



Commission on Veterans Affairs



MEETING AGENDA

Tuesday, May 18, 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/91333002857>

If you want to call into the meeting, call 301-715-8592, use Meeting ID 913 3300 2857 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 April 2021 Meeting Minutes – Wayne Miller, Chair

6:10 Warrior Canine Connection and Service Animals: Roles, Access and Reasonable Accommodations – Rick Yount, Executive Director, Warrior Canine Connection, Boyds, MD and Robert Koffman www.warriorcanineconnection.org

Service animals are not pets. So, although a “no pets” policy is perfectly legal, it does not allow a business to exclude service animals. ... A public accommodation or facility is not allowed to ask for documentation or proof that the animal has been certified, trained, or licensed as a service animal.

6:45 Memorial Day Tributes and Events – Wayne Miller and all

7:00 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
May 18th, 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 April 2021 Meeting Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken, and the April 2021 Meeting Minutes were unanimously approved. Approved minutes are available online at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva.

III. Warrior Canine Connection (WCC) and Service Animals: Roles, Access and Reasonable Accommodations – Rick Yount, Executive Director, WCC and Robert Koffman, M.D., Chief Medical Advisor, WCC

Website: www.warriorcanineconnection.org

In July 2008, Rick Yount created the first warrior dog-training program to provide a safe, effective, non-pharmaceutical intervention to help treat the symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI). The program, based at the Palo Alto VA's Men's Trauma Recovery Program in Menlo Park, CA, involved a mixture of active duty and Vietnam War Veterans and evolved into a highly respected intervention using experiential training. Rick was asked in 2009 to establish the Warrior dog-training program at Walter Reed Army Medical Center's Warrior Transition Brigade (WTB) in Washington, DC. In October 2010, he and the program were invited to be part of the PTSD and TBI research, treatment and education mission at the new National Intrepid Center of Excellence (NICoE), in Bethesda, MD — located at what is now the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. In 2011, WCC was founded to expand the availability of this therapeutic service dog-training program to the U.S. Department of Defense and VA medical treatment facilities throughout the country, and to conduct research to establish this model as an evidence-based therapy for PTSD and TBI.

WCC utilizes a mission-based trauma recovery (MBTR) model to help recovering warriors reconnect with life, their families, their communities, and each other. The MBTR model harnesses the healing power of the Warrior Ethos and the human-animal bond to reduce symptoms of combat trauma whereby patients with combat stress train the dogs to assist another Veteran with invisible and/or physical wounds. The model provides recovering combat Veterans with a sense of purpose while they are in treatment at Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs medical facilities and is designed to remediate their symptoms of combat stress, such as isolation, emotional numbness and re-experiencing. WCC breeds their own service dogs. WCC dogs are Golden and Labrador Retrievers specially bred for health, temperament and longevity.

Rick currently serves on the Board of Directors for Assistance Dogs International North America Regional Chapter (ADINARC), which is one of the main accrediting bodies for services dogs. The International Guide Dog Federation sets standards for guide dog organizations. ADINARC has been consulting with the airline industry on the [Air Carriers Access Act](#) which provides access for individuals who have service animals. The Act was revised and no longer considers an emotional support animal to be a service animal. The act also defines a service animal as a dog that is individually trained to do work or perform tasks for the benefit of a

person with a disability. There has been a provision to allow miniature horses as a service animal, but it only happens on very rare occasions. Rick has been lobbying with airlines to allow service dogs in training to be allowed to train on airplanes. The Act allows airlines to require forms developed by DOT attesting to a service animal's health, behavior and training, and if taking a long flight attesting that the service animal can either not relieve itself or can relieve itself in a sanitary manner. This gives the airline the ability to hold individuals accountable for the behavior of the service animal.

The VA has been supporting guide dogs to some degree for many decades. In 2002, the VA began providing veterinary care and equipment such as leashes and harnesses for service dogs through the [VA Prosthetics and Sensory Aids Service](#). The VA also provides a veterinary health insurance benefit and other benefits in support of service dogs to maximize the life and utility of these specialized dogs. The VA does not pay for the dog or for boarding, grooming, food or other routine expense associated with owning a dog.

In 2010, Senator Al Franken introduced legislation asking the VA to provide similar support for services dogs used for psychological injuries including PTSD. The VA wanted more evidence and research that service dogs were beneficial for those with psychological injuries before moving forward. Research introduced in 2011 was not successful and was discontinued for several years. Due to congressional pressure, the VA was going to conduct another study on service dogs for PTSD in 2015. That study was focused on service dogs that had been trained to complete such tasks as creating a perimeter around a Veteran in public spaces so they wouldn't feel crowded and to provide a sense of safety. The study also required the service dogs to be trained to sweep the Veteran's home for potential intruders prior to entry. The results of this study will be released this year. Rick steered away from these studies because WCC does not train service dogs to support symptomatology. WCC trains service dogs to help address symptoms and ultimately break down isolation. If the service dog is not well-behaved the Veteran will be more likely to stay home which will only increase their isolation. Rick can speak from personal experience that a service dog can be a natural conductor of interactions in public. The service dog tends to be the focus of attention which helps the Veteran focus on the animal instead of themselves and also helps in defeating isolation. Service dogs also help the Veteran challenge their intrusive thoughts and are put in the position to ensure the dog feels safe rather than making themselves feel safe.

There is no mandate from the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that service dogs must be trained by a professional service dog training program. The ADA does not require service animals to wear a vest, ID tag, or specific harness. The ADA requires State and local government agencies, businesses, and non-profit organizations (covered entities) that provide goods or services to the public to make "reasonable modifications" in their policies, practices, or procedures when necessary to accommodate people with disabilities. Covered entities may not require documentation, such as proof that the animal has been certified, trained, or licensed as a service animal, as a condition for entry. Rick noted that oftentimes businesses are too focused on asking for a service dogs' papers as proof. Some individuals with dogs as pets that have not been trained purchase false certification papers online. This has led to businesses being very suspicious of service dogs in general, especially if the individual does not have a visible impairment or disability. Rick is trying to push educating businesses on their rights on reasonable accessibility and reasonable accommodations. If an individual has a service animal that is not disrupting business, the business owner has the right to ask if the dog is a service animal and what it has been trained to do. If the dog is showing aggression, is disruptive including barking, or if the dog is unclean and smells, the business has the right to ask that the dog be removed. Some individuals have brought their personal pets into grocery stores and other businesses, allowing the pet to lay in the cart and remain in a purse or bag. This also causes business owners to question having service animals in their stores.

Rick added that the individual with the service animal has a responsibility to ensure their service animal is not being disruptive. Part of the education process is teaching Veterans about their responsibility. Assistance Dogs International works to make sure service animal organizations make that education as part of their placement process. WCC requires service animals and Veterans to pass a public access test as well as yearly recertification.

The ADA does not restrict the type of dog breeds that can be service animals. It is feasible that a dog that is not a retriever or a lab could be a service animal. Poodles have been trained to recognize changes in a

person's blood chemistry for diabetic detection. Other breeds of dogs have been trained to respond to a seizure in someone who has epilepsy or to predict when a seizure is going to occur.

Emotional support, therapy, comfort, or companion animals are not considered service animals under the ADA. These terms are used to describe animals that provide comfort just by being with a person. Because they have not been trained to perform a specific job or task, they do not qualify as service animals under the ADA. However, some State or local governments have laws that allow people to take emotional support animals into public places.

Betsy Luecking, Staff, noted that fair housing laws are different. Under the federal Fair Housing Act (FHA), an emotional support animal is viewed as a "reasonable accommodation" in a housing unit that has a "no pets" rule for its residents. Betsy has received numerous complaints from Veterans who have had landlords refusing to allow their service animal into their rental. Rick said he has had to assist Veterans on several occasions who have had landlords refusing to allow a service animal. He said more education is needed to help people understand service animal rights and reasonable accommodation laws.

Mike Subin, Commissioner, noted that Maryland state law permits service animal trainers accompanied by a service animal in training to the same rights and access as a person who uses a service animal, unless the animal would create a clear danger of a disturbance or physical harm. Rick noted that recently a trainer had an issue in Montgomery County where the service animal in training was not allowed near the dog park because they did not have a permit. Mike said he has dealt with this issue before and the County has a standard letter that can be sent. Eventually, Rick was able to speak with Maryland-National Capital Park Police (MNCPP) to have the situation resolved. As a result of that interaction, WCC has formed a partnership with MNCPP and are collaborating on an event for Veterans and their service dogs this fall.

Rick noted there have also been issues where a teacher wanted to be a service animal puppy raiser but the school did not want to allow the puppy in the classroom. People assume that service dogs are disruptive and running around. Rick said training the dog to lay quietly during classroom time would have a beneficial impact and teach the children as well.

The floor was opened to questions.

Jameelah Johnson, Commissioner, asked about service animals on planes and how a situation would be handled if an individual on the plane is allergic to dogs. Rick has been in such situations and worked with the airline to determine how best to handle it. Oftentimes, the service animal is sat as far away as possible for the individual with the allergy. Rick added that service animals should also receive a bath prior to being on a plane as well as brushed. Betsy noted that the Commission on People with Disabilities at one time had a Commissioner who was severely allergic to dogs that served during a time when there were also two Commissioners who each had their own service animal. Betsy separated the Commissioner as much as possible and the situation worked for them.

Rick said the training of the service animal never stops. Dogs will test their boundaries and the continual training keeps the Veteran mindful and attune to their service animal. Veterans have to learn how to be assertive without being aggressive or passive as well as consistent. The Veteran has been taught how important it is to reinforce behavior and will pet the service dog. Rick said that when a Veteran pets their service dog they release an oxytocin hormone which counters the effects of cortisol (known as the stress hormone). Oxytocin has a calming effect and is sometime referred to as the hormone of cuddling. The service dog also releases oxytocin during the petting. The Veterans are also taught to practice patience when training the dog which in turn helps them to have patience in their own lives. Veterans participating in the program have reported that using these positive emotions to praise their dogs has significantly improved their family dynamics, as their children are able to experience and respond to this positive parenting strategy.

There is at least a year or two wait list for a Veteran to receive a service dog from a well-regulated and accredited organization. There are not enough dogs to support the demand. Dogs are matched with Veterans based on the dog's skills, strengths, temperament, and energy level, as well as the applicant's needs, experience, personality, and lifestyle. There may be an indefinite wait for the right dog to become available for

a particular applicant. Eligibility requirements for applicants: <https://warriorcanineconnection.org/service-dogs/dog-applicants/>. PTSD is the most common reason why Veterans ask for a service dog. Bob Koffman serves as WCC's Chief Medical Advisor assists in screening applicants. Applicants who apply for a service dog to assist with mitigating the symptoms of PTSD must show that they have first tried traditional evidence-based interventions and treatments.

Betsy suggested offering training for those who currently have a dog as a pet but would like to train them to provide emotional support. Rick said training makes all the difference and a trained dog can offer so much. WCC service dogs are trained to pick up on stress cues. During the COVID-19 pandemic, WCC started a video series titled "[Unleashed](#)" designed to teach Veterans how they can strengthen their bond with their pet dog while also learning about training from their own home. The videos clearly state that the dog will not be a service dog after completing the videos.

Jameelah Johnson, Commissioner, asked if WCC provides any bereavement assistance for when a service dog passes away. WCC has discussed building a healing garden and memorial at WCC headquarters. If someone loses their service dog, that Veteran goes to the front of the line for another dog. For anyone whose dog passes away that says they are not ready for another dog, Rick said dogs provide internal natural medication and keep those oxytocin levels up. Rick told a story of a Congressman who asked a Veteran who had received a service dog from WCC how the Veteran would manage when the dog passes in ten years. The Veteran responded that he had experienced more death in the last decade than the Congressman could ever imagine so he is familiar with it, but that he would prefer to focus on life now. WCC has program liaisons that keep in touch with Veterans who receive service dogs and assisting them with grieving is a part of that process. Bob said it is important to understand and expect that dog's have 1/7 the lifespan of a human. One has to expect and appreciate that it is not replacing the dog but ensuring the opportunity for that person to continue living their life.

WCC often names their puppies after fallen warriors. Rick was recently in Greenville, Pennsylvania to visit with the widow, brother and other family of Marine Corps Lt. Paul William Bush who was killed in Vietnam in 1968. Rick was introducing them to the puppy named after Paul. He noted it's amazing to be able to continue to tell Paul's story 53 years later. A mini documentary about that visit will air on WCC's website on Memorial Day.

IV. Memorial Day Tributes and Events

The Greenberg-Lerner Jewish War Veterans Post 692 will be hosting their 5th Annual Memorial Day Program on Sunday May 30 at 2:30pm at the American Jewish Veterans Memorial, Bender Jewish Community Center, 6125 Montrose Road, Rockville. The event will be open to the public to the limit allowed by county restrictions, masked and socially distanced. Captain (Rabbi) Irving Elson, USN (Ret), Director, Jewish Welfare Board's Jewish Chaplains Council will be the keynote speaker. A reading of the names of the Jewish 'Fallen' since 9/11 will also be held.

On Monday, May 31 the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund will host a ceremony at the Memorial on the National Mall. The in-person event will be limited due to coronavirus restrictions, but participants can also check out the ceremony online. All in-person attendees are encouraged to wear a mask. The Silver Spring Vet Center will be available to provide emotional support for attendees.

Neil Greenberg, Office of Public Information, said Betsy and Carly Clem, Staff, have worked hard to create a website that honors County heroes killed in service dating back to World War I. The website features bios for all listed and photos for many. Neil has drafted a press release to promote the website and the work of this Commission. It will be sent out on Tuesday, May 24 and again before Memorial Day. The website will also be featured on the County's homepage and shared via all County social media channels. Betsy said this website was created after the family members of fallen County service members attended a Commission meeting in 2009 asking that the Rockville Library be renamed to the Rockville Memorial Library. The following day Betsy and Carly decided to create a website that would honor those who lost their lives while serving as a tribute. Jameelah said she knows Paula Davis, the mother of fallen hero Justin Davis who was killed in action in Afghanistan. Paula is very appreciative of what this County has done for her son.

Betsy reminded Commissioners we have a [Black History Month](#) website as well as a [Vietnam War and Vietnam-Era Veterans](#) and [Veterans Day](#) website. All three websites are online year-round and are regularly updated with new profiles. These websites are featured by the County during their respective tribute months. This Commission is working to pay proper tribute to the people in this County who have served. Betsy thanked Carly for her hard work on designing the website and researching various sources to obtain information and create profiles for each fallen hero and Veteran. She thanked Neil for helping this Commission with their outreach to the community.

V. Chair and Vice Chair Report

None.

VI. Updates / Announcements

Betsy received an e-mail regarding poor signage at the VA Community-Based Outpatient Clinic in Gaithersburg. She asked for input on what is needed. It was suggested that the existing signage is too small and placed too low to see or read. A sign is also needed to direct drivers on the last road before making the right to the back of the building. Betsy said the VA would need to install their own signage and the County cannot place signage on private property.

Dr. Elwood Gray, Commissioner, announced American Minorities Veterans Research Project in partnership with the African American Health Program, Montgomery County Government, and the National Center for Children and Families along with a few other organizations will be hosting free COVID-19 tests at Montgomery College Rockville Campus on Saturday, May 22. Outreach is primarily to the Black community but anyone is welcome to get tested for COVID. Participants can also receive a free bag of food, free COVID-19 swag, and free on-site vaccine pre-registration. Dr. Gray thanked Joanna Starling, Montgomery College, for her assistance in securing the location. More information on future testing dates can be found at: www.aahpcovid.com.

Mallory Lass, Outreach Manager, Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic at Easterseals, announced several special events the Cohen Clinic will be hosting. On Saturday May 22, the Cohen Clinic will be presenting virtual puppy yoga for mental health hosted by WCC. The Cohen Clinic is also partnering with WCC for an 8-week session to train puppies for Veterans. The session starts June 8. Registration is open to Veterans and their families. Contact Emily McNeal at WCC at emcneal@warriorcanineconnection.org. On June 19, the Cohen Clinic and Blue Star Families will be hosting a [Rock Creek Park Hiking, Boating and Wellness Event for Military Families](#) at Lake Needwood from 10am to 12pm. The Cohen Clinic continues to partner with several community organizations to advocate ending the stigma towards mental health in the military and Veteran community and will continue this conversation through their virtual platform.

Dr. Cynthia Macri, Commissioner, announced the Japanese American Veterans Association would be holding its 37th Annual Memorial Day Service on Sunday, May 30, 2021 at Arlington National Cemetery Columbarium. She noted that several World War II Veterans who served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team live in Montgomery County. Most notable is Terry Shima who was awarded a 2012 Presidential Citizens Medal by President Obama. The 442nd Regimental Combat Team was a segregated Japanese American unit and became the most decorated unit of its size in U.S. military history.

Dr. Macri also announced the Chinese Cultural and Community Service Center (CCACC) in Gaithersburg is offering Pfizer vaccinations on Saturdays. Vaccinations are available to anyone, not just the Asian community, ages 12 and older. The next first dose of vaccine injection is scheduled for June 5. Each vaccination registration link will be posted on their website. To make an appointment, please log on to www.ccacchealth.org or call their vaccine hotline at 301-663-1375 to make an appointment.

Mike suggested taping another Homefront episode. Betsy suggested the episode focus on Veteran wellness post-COVID. Neil will work with Mike to organize it. Dr. Macri said she serves on the Governor's Commission on Suicide Prevention as well as the Montgomery County Suicide Prevention Coalition. Mike suggested adding Dr. Macri as a presenter for a future Homefront episode.

Miguel Sapp, Veterans Benefits Specialist, Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs (MDVA), reported the new MDVA office located at the Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration in Gaithersburg can assist Veterans and their families with requesting Veteran disabled plates and disabled placards. Miguel also assists Veterans, dependents, and survivors, in obtaining benefits from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the U.S. Department of Defense and the State of Maryland. Contact Miguel at 301-987-8412 or via e-mail at miguel.sapp@maryland.gov. He is currently taking appointments only on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 8am to 4pm.

Adjournment: 7:30pm

Next Full Commission Meeting: Tuesday, June 15th, 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; Reggie Mitchell; Lisa Schuster; Joanna Starling; Michael Subin; Anneke Vandenbroek; Susan Webman; Steven Willis

Commissioners Absent: Scott Schlesinger; Michael Wilson

Non-Voting Congressional Representatives Present: Ken Reichard (Senator Ben Cardin)

Non-Voting Congressional Representatives Absent: Christa Burton (Congressman Jamie Raskin); Vikki Garcia (Congressman John Sarbanes); Austin Morris (Senator Chris Van Hollen)

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