinically appropriate psychedelic usage. The key is preparing participants in what to expect and managing dosing anxiety. A study will be published soon that show 60% of veterans with schedule one status benefited from psychedelic-assisted therapy, but there were significant adverse experiences. For two-thirds of participants, there is symptomatic improvements, but they still carry a PTSD diagnosis and lifetime medication. Veterans with PTSD have a high co-occurrence with depression. The majority of veterans are one five or more prescriptions and one-third of

veterans are on psychotropics. The VA is limited in what it can offer. Seven VAs are conducting psychedelic-assisted therapy trials.

As a psychiatrist, Dr. Koffman has not seen a substance or drug more perfectly suited to treat PTSD than MDMA. It turns off the fear in the amygdala where bad memories are stored in the hippocampus. During one of three psychedelic treatments, an individual will experience a reduction in fear. The drop out rate for prolonged exposures is approximately 40%. It is difficult to experience your worst memories over and over again. There is a 64% reduction in treatment resistant depression from psychedelic assisted therapies. Dr. Koffman noted that psilocybin is being used to treat cancer patients who are experiencing PTSD from their cancer diagnosis and treatments. The Federal Drug Administration (FDA) has also mandated MDMA assisted therapy studies on adolescents (12- to 18-year olds).

Completion of the phase three trial was so positive that the FDA fast-tracked application of MDMA and granted compassionate use as expanded access. The FDA provided the medical community with 50 quotas (150 doses – each treatment is 3 doses). Dozens of research facilities applied for the quotes. Sunstone received 46 of the 50 quotes. Hundreds have applied and are being screened. Hopkins and Sheppard Pratt are also conducting research as well as most universities.

View clinical trials: www.sunstonetherapies.com/science/clinical-trials

The floor was opened to questions.

- **Are there residual risks for some patients who have a bad experience and potentially could make things worse?** In the study that will be published, individuals that had at least one adverse experience overwhelming were poorly prepared. MAPS protocol requires a 50-hour treatment block with 25 of those hours forced on medicine and the journey and three 8-hour dosing sessions. Before the dosing session, individuals are prepared for 4 to 6 hours on what happens when a challenging emotion comes up, how to ground and how to breathe. Sunstone is the first community-based purpose built PSY holistic care model. There are some mental health conditions that are not treated by PSY hence the screening process. PSY assisted therapy is not for everybody but for those where no other treatment works, if it is done right this breakthrough therapy can be realized.
- **How does PSY assisted therapy compare to electric compulsive shock therapy for depression?** Part of the research being conducted currently shows parts of the brain talking to other parts of the brain they didn't know existed and the amount of neuroplasticity with growth and synaptive genesis from one dosing of psilocybin equivalent to months to anti-depressants. Research may identify treatments for neurodegenerative diseases such as multiple sclerosis and ALS.
- **How much of the effectiveness of this treatment is due to the exposure work done in the three to four sessions?** The placebo-controlled group had an effect size of 0.3 compared to the MDMA group which had an effect size of 0.8. Both groups received the same amount of exposure work in terms of assisted therapy and dosing. Researchers are approaching this trial with cautious optimism. You cannot erase moral injury. MDMA is an empathogen which allows an individual to find a degree of empathy and self-love while an intactogen allows the individual to feel that love and be worthy of that love. FDA requires two therapists (one male and one female) for MDMA therapy due to instances of the patient falling in love with their therapist due to the amount of oxytocin released. It was noted that one trial of MDMA being conducted is for individuals who have had cancer and treatment of their partner or caregiver simultaneously due to cancer sufferers experiencing PTSD.
- **Concern for individuals who are not able to receive consistent follow-ups or appointments only every six weeks.**
- **Suggestion that an episode of the Homefront series be dedicated to this topic.** Betsy Luecking, Staff, will reach out to the Office of Public Information about scheduling.
- **Will veterans lose their VA rating if they are cured of PTSD?** A former Marine and Army Staff Sergeant that was saved by MDMA assisted therapy has been working with VA administrators on this issue and if veterans that lose their diagnosis of PTSD should continue to receive disability pay.

There is no answer at this time. Dr. Koffman reported that approximately 100 individuals in each trial lost their PTSD diagnosis, not only because of MDMA but due to prolonged exposure.

- **Are some diagnoses, such as substance use disorders, ruled out for treatment?** Individuals must abstain for substance use. A four-fold increase with abstinence has been noted with MDMA therapy. Some individuals who had been addicted to opioids did not experience withdrawal during therapy.

Chair and Vice Chair Updates

Terms for Wayne Miller and Bob Koffman have ended. Commission legislation requires that the County Executive designate a Chair and Vice-Chair from among the Commission's members. County Executive Marc Elrich has appointed Michael Wilson as Chair and Anneke Vandenbroek as Vice-Chair. They will assume their new roles at the next meeting. Wayne and Bob were thanked for their work on the Commission and encouraged to continue attending meetings.

The following new Commission members were appointed by the County Council on April 2: Grace Caulfield, Bernard Chesman, Drew Garza, Veronica Pei, Miguel Sapp, Christopher Thomas, and Charles Von Goin. Time will be allotted at the next meeting for new Commission members to introduce themselves.

The Commission will discuss at the next meeting when an in-person meeting may be scheduled. All Commission members must come to an agreement.

Commissioner Updates

Mike Subin, Commissioner, reported Maryland Public Television (MPT) has a series titled 'After Action' that focuses on conversations with veterans who reveal what life is like before, during and after action (<https://video.mpt.tv/show/after-action/>).

Commission Planning for Next Meeting

Tabled due to time.

Adjournment

7:36 p.m.

Respectfully submitted: Carly Clem, Program Specialist II; Betsy Luecking, Community Outreach Manager

Attendance

Commissioners Present: Grace Caulfield; Bernard Chesman; Drew Garza; Elwood Gray; Jameelah Johnson; Bob Koffman, Vice-Chair; Wayne Miller, Chair; Veronica Pei; Scott Schlesinger; Joanna Starling; Christopher Thomas; Anneke Vandenbroek; Michael Wilson

Commissioners Absent: Miguel Sapp; Michael Subin; Charles Von Goins

Non-Voting Representatives Present: Joseph Eyong (Congressman Jamie Raskin); Ken Reichard (Senator Ben **Congressional** Cardin)

Non-Voting Congressional Representatives Absent: Vikki Garcia (Congressman John Sarbanes); Audrey Severn (Senator Chris Van Hollen)

County Staff Present: County Councilmember Natali Fani-González; Hazle Crawford, Office of Councilmember Fani-González; Jen Hodge, Local Behavioral Health Authority

Commission Liaison: Sam Korper, Commission on People with Disabilities

Commission Staff Present: Betsy Luecking, Staff Liaison; Carly Clem, Program Specialist II

Public Present: Bill Gray; Michael Theard; James Wade; Sarah Huang