



## Commission on Veterans Affairs



### MEETING AGENDA

**Tuesday, January 19, 2021**

**6 p.m. – 7:30 p.m.**

**Wayne Miller, Chair – Bob Koffman, Vice-Chair**

**PLEASE NOTE:** Given the concerns of the corona virus, the Commission on Veterans Affairs will be meeting virtually via Zoom.

**Join the meeting via ZOOM - <https://zoom.us/j/98257285698>**

**If you want to call into the meeting**, call 301-715-8592, use Meeting ID 982 5728 5698 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, Approval of December 2020 Meeting Minutes – Wayne Miller, Chair**

**6:05 Moment of Silence in Honor of Tommy Raskin – Son of Representative Jamie Raskin and his wife Sarah Bloom Raskin – Bob Koffman, MD, MPH - Vice-Chair**

**6:10 I AM ALS VETERANS AFFAIRS TEAM – Michael Lecker, Gaillermo Garcia, Mandi Bailey, Pat Metcalf, Roger Brannon, and Jay Kenney**  
*Please review [Welcome to the ALS Revolution](#) PowerPoint presentation in advance.*

**7:00 Maryland Military Coalition 2021 Legislative Update – Bob Norton, President, Maryland Military Coalition. [Please review handout](#)**

**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](mailto:betsy.luecking@montgomerycountymd.gov).

**Commission's Website – [www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva)**  
**Veterans Network Directory – [www.montgomerycountymd.gov/vnd](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/vnd)**



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs  
Meeting Summary Minutes  
January 19th, 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. Moment of Silence in Honor of Thomas “Tommy” Bloom Raskin – Son of Congressman Jamie Raskin and his wife Sarah Bloom Raskin – Bob Koffman, MD, MPH, Vice-Chair**

The Commission held a moment of silence in honor of Tommy Raskin who passed away on December 31st, 2020. Tommy was in his second year of law school. The Raskin family announced the launch of the Tommy Raskin Memorial Fund for People and Animals, which will distribute money semiannually to causes and charities he championed and helped advance.

**III. Approval of Minutes**

A motion was made to approve the December 2020 Meeting Summary Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken, and the December 2020 Meeting Summary Minutes were unanimously approved. Approved minutes are available online at [www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva).

**IV. I AM ALS Veterans Affairs Team – Michael Lecker, Community Leader Organizer, Gailllermo Garcia, Mandi Bailey, Pat Metcalf, Roger Brannon, and Jay Kenney**

PowerPoint:

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

Website: <https://iamals.org/action/veterans-affairs-team/>

ALS, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease), is a progressive neurodegenerative disease that affects nerve cells in the brain and the spinal cord. ALS is characterized by muscle atrophy with symptoms including fasciculations (muscle twitches) in the arm, leg, shoulder, or tongue; muscle cramps; tight and stiff muscles (spasticity); muscle weakness affecting an arm, a leg, neck or diaphragm; slurred and nasal speech; and difficulty chewing or swallowing. ALS affects everyone in different ways but most everyone has some variety of those symptoms. ALS is a progressive disease that is always fatal and patients typically live for 2 to 5 years after diagnosis. To this date there is no cure or treatment to reverse progression. 30,000 people in the U.S. are living with ALS, with 5,000 new cases being diagnoses each year. U.S. military Veterans are twice as likely than the general population to develop ALS. Since 2001, ALS has taken the lives of more Veterans than the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan combined. The VA has made ALS a service-connected disability due to the unexplainable prevalence of the disease amongst Veterans.

Michael Lecker has served as the I AM ALS Community Lead Organizer for over six months. His mother passed from ALS two years ago. I AM ALS was launched in 2019 as a patient- led community that provides critical support and resources to patients, caregivers and loved ones. They empower advocates to raise awareness and lead the revolution against ALS in driving the development of cures. I AM ALS is comprised of six paid staff and five teams of 90 volunteers who do the bulk of the work setting and moving forward with their agenda to find cures and treatments. The five teams consist of a Veterans team, an outreach team, a

legislative team, a clinical trials team, and a familial team, which raises awareness of familial ALS and empowers, supports and advocates for potential and actual ALS gene holders and their families.

The I AM ALS Veterans Team was formed in January 2020. The Team meets weekly on Mondays at 3pm EST. The Team's Co-Chairs are Gill Garcia, a Navy Veteran who is living with ALS, and Mandy Bailey, the stepdaughter of an Army Veteran who died from ALS. Team members use their voices to network with veteran-centered organizations and services to identify unique needs and concerns of the veteran community. This includes working with other I AM ALS teams to facilitate legislative action. The Team works to educate and empower Veterans with ALS and their loved ones on navigating the VA health care system and the Veterans benefit system, raise awareness of the prevalence of ALS among Veterans and support policies that improve the lives of Veterans with ALS and their loved ones by providing them with resources, increasing funding of ALS research, and providing easier access to clinical trials. Since their inception, the Team has developed a directory of resources for Veterans with ALS and their caregivers and with the help of I AM ALS staff, helped develop the "Understanding Your Risks" and "Understanding and Navigating the VA" resources. They have established relationships with key stakeholders within the VA healthcare system and legislators. The Team is currently conducting a [survey of Veterans and their caregivers](#) experiences to provide construction feedback to the Veterans Affairs Hospital Executive Committee on ALS.

Jay Kenney is a member of the I AM ALS Veterans Affairs Team. He is a Vietnam-era Veteran who served in the U.S. Army at Fort Rutger, Alabama, from 1972 to 1974 as a research psychologist in aviation safety. Jay served as Chief of Montgomery County Aging & Disability Services for 29 years. He met often with this Commission and worked with Betsy Luecking, Staff, for the entirety of his County career. Jay received his ALS diagnosis in 2019 after retiring from the County and moving on to a new position as Chief Operating Officer with Jewish Social Services Agency (JSSA). He stated that his symptoms began with trouble speaking and swallowing issues as well as hoarseness and a number of choking episodes and muscle weakness.

Roger Brannon is also an I AM ALS Veterans Team member. He is a retired Veteran who has ALS. He served in the Marine Corps from 1989 to 2017 in both active duty and Reserves in all aspects of communications. He medically retired from the Marine Corps Cyberpace Command at Fort Meade in April 2017 after being diagnosed with ALS in May 2016 at Walter Reed Medical Center. As Roger continues to battle ALS, he keeps active in sports and advocates for those that have lost their ability to walk and talk. He helps local Veterans navigate the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) and the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBS). Roger also speaks to Veterans groups about ALS and its effects on Veterans and their families. He has participated in three clinical trials and donated specimens to four biorepositories. Roger reported an ALS diagnosis is two times higher for all Veterans and all eras whether they served in combat or not. The CDC has reported that those who served in Afghanistan as well as in Desert Storm had an even higher likelihood of being diagnosed with ALS. Roger noted that the CDC has stopped publishing data on Veterans.

Pat Metcalf is another I AM ALS Veteran Team Member. Her husband was a Vietnam-era Vietnam. He was diagnosed with ALS in 2016 and passed away in May 2019. She reported the House and Senate in October 2020 introduced [Accelerating Access to Critical Therapies for ALS \(Act for ALS\)](#), which would create new pathways for faster and broader access to therapies for those most in need. The four main goals of the bill are to streamline the review and approval process of the effective therapies that treat neurodegenerative diseases; to develop an FDA grant program which funds research on and development of interventions to prevent diagnose, treat and cure ALS and other life threatening or severely debilitating neurodegenerative diseases; establish a Health and Human Services collaborative on neurodegenerative diseases between the FDA and the Nation Institutes of Health (NIH); and provide a pathway for timely patient access to investigative als treatments being tested by biopharmaceutical companies to patients who are not participating in a trial. Pat noted that grant funds would only be available for small businesses. There are 278 House Representatives sponsoring the bill. All Maryland House Representatives except one have signed on as co-sponsors. I AM ALS is working to gain more support from the Senate as at this time there are only 15 to 20 Senate co-sponsors. Pat noted that while there is already an enacted law allowing for expanded access to treatments if the individual is not in a trial, it is a long and laborious process as the patient and the patient's doctor must file paperwork with the FDA. This new legislation would create expanded access to be given to groups of individuals rather than just one person. Many ALS patients are willing to accept the risk of drug side

effects if there is a chance it could slow progression or cure ALS. It can also take up to fifteen years for a drug to go from phase one trial to market and ALS patients do not have fifteen years to wait for a drug that may help them. For example, a new drug that went for FDA approval in 2011 just finished their phase three trial. The drug still has not gone to market despite showing much promise in some of the patients and the patients in the trial up until recently were not allowed to have the drug after the trial ended. It was stated it is a broken system and this legislation will work to fix it.

Roger added that some clinical trials have criteria that the individual cannot participate if they have had ALS for a specified length of time. He is not allowed in most clinical trials because he has lived too long with the disease. It also can take a year or more to be diagnosed with ALS so many patients already have time against them. Jay said he was judged to be too healthy to be clinical trials while other friends of his who have ALS didn't have good lung capacity to be able to participate. This is why passing legislation that will give ALS patients access to clinical treatments is so important as well as moving research forward quickly to develop treatments and cures.

Roger reported the VA Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) benefit for Veteran who have died of a service-connected disease or service-connected disability provides the survivor with a monthly payment. There is a clause that if the Veteran lives 8 years or more with the disease or disability then the survivor receives an additional monthly payment. Given that 80% of ALS patients die within 5 years, that makes the survivor ineligible to receive that additional payment. Roger noted that he has lost more friends to ALS than his four combat tours and 28 years in the military or to suicide. In 2019, Senate Bill 1047- Dependency and Indemnity Compensation Improvement Act of 2019 was introduced. The bill would increase the base amount of DIC. Roger said this would help to take care of the people who are taking care of them after they are gone. Michael reiterated that ALS is a progressive neurodegenerative disease and patients rely on caregivers for almost everything. Many put their careers on hold or leave the industry in order to provide care.

Betsy Luecking, Staff, asked if there were plans to have these bills reintroduced. Michael said I AM ALS is working with a co-sponsor to have them reintroduced in March into the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress. There are many House members already on board with the previous legislation. They will work to re-engage them with the new legislation that may have some minor tweaks in order to gain more support. The bill was also be introduced later in the Senate and I AM ALS will work on educating more Senators on that bill. The Team is also working with the person who introduced the DIC bill last year and will continue to engage with their staff to push that forward. Betsy will connect Michael with the Senate and Congressional representatives for Montgomery County. Austin Morris, Representative of Senator Chris Van Hollen, said she will share information about the two ALS Senate Bills with Senator Van Hollen. Bob Koffman serves on the Veterans' Family, Caregiver, and Survivor Advisory Committee. He will present these issues that are limiting Veteran care to the Advisory Committee. The bills have not yet been introduced into the 117th Congress. Here are the bills as listed in the 116th:H.R.8662/S.4867 - Accelerating Access to Critical Therapies for ALS Act and H.R.3221/ S.1047 - Dependency and Indemnity Compensation Improvement Act of 2019. On February 3, 2021 Betsy Luecking along with her supervisor Odile Brunetto submitted these bills to be a federal legislative priority with the Montgomery County Office of Intergovernmental Relations.

Susan Webman, Commissioner, asked why the Act for ALS bill would only serve small businesses. Pat said larger pharmaceutical companies may not focus on ALS as much as it is a very small community compared to other diseases. Gill said small tech companies do not have the capital to fund expanded access. Smaller pharmaceutical companies are doing more interesting work that is actually pushing forward treatments and cures. The expanded access program and open label extension costs them too much money and they have to work month to month to make ends meet. The legislation would create a program that FDA and NIH would provide those smaller companies with the capital as well as have those companies share their data with the government in order to help find treatment and cures.

Bob Koffman asked if there was research being conducted to identify why Veterans are twice as likely to develop ALS. Roger said the VA has been researching it but as ALS is hard to diagnose it is even harder to track down when it starts or trace the origin as every individual is different. On average it takes one year for a patient to be diagnosed with ALS. As there is no test, doctors rule out everything else. When Roger was

diagnosed, Walter Reed sent him to Johns Hopkins for a second opinion and Johns Hopkins made the ALS diagnosis.

## **V. Maryland Military Coalition (MMC) 2021 Legislative Update – Bob Norton, President, MMC**

PowerPoint: [https://montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/CVA/MMCUpdate\\_MOCOVetsComm\\_19Jan21v2.pdf](https://montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/CVA/MMCUpdate_MOCOVetsComm_19Jan21v2.pdf)

Website: [www.mdmilcoalition.org](http://www.mdmilcoalition.org)

MMC was founded on Veterans Day weekend in 2018. It represents 17 military and Veteran service organizations serving approximately 150,000 active duty, Veterans, retirees, survivors, their families and caregivers. MMC seeks to protect and enhance the benefits earned in service to our nation by raising awareness and advancing legislative proposals and policies before the Maryland General Assembly and the Office of the Governor. Bob noted that while the Maryland Veterans Commission (MVC) advises and recommends policies to Governor Hogan and Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA) Secretary George Owings, they are not permitted to lobby whereas MMC is a non-profit, non-partisan lobbying organization.

Bob Norton reported the American Minority Veterans Research Project was voted into membership this past Monday. Other organizations in the membership include Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), Disabled American Veterans (DAV), Military Officers Association of America (MOAA), the Fleet Reserve Association and the National Association of Black Veterans. MMC continues to look for new members. Bob noted that Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) has been approached multiple times but to date have not joined.

The Maryland General Assembly 2021 legislative session began last week. All hearings will be conducted virtually and witnesses must obtain a Maryland General Assembly account to submit testimony. In-person lobbying efforts will be limited and by appointment only. Due to these changes, MMC will be expanding its use of emails to Senators, Delegates, and Committee leaders to make their action alerts more effective and give members the tools and techniques to get messages to their chain of command, their posts, and their chapters. MMC has also increased their social media presence and created a Twitter account (<https://twitter.com/MDMilCoalition>), a Facebook account (<https://www.facebook.com/MDMilCoalition/>), and a dedicated Gmail account ([MDMilCoalition@gmail.com](mailto:MDMilCoalition@gmail.com)).

MMC's 2021 legislation goals include:

- Expand Property-Tax Credit for Severely Disabled Veterans (SB258)
- Vets' Mental Health First Aid (SB164)
- Create Commission for new Women Veterans' Memorial (SJ003)
- Reduce / Eliminate State tax on Uniformed Services retired pay (HB161)
- Establish a State Tax "Check Off" for the Veterans Trust Fund (HB358 / SB241)
- Mil & Student Voter Empowerment (SB283 / HB156) – would involve active duty
- Higher Ed Non-Res. Tuition Exemption for spouses / dependents of Hon. Discharged vets. (HB406)

MMC has created an award to be given to legislative champions. MMC will be giving our four awards to two senators and two delegates who sponsored and successfully passed legislation in the 2020 session that benefit the military-connected community in our state. Bob said the award will provide public recognition and can be used by the legislators in their media announcements. The floor was opened to questions.

Stan Siedel, MVC, reported Senate Bill 0186 - Economic Development – Job Creation Tax Credit – Credit for Hiring Veterans would expand eligibility under the job creation tax credit program administered by the Department of Commerce to include certain small businesses that hire at least one qualified Veteran employee. Stan noted that when this legislation was first passed it was taking the state at least two years to provide the tax credit to the employer which does not provide much incentive to the employer for hiring Veterans to receive this tax credit. He said there is the additional challenge of ensuring legislation passed is being implemented. He suggested MMC follow-up with legislators. Bob said that is a great point. MMC looks to Secretary Owings to work with the state agencies to implement bills once they have been passed.



Michael Wilson, Commissioner, asked if MMC is using evidence from other states such as Texas and North Carolina that have retirement exemption. Bob said Towson University has a study that goes into great detail about the positive economic impact of creating monetary incentives for uniformed services retirees to live in the state where they work, pay taxes, and provide skills and leadership to a variety of Maryland businesses. At testimony given last year, it was noted how many military contractors who work in Aberdeen live in neighboring states that do tax retirees. Maryland should be looking at how best to attract and retain these individuals who bring tremendous experience, skills, energy and leadership into the state's economy.

## **VI. Chair and Vice Chair Report**

Wayne reported the DC VA Medical Center is providing COVID-19 vaccination shots to Veterans who are enrolled in VA healthcare age 65 and older. Veterans can schedule an appointment by calling 202-745-4342. Veterans Enrolled in VA Healthcare: [Washington DC VA Medical Center](#) / [Martinsburg VA Medical Center](#)

## **VII. Updates / Announcements**

Austin Morris, Representative of Senator Chris Van Hollen, reported the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) included a pay raise for members of the armed forces, critical investments for Maryland's military installations, secures new funds for the University of Maryland's START program, and a measure to rename bases that are currently named for individuals who fought for the Confederacy to preserve slavery. The NDAA also includes a provision that slain ROTC graduate U.S. Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Richard E. Cole, who was murdered on University of Maryland's campus a few years ago, receives the benefits and recognition that his family deserves. This includes an honorary and posthumous promotion to Colonel as well as an advancement on the retired list of the Air Force to ensure his family receives those benefits. While a provision was passed last year to provide benefits, this new provision will make it retroactive.

Joanna Starling, Montgomery College, reported National Guard members who were activated at the beginning of the pandemic still have not received their DD214s. Many need access to VA healthcare. Austin said it is her understanding that the Department of Defense (DoD) is not processing anything unless it's urgent.

Scott Schlesinger, Commissioner, reported in August 2020 President Trump signed a memorandum that would temporarily defer Social Security (Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (OASDI)) from paychecks of active duty military and civilians from September to December. That deduction has now been reintroduced effective the first of this month. Also, collection of the deferred taxes will be taken from wages between January 1 and April 30, 2021, for both military members and civilian employees.

Miguel Sapp, Veterans Benefits Specialist (VBS), MDVA, reported his office is now open at the Gaithersburg Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration office located at 15 Metropolitan Grove Road. In-person visits are by appointment only on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 8am to 4pm. Miguel can be reached via e-mail at [Miguel.Sapp@maryland.gov](mailto:Miguel.Sapp@maryland.gov) and via phone at 301-987-8412.

**Adjournment: 7:30pm**

**Next Full Commission Meeting: Tuesday, February 16th, 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; Hannah Dibonge; Elwood Gray; Jameelah Johnson; Robert Koffman; Cynthia Macri; Wayne Miller; Scott Schlesinger; Joanna Starling; Susan Webman; Michael Wilson

**Commissioners Absent:** Jonathan Alfaro; Dan Bolling; James Campbell; Reggie Mitchell; Michael Subin

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

**Non-Voting Congressional Representatives Absent:** Christa Burton (Congressman Jamie Raskin); Ken Reichard (Senator Ben Cardin)

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