



Commission on Veterans Affairs



MEETING AGENDA **Tuesday, January 18, 2022** **6 p.m. – 7:30 p.m.**

Wayne Miller, Chair – Bob Koffman, Vice-Chair

Join the meeting via ZOOM

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/84495474915>

If you want to call into the meeting, call 301-715-8592, use Meeting ID: 844 9547 4915 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 2021 Meeting Minutes – Wayne Miller, Chair

6:05 Various Measures DHHS is Taking to Help with Mental and Physical Well-Being within the Community – James C. Bridgers, Jr., Ph.D., M.B.A, Acting Health Officer and Chief, Public Health Services, Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services

6:35 Project Opportunity – Joe Giordano, Owner and Founder of Project Opportunity

7:00 Goals of Women Veterans Workgroup – Jameelah Johnson, Commissioner

7:15 Updates

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 betsy.luecking@montgomerycountymd.gov or 240-418-4865.

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



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs
Meeting Summary Minutes
January 18, 2022**

****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 December 2021 Meeting Summary Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken, and the December 2021 Meeting Summary Minutes were unanimously approved. Approved minutes are available online at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva.

III. Various Measures Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) is Taking to Help with Mental and Physical Well-Being within the Community – James C. Bridgers, Jr., Ph.D., M.B.A, Acting Health Officer and Chief, Public Health Services, Montgomery County DHHS

Dr. James Bridgers is a Veteran and a service-disabled retired Command Sergeant Major in the U.S. Army Reserve with a combined 30 years of service in the Reserve and Active Duty.

Dr. Bridgers gave an update on the County's COVID-19 data. The [DHHS Pulse Report](#) is shared weekly and provides information regarding cases, vaccination, and testing. The County reviews Maryland Department of Health (MDH) data as well as Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Primary data indicators include cases per 100,000 individuals, hospitalizations, deaths, community level exposure by zip code, and cases by age, race and ethnicity. Due to the highly contagious and highly transmissible current strain of coronavirus known as omicron, County case counts have been consistent with the international and national trends. As of today, the County's case count increased by 371 cases and now has a total case count of 1,119 which is considered a high level of transmission. The County is also tracking epidemiology data to see when they hit a peak for cases. It has been the fourth day where there has been a slight decrease in the number of cases. Statistical modeling does not indicate that the County will reach case peak for another week or so. The County continues to monitor cases on a daily basis. As of January 11, 2022, 36.2% of all hospital inpatient beds at all six hospitals in the County are occupied by patients with COVID-19. Montgomery County per capita of 300,000 residents or more is the number one highly vaccinated county in the nation. Patients in the hospital are largely unvaccinated. The death cases are not at the numbers or levels they were prior to vaccination. Pediatric cases are lower as well. The County continues to monitor cases of 5-17 year olds as that is the cohort that is currently being vaccinated. Approximately 54,000 of the County's 94,000 of the 5-to-11-year old population has been vaccinated.

The County continues to work with community partners, minority health initiatives, and Commissions to encourage individuals to get vaccinated. Almost all age group categories have a vaccination rate level of 95% with the exception of the 5-11-year old age group. County-run vaccination clinics are located at the Dennis Avenue Health Center in Silver Spring, the East County Recreation Center in Silver Spring, Lakeforest Mall in Gaithersburg, the Montgomery College Germantown Campus, and the Silver Spring Civic Building (SSCB). Testing is also being conducted at SSCB.

Testing demand increased over the summer and into fall due to the delta variant. When omicron hit in December testing dramatically increased from almost 4,000 individuals in November to almost 20,000 individuals in December. The demand for testing still continues. Omicron is highly contagious and more individuals are starting to be symptomatic. The County continues to monitor the CDC's prevention isolation and quarantine guidance which currently allows individuals who test positive to return to work after five days. Children under the age of 5 who are unvaccinated should stay in isolation for ten days. Children age 5 and older who are unvaccinated and who have had close contact with an individual who has tested positive can test on day five. If they have no symptoms they can return to schools or childcare settings.

The County has had conversations with MDH which provided 20,000 rapid test kits. These were used as leverage to procure other test kits. Kits were shared with the minority health initiatives (African American Health Program, Latino Health Initiative and Asian American Health Initiative) and Primary Care Coalition partners. The first wave of test kits were also given to Department of Correction and Rehabilitation, community hubs, crisis centers, persons who are homebound, food assistance recipients, frontline service industry and adult day care facilities. The County recognized that tests needed to be made available to the wider community and 2 million additional rapid test kits were ordered. Last week the County received 786,000 test kits from that order. Test kits have been provided to Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) to help test children as part of a calculated strategy to keep MCPS students in school. Rapid testing is one preventative measure for parents to identify their child's status. Test kits have also been allocated for childcare facilities and private schools. Distribution of test kits at libraries is currently underway and will continue through this week. COVID-19 at-home test kits can also now be ordered for free from the federal government. Four free at-home test kits are delivered directly to your home.

The County continues to look at better practices for the community and monitors the science and data in emergency healthcare trends so they can be communicated to the public. There may be other variants on the heels of omicron. FDA anti-viral medications have been approved but manufacturers are slow in distributing them out in the County. Everyone is encouraged to get vaccinated as well as the booster. All individuals who are feeling sick or have flu-like symptoms should get tested. Last week a combination virus of the flu and coronavirus (known as flu-rona) was detected in Los Angeles. Pfizer is currently working on a vaccine that will combine the influenza vaccine with the coronavirus vaccine. The County continues to have conversations with groups such as this Commission to determine best practices for responding to the coronavirus.

There are two organizations within Montgomery County that provide high quality and accessible counseling services to Veterans. The Silver Spring Vet Center and the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic. Information on these two organizations and other resources can be found in the [Veterans Network Directory – Behavioral Health, Counseling and Wellness category](#). Veterans can find additional resources in the [Veterans Network Directory](#).

The floor was opened to questions.

Dr. Bob Koffman, Vice-Chair, asked how much of the success of the vaccination rate can be attributed to the County being a progressive county versus the active intervention by the County to get people vaccinated. Dr. Bridgers said he tries to move away from politicizing public health. The most important part is the County has been consistent with using science and data to demonstrate the effectiveness of the vaccine. Montgomery County residents have been very responsive to the need to be vaccinated and have moved beyond a political stance. The County continues to push for information to keep the public informed and has identified ways to get vaccines and testing to those individuals that were unable to access them. The County has also reviewed journal articles and research regarding the effectiveness of wearing masks indoors and has established model practices that other regional jurisdictions have used.

Dr. Cynthia Macri, Commissioner, reported a recent [article](#) that identified law enforcement deaths due to COVID-19 greatly exceeded all other causes of death. She asked if the County has this issue compared to other counties or the state. Dr. Bridgers said he will need to look into this issue further. At this time there is no data to suggest an increase in deaths from COVID-19. One issue has been interpreting CDC guidelines for exposure and quarantines. The County has been working with public safety (police, fire and rescue) to

determine quarantine times, reinfection rates from omicron or breakthrough cases, and when to administer PCR tests. Dr. Bridgers noted that one first responder tested positive on day 16 of testing. One challenge the County is currently facing is the number of emergency room beds managed by hospitals and the number of first responders who are assisting those healthcare professionals due to lack of staff.

Dr. Bridgers encouraged Commissions to join the public health advisory team. He will follow-up with a meeting invitation.

IV. Project Opportunity – Joe Giordano, Owner and Founder of Project Opportunity

Website: www.project-opportunity.com

Joe Giordano, Owner of Consulting, Training, and Development Services, has over 40 years of experience in the workforce development, human resources and leadership development arenas. His vast experience includes a 20 year career as a Personnel Administrator and Training Supervisor with the U.S. Army and 17 years as owner of Consulting, Training, and Development Services. Joe also developed numerous leadership and management training programs to provide career progression skills for participants. Project Opportunity was started when Joe began working with the Director of the Salisbury Chamber of Commerce who wanted to create a program for Veterans and address their high unemployment rate.

Project Opportunity is a free entrepreneurship training program designed solely for Veterans (Active Duty, Guard/Reserve Personnel, and Veterans) who want to start their own business or expand their current small business. Program graduates are in various stages of their business ventures, ranging from finalizing their business plan to actual launch and earning income.

The first phase of Project Opportunity is to conduct outreach and educational sessions. These two and a half hour workshops “Exploring Entrepreneurship” include a discussion of why the individual wants to start their own small businesses, characteristics of successful entrepreneurs, an overview of the 11-week training program, and an entrepreneurship self assessment. Curriculum is supplemented with presentations by subject matter experts in marketing, small business financials, small business credit, business entities, social media, website design, and commercial insurance.

The second phase consists of a one-hour assessment conducted either telephonically or in-person to determine eligibility for the 3rd phase. Project Opportunity Business Boot Camp, the entrepreneurship training program for Veterans who were selected based on the assessment results. The Business Boot Camp training takes ten weeks. These classes total 30 hours of classroom instruction, 3 hours per week. Veterans will set one-on-one with a financial expert and a marketing expert to review their business plans and receive feedback and guidance. A formal graduation ceremony is held after completion of the ten-week training program.

Joe noted that many Veteran small business owners have retaken the program for a variety of reasons including COVID-related issues, lack of finances or lack of marketing. Class sizes typically range from 8 to 14 participants. Orientation held last week in Howard County resulted in the largest increase in class size with 32 Veterans as more are becoming interested in starting their own business.

The program is currently available in Prince George’s, Howard, Harford, and Anne Arundel counties, on the Eastern Shore, Southern Maryland, and Baltimore City. Joe has been in discussions with Joanna Starling, Montgomery College, about how to bring this program to Montgomery County. He is seeking partnerships and financial sponsorships as well as assistance in locating instructors and subject matter experts. Project Opportunity currently has four instructors working throughout the state. All instructors are both Veterans and small business owners.

Project Opportunity also offers an 8-week entrepreneurship course for military spouses and dependents. This course is offered two times a year. Separate grant funding is available for military spouses and dependents. The next course will be held in Harford County with a second course held in Anne Arundel County this fall. If there is significant interest Joe would look into offering the course in Montgomery County. The three-year grant funding ends next year but he is in discussions with the Ratcliffe Foundation to have it extended.

The floor was opened to questions.

Jameelah Johnson, Commissioner, asked if children or teenagers can participate. Joe said the program is not suitable for children or teenagers as it is not an exploratory course and participants need to be able to write a comprehensive business plan.

Jameelah asked if classes are currently being offered through Zoom or in-person. Joe said the course is being held in the classroom and using social distancing and mask mandates as set forth by that jurisdiction. Courses were offered via Zoom last year, but participants lost out on the interaction among their classmates and presentations were not received as well.

Michael Wilson, Commissioner, participated in the program several years ago. He found the program to be very beneficial and learned what it takes to manage a small business. He had the opportunity to develop a business plan and was selected to participate in a business pitch competition to start a part-time physical fitness company in Montgomery County. Michael encouraged Veterans that are interested in starting a small business to participate in the program.

Bob Norton, Maryland Military Coalition (MMC), asked how many Veterans have taken the course. Since the program was founded in 2010 approximately 374 graduates have completed the course.

Betsy Luecking, Staff, asked if Joe would be partnering with Anthony Butler, Regional Local Veteran Employment Representative, Maryland Department of Labor (MDL) and WorkSource Montgomery. Joe has been working closely with Anthony who is supportive of the program. Veteran Employment Representatives at MDL are one of the best resources to recruit Veterans for the program. Joe asked Betsy for contacts at WorkSource Montgomery.

V. Goals of Women Veterans Workgroup – Jameelah Johnson, Commissioner

Jameelah reported the Women Veterans Workgroup held their first meeting last month to brainstorm ideas, identify the needs of women Veterans and the goals of the Workgroup. A second Workgroup meeting has been scheduled for January 27. Anyone interested in attending can contact Jameelah.

Betsy suggested the Workgroup discuss how women could be included more in Veteran Service Organizations (VSO) such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) or American Legion (AL). Dr. Macri added that she was invited to join the VFW but due to their membership requirements she is not eligible as she was never actively fighting on foreign soil. Strict membership requirements may be a deterrent for Veterans not joining VSOs.

Dr. Macri noted that the Workgroup discussed how Congress passed legislation requiring an examination of racial disparities concerning veteran benefits. The legislation excluded a study by gender. A number of VSO's are well-connected in legislative lobbying and need more women Veterans to voice their concerns, make suggestions and have influence before laws become public.

Bob reported Maryland General Assembly [House Bill 167](#) has been introduced to create a Commission to establish a Maryland Women Veterans Memorial. He suggested that Veterans interested in this bill send in their support.

VI. Chair and Vice Chair Report

The next meeting of the Commission is February 15. Betsy will send out an agenda with the Zoom link.

VII. Updates / Announcements

Jason Marshall, Serving Together (ST), reported ST received 124 calls and managed 42 cases in December which involved mostly housing. ST is hiring a new senior peer navigator and has new interns on board. The Western Maryland Region is expanding and adding more contact. Both Montgomery County and Frederick County offices are doing well.

Anneke Vandenbroek, Commissioner, reported the Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic will be hosting a stress resiliency program for middle school students (grades 6, 7, and 8) on February 23. Family members of

anyone who has ever served in the military are eligible to participate. Participants must complete a pre-evaluation prior to the program in order to identify if more intensive services are needed.

Betsy reported the DC VA Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in Gaithersburg is offering walk-in vaccinations Monday through Friday from 9am to 2pm. Vaccinations and testing are also available at the DC VA Medical Center. The CBOC has enrolled 2,500 Veterans and new services have been added. Betsy will send an email with these updates to Commissioners.

Bob reported MMC has posted their [legislative agenda](#) for this year. Agenda includes legislative goals for disabled Veterans and uniformed services retirees. Bob also reported on the Valhalla Sailing Project in Annapolis which is a free sailing training program for wounded, disabled and separating Veterans.

Roslyn Jones, Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA), reported the Women Veterans/Inclusion Program will be hosting four focus groups in February. The purpose of the groups will be to gain an understanding of the needs of veterans in various populations in four regional areas. If you are interested in attending, please register according to the region where you live. Each women's veterans focus group will take place between 9am - 11am. Afternoon focus groups are open to all veterans and will take place between 1pm - 3pm. Registration is limited. For veterans not selected to attend, an online survey will be made available. MDVA encourages individuals not attending a focus group to please complete this survey.

Focus Group Calendar with Registration Links:

- [Central Maryland: February 3, 2022](#)
- [Southern Maryland: February 10, 2022](#)
- [Eastern Shore: February 4, 2022](#)
- [Western Maryland: February 11, 2022](#)

Betsy reported she has heard from numerous Veterans with ALS since the "Accelerating Access to Critical Therapies (ACT) for ALS Act" was signed into law on December 23, 2021. They are hopeful that they will benefit from investigational therapies and research. The bill authorizes \$100 million annually for five years to fund essential research into fast-progressing, rare neurodegenerative and terminal diseases, such as ALS. Betsy noted that Veterans are one and a half times more likely to develop ALS than the general population. Wayne reported Montgomery County resident and WWII Veteran Charles McGee passed away on January 16, 2022 at his home in Bethesda, Maryland. He was 102 years old. Brigadier General Charles McGee was a retired pilot who was one of the Tuskegee Airmen and a career officer in the U.S. Air Force for 30 years who flew a total of 409 combat missions in World War II, Korea and Vietnam. [View profile of Charles McGee](#) Dr. Macri reported a WWII U.S. Army Veteran who served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team (RCT) will be turning 99 years old on February 20. He currently resides at Asbury Methodist Village in Gaithersburg. The 442nd RCT was a segregated Japanese American Unit and the most decorated in U.S. military history. Betsy suggested sending us information that could be featured on the Commission's website.

Betsy reported that Neil Greenberg, Office of Public Information, will be sending out a press release regarding the [Commission's virtual tributes to County uniformed service members and Veterans for Black History Month](#) which is celebrated during the month of February. Due to the current situation with omicron, the tributes will remain virtual and will not be included at the display cases at the Silver Spring Civic Building..

Wayne reported March 29 is National Vietnam War Veterans Day. Gilchrist will be hosting a [Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Day Celebration](#) on March 20, 2022. The event will be held at Martin's West and will also be live streamed. Betsy noted that the Commission also has a website that features [Montgomery County Vietnam War and Vietnam Era Veterans](#). A press release about this website as well as information on how to submit additional photos and bios will be sent out in March. The Commission also has a website for Fallen Heroes and those killed in action broken down by era.

Betsy asked for speaker suggestions for the February meeting. It was suggested that nutrition be a topic as well as an update on the legislative session. Bob said he would be willing to give the Commission a briefing on legislation. Betsy noted that the Commission can comment on state legislation with permission from the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs (OIR). OIR then briefs the Maryland delegation. She also comments and makes

recommendations on the County's legislative policy regarding Veterans and persons with disabilities and the fiscal impact it could have on the County.

Dr. Macri reported [Maryland General Assembly Senate Bill 005](#) would require the Governor to annually proclaim the fourth Thursday in March as Tuskegee Airmen Commemoration Day.

Adjournment

7:30 p.m.

Next Full Commission Meeting

Tuesday, February 15, 2022 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, Vice-Chair; Cynthia Macri; Wayne Miller, Chair; Reggie Mitchell; Scott Schlesinger; Lisa Schuster; Joanna Starling; Anneke Vandenbroek; Michael Wilson

Commissioners Absent: Michael Subin; Susan Webman

Non-Voting Congressional Representatives Present: Vikki Garcia (Congressman John Sarbanes)

Non-Voting Congressional Representatives Absent: Christa Burton (Congressman Jamie Raskin); Austin Morris (Senator Chris Van Hollen); Ken Reichard (Senator Ben Cardin)

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