



**Montgomery County Commission on Veterans Affairs
Meeting Minutes
June 18, 2024**

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

Call to Order - Welcome, Pledge of Allegiance, Moment of Silence & POW/MIA Remembrance

Michael Wilson, 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.

Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic Overview and Updates – Grace Caulfield, LCPC, LPC (DC), LPC (VA), CAC-AD, Clinic Director, The Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic and Vice President at Easterseals DC/MD/VA

Website: www.easterseals.com/DCMDVA/programs-and-services/cvn-home.html

Anneke Vandenbroek, Vice-Chair, introduced Grace Caulfield.

Please review the PowerPoint presentation: <https://montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/Resources/Files/A%26D%20Docs/CVA/Minutes/StevenACohenMilitaryFamilyClinic61724.pdf>

The Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic (Cohen Clinic) at Easterseals provides high-quality and accessible behavioral healthcare focused on post-9/11 veterans, active-duty service members, their families, and caregivers. Services are available to any person who served in the Armed Forces, including the National Guard and Reserves, regardless of role or discharge status. The Cohen Clinic will treat veterans from any era if staff services are available. Children as young as four years old can receive services. There is only a 10 day wait from the intake referral process to the first session. There is not wait list and intakes are tracked quickly so that servicemembers can receive care.

The Cohen Clinic has a dedicated case manager that focuses on meeting the client's needs to improve their quality of life and offer brief case management services, as well as connecting you to needed resources, such as caregiver support, childcare, education, housing, legal assistance, peer support, personal finances, recreation, rehabilitation, occupation and/or physical therapies, smoking cessation, transportation, wellness, health, nutrition, exercise, and other life circumstances. Case manager does warm hand offs to VA and other agencies.

Cost will never be a barrier to care at the Cohen Clinic. They accept all major insurances but will work with clients on a case-by-case basis to ensure that any barriers to care are addressed. For those with no insurance, care may be available at no cost. The Cohen Clinic is also contracted with DoD TRICARE and VA as part of the VA Community Care Network of providers under the VA Mission Act.

Program highlights:

- Have served close to 6,000 clients since the Clinic's inception
- Licensed to serve clients in Maryland, D.C., Virginia, and West Virginia. As of July 1, services will be expanded to access clients in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware.
- Offer telehealth and in-person services – 86% of services provided are telehealth and 14% of services provided are in-person.
- Launch psychological testing on July 1. Two psychologists onsite will assist with diagnosing as well as with disability ratings.

- Offer Child Watch program – childcare available to clients who are receiving service at no cost.
- Work with Easterseals Veterans Staffing Network, homeless reintegration program, adult medical day care and intergenerational care programs.
- Cohen Clinic secured a grant to refurbish childcare and play therapy space.
- Offer a community hub for socializing and a large meeting room available to community partners.
- Working on memorandums of understanding with Reveille Grounds in Baltimore and Platoon 22 to provide case managers for this organizations.
- Outreach and wellness activities include yoga, guitar lessons, and Warrior Canine Connection.
- Staff include psychologists, licensed marriage therapists, addiction counselors, interns and two fellows.

The floor was opened to questions and comments.

- **Will the Cohen Clinic offer pain management and alternative medicine options such as acupuncture?** This topic has been discussed as to how to refer clients to pain clinics along with wellness mindfulness, and how to promote overall wellbeing while addressing mental health issues.
- **Who is Steven A. Cohen and why did he open military family clinics?** The Cohen Veterans Network was founded by philanthropist Steven A. Cohen who made billions of dollars as a hedge-fund manager. His son enlisted in the Marine Corps and after his service told his father that many of his veteran friends were suffering from depression and anxiety. In 2016, Cohen committed \$325 million to help veterans, members of the National Guard and Reserves, and their families address mental-health needs. It was the single largest commitment of philanthropic support to Americans with military service. The lion's share went to establishing the Cohen Veterans Network - a collection of roughly two dozen mental-health clinics around the country specially staffed and resourced to care for 25,000 patients annually. The clinics quickly found that most of the mental-health challenges that current and former servicemembers seek help for are not battle-related at all, but the same issues that affect the rest of us - like depression, guilt, family strife, anxiety. In addition to providing high-quality evidence-based treatment to patients, the Cohen clinics train new practitioners, and gather data that can be used to improve practices across all sites. All of this comes at no cost to the veteran. Cohen Veterans Network currently operates 24 clinics with plans to open another clinic in 2025. The intention of the clinics is to work alongside local government, private, and community providers and to operate out of already established agencies to help serve as many clients as possible.
- **Does the Cohen Clinic receive any other funding?** Easterseals is responsible for providing 50% of the revenue which is acquired through grant funding, advocates, and donors. The County does not provide funding to the Cohen Clinic. Betsy Luecking, Staff, noted that this Commission may want to include the Cohen Clinic in its upcoming budget priorities for fiscal year 2026 (FY26). It was reported that ServingTogether receives \$172,000 in County funding. Jenn Hodge, Local Behavioral Health Authority, Department of Health and Human Services, is the contract monitor for ServingTogether. She monitors the peer navigators as well as the mental health line through EveryMind.

Getting to Know One Another – Commissioner Roundtable

Commissioners and staff were asked to introduce themselves and to discuss their key interests.

Follow-Up on Bill 6-24 to Reduce Property Taxes for Veterans with Severe Disabilities

Michael testified before the County Council last week on Bill 6-24. Several other veterans organizations testified including the Maryland Military Coalition. A vote on the bill should occur sometime in July.

Mike Subin, Commissioner, said the income requirement ignores other factors and that veterans that have served have already paid their dues. It was suggested that he send his comments to the County Council as a private citizen. The Council may be more receptive to a proposal that recognizes income limits in terms of strategy and would be willing to expand the benefit later on regardless of income.

It was proposed that the issue of military retiree tax exemptions be discussed at upcoming Commission meetings. Many states exempt 100% of military retiree pay. In 2022, the Keep Our Heroes Home Act was enacted and signed by the Governor that increased the amount of a certain subtraction modification under the Maryland income tax for certain military retirement income received by individuals under the age of 55 years to

\$12,500 and individuals at least 55 years of age to \$20,000 during the taxable year for certain military service. The legislation applies to all years beginning after December 31, 2022. It was suggested that Maryland expand the amount to a higher limit to include more veterans and to entice more veterans to move to Maryland. There has been a bill in the Maryland General Assembly the past few years that would exempt 100% of military retiree pay but the bill fails every time. The Maryland Military Coalition has advocated several years now for a 100% exemption. It was suggested that the County enact their legislation to offer military retiree tax exemptions on top of what the state offers.

A motion was made to move forward with the proposal to examine military retirement tax exemptions and to either create legislation within the county or expand the exemptions at the state level. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken and the motion was unanimously approved.

Miguel will research options and existing legislation prior to the next meeting. Chris Thomas, Commissioner, would like to be included in the discussion. He has written to the Maryland Governor previously about making Maryland a destination for military retirees. He reported that Pennsylvania and West Virginia do not tax military retiree income.

Betsy suggested that the property tax credit be based on their VA disability rating instead of income. For example, a veteran with a 50% disability rating would receive a 50% property tax credit. It would have the potential to help more veterans regardless of income. It was asked how many veterans would benefit from this option versus income only. Miguel said he will research the number of veterans with disabilities in Montgomery County.

Chair and Vice Chair Updates

New Commissioner orientation was held on June 11 and June 14. Orientation materials can be found online: www.montgomerycountymd.gov/HHS-Program/ADS/CVA/CVAOrientation.html#orientation

The Commission does not meet in July or August. The next meeting is scheduled on September 17. It was suggested that Platoon 22 give a presentation to the Commission at a future meeting.

Commissioner Updates

Dr. Norvell "Van" Coots passed away on June 12. In 2016, Dr. Coots retired from the United States Army as a Brigadier General after serving 36 years and receiving many awards and recognitions. Dr. Coots led Holy Cross Health in Silver Spring, Md., for seven years before retiring in January 2024. Holy Cross Health is part of Trinity Health system. Under his leadership Holy Cross Health became a regional leader in comprehensive cancer care, and he established the Trinity Health Military and Veterans Healthcare Program to meet the specific needs of military service members, veterans and their families, among many other accomplishments.

Adjournment - 7:32pm

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

Attendance

Commissioners Present: Grace Caulfield; Bernard Chesman; Elwood Gray; Miguel Sapp; Scott Schlesinger; Joanna Starling; Michael Subin; Christopher Thomas; Anneke Vandenbroek, Vice-Chair; Charles Von Goin; Michael Wilson, Chair

Commissioners Absent: Drew Garza; Veronica Pei; Jameelah Johnson

Non-Voting Congressional Representatives Present: Joseph Eyong (Congressman Jamie Raskin); Ken Reichard (Senator Ben Cardin); Audrey Severn (Senator Chris Van Hollen)

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

County Staff Present: 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; Gary Palmer