



## Commission on Veterans Affairs



### Meeting Agenda

**September 17, 2024**

**6 p.m. – 7:30 p.m.**

**September is National Suicide Prevention Month**

**DOD theme:** Joining Your Fight: Connect to Protect

**Michael Wilson, Chair**

**Anneke Vandenbroek, Vice-Chair**

**Join the meeting via Zoom**

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/81364432273>

**If you want to call into the meeting**, call 301-715-8592, use Meeting ID 813 6443 2273 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 June 2024 Minutes – *Michael Wilson, Chair***
- 6:10 Veterans and the Court System & the Veterans Hiring Preference – *Phil Andrews, Director of Crime Prevention Initiatives, Montgomery County State’s Attorney’s Office***
- 6:40 Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs and Military Families - *Introduction of Christina Williams, Veterans Benefits Specialist (VBS) by David Skisano, VBS***
- 6:50 Discussion on Establishing the Two Policy Issues for the Upcoming Year for County Council HHS Committee Meeting on October 16, 2024 - see attached priorities from last year as FYI**
- 7:05 Chair and Vice Chair Updates – *Michael Wilson & Anneke Vandenbroek***
- 7:15 Updates from Commissioners**
- 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](mailto:carly.clem@montgomerycountymd.gov) or call 202-853-1109 or via MD Relay at 711. **\*\*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**

**September 17, 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.

### **Approval of June 2024 Meeting Minutes**

A motion was made to approve the June 2024 Meeting Minutes. The motion was seconded. A vote was taken and the June 2024 Meeting Minutes were unanimously approved. Approved minutes are available online at [www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cva).

### **Veterans and the Court System & the Veterans Hiring Preference – Phil Andrews, Director of Crime Prevention Initiatives, Montgomery County State's Attorney's Office**

Montgomery County Circuit Court Mental Health Court Program:

[www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cct/mental-health-court.html](http://www.montgomerycountymd.gov/cct/mental-health-court.html)

Phil Andrews is a former Montgomery County Councilmember who served four terms on the Council from 1988 to 2014. In December 2014, Montgomery County State's Attorney John McCarthy hired Phil to develop and implement crime prevention initiatives, beginning with the establishment of mental health courts, and to strengthen community outreach. In 2015, he was appointed by Circuit Court Administrative Judge John Debelius to chair the Montgomery County Mental Health Court Planning and Implementation Task Force. Only three other counties had mental health courts at the time – Baltimore City, Harford County, and Prince George's County. The Task Force reviewed what these jurisdictions were doing, which was very complex, involved many different agencies, and were led by champion judges. In January 2016, the Task Force released a report unanimously recommending the establishment of Mental Health Courts in the Montgomery County Circuit Court and the Maryland District Court for Montgomery County by the Court's respective administrative judges to divert people who commit low-level crimes because of a mental illness into treatment and services and away from prosecution and jail. Report: [Montgomery County Maryland Mental Health Court Planning and Implementation Task Force](#).

On August 2, 2016, the Council approved a supplemental appropriation of \$163,609 to the Department of Health and Human Services for therapists and \$29,952 to the Circuit Court for implementation of the Mental Health Court. This funding is in addition to \$97,000 in funding awarded to the District Court by the State's Office of Problem Solving Courts. In December 2016, the Montgomery County Circuit Court's Mental Health Court began operating, and the District Court's Mental Health Court began in January 2017.

Prior to the establishment of the mental health court, the number of people entering the criminal justice system was skyrocketing. 90% of the population in jail is male. Approximately 15% of male inmates and 20% of female inmates were determined to have a significant mental health issue that needed immediate attention. A higher percentage of the female population in jail were exhibiting mental health issues. Many of these individuals have been arrested multiple times for the same minor offenses, typically disorderly conduct, vandalism, public urination, shoplifting and theft. Mental Health Courts help break this cycle of repeated arrests by addressing the cause of the criminal behavior.

A Mental Health Court is a specialized court docket established for defendants with mental illness that substitutes a problem-solving approach for the traditional adversarial criminal court processing. Participants are identified through mental health screening and assessments and voluntarily participate in a judicially supervised treatment plan developed jointly by a team of court staff and mental health professionals. (Justice Center, Bureau of Justice Assistance) The overarching goal of the Mental Health Court is to decrease the frequency of participants contacts with the criminal justice system by providing participants with judicial leadership to improve the social functioning, employment linkage, housing needs, treatment, and support services of participants.

Mental Health Courts rely on individualized treatment plans and ongoing judicial monitoring to address both the mental health needs of offenders and public safety concerns of communities. These courts also seek to address the underlying problems that contribute to criminal behavior, and to assist with the avoidance of recurring correctional visits, as well as to overall lower the recidivism of this population.

Anyone can refer a defendant to Mental Health Court, including, but not limited to, judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, law enforcement, the Department of Correction and Rehabilitation, Parole and Probation, state hospitals, private mental health providers, and family members. If you would like to have a defendant evaluated for possible entry into the Mental Health Court Program, please contact the Problem Solving Court Coordinator at 240-777-9141.

To graduate from Mental Health Court, participants must achieve the goals of their individualized treatment plan, which include taking all prescribed medication, no substance abuse (in some cases, no substance use), stability, participation in therapy, compliance with directives, living in court-approved housing, and employment or the ability to meet their daily needs. The program normally takes about 18 to 21 months to complete. The Drug Court program typically takes 2 years or longer to complete.

Many participants in the mental health court also have substance abuse issues. Testing is required during the program. It is not always clear what is the primary problem that is driving the criminal behavior. It is critical to address substance abuse disorders in order to address mental health issues. Participants must stay sober in order for them to progress in mental health court. There are four stages in mental health court that must be completed with graduated sanctions and incentives for compliance with participants gradually working towards independence and their ability to function completely independently.

75% to 80% of participants are in the District Court program where as 20% of participants are in the Circuit Court program. The program has a total capacity of 100 participants. At most, the program has had between 75 to 80 participants at one time. 120 participants have graduated in the District Court program and 20 participants have graduated in the Circuit Court program since it started. Participants also average a lower recidivism rate with about 20% over a multi-year period for graduates versus a 40% to 50% recidivism rate for the general prison population over a five-year period. The main incentives to complete the program is to avoid criminal records, to have their case dismissed and to get their life back on track.

An average of 1 to 3 veterans have participated in the program at any particular time over the years, which is equivalent to the percentage of the veteran population (approximately 40,000) in the county versus total population (over a million). The programs want to serve veterans. The goal is to de-stigmatize mental illness and treat it as another health condition.

The Mental Health Court continues to receive support from the public and elected officials who view it as a smart approach to criminal justice. Individuals are prosecuted when necessary and diverted whenever appropriate. The key to the program is to have dedicated judges who have asked for this particular assignment as well as experienced therapists who stay in their position for an average of 5 to 6 years.

The floor was opened to questions.

- **Are there recommendations to convince veterans to participate in these programs that may have an issue or a stigma with the term 'mental health'?** It is a challenge issue when people feel that mental health is a stigma. It may be helpful if they observed the program. The treatment court meets every Thursday at 1:30 p.m. at the District Court. Anyone is welcome to view it. Anyone that has

charges pending against them can participate in the court program. It is a tough, rigorous program and it can change lives.

- **How do you engaging with veterans whose issues may extend to housing, finances, employment, or education?** Often participants have other needs. Housing is a big issue given the cost of housing but also the limited number of appropriate beds and supervision needed. One of the requirements is housing must be approved by the court. Some participants live at home, some live on their own, and some require 24/7 supervision. The courts have a high staffing level of therapists, case workers and case managers that assist with day-to-day concerns, locating appropriate employment, services, and housing, and monitoring medication management and mandatory drug testing. There is a lot of hands-on contact between staff and participants to provide wrap around support to those who need it.
- **What is a champion judge?** A judge who takes on the issue as a tremendous cause and is completely devoted to it. They have a passion for what they are doing and they are committed to continually making the programs better.
- **Are participants required to complete a 12-step program and have a mentor?** Drug court is a 12-step program, but the mental health court is not. Participants in the drug court do have mentors or sponsors. Participants in the mental health court are not required to have a sponsor, but they are encouraged to have peer support with someone who has completed the program. There are much more varied and individualized treatment plans for each person, whereas drug court is more of a team experience for participants.
- **The Maryland Military Coalition has discussed creating a veterans court similar to the drug or mental health court. How many veterans do not get identified in either of the existing courts due to the stigma of mental health?** The need for a veterans treatment court is unknown. Two years ago, the County started a homeless persons diversion program which does serve some veterans who are experiencing homelessness. This is a pre-arrest program that seeks to divert and drop minor charges if the person agrees to complete and attend services for a particular amount of time. The number of veterans in Montgomery County is smaller than other counties in the state. There are also fewer veterans who served in combat than in the past century. Most of the veterans in the county who experienced combat are most likely above the average age of the population. The majority of the population in the criminal justice system are under the age of 40. There has been a reluctance to start problem-solving courts due to staffing issues. The District Court is starting a DUI/DWI problem-solving to divert people away from the traditional system and jail.
- **How does the court ensure that the family has connection to the services that the participant is getting?** The courts encourage families when they are available to become involved. In some cases participants live at home while in other cases the individual may be in court due to issues relating to family members. Involvement does depend on the assessment of the clinical therapist, judge and health court team. While the program focuses on the participant and what is best for them, family members are always given information on services they are eligible for. If the participant is seeking employment, the court will provide a letter explaining their involvement in the program.

The [veterans hiring preference](#) has been in place for 14 years now. As of 2021, the County has hired 283 veterans and 23 veterans with a disability. Many were hired to work in public safety (police, fire and rescue, correction and rehabilitation). Approximately 35 to 40 veterans have been hired under the non-competitive hiring preference for people with several disabilities, which was adopted into law in 2012. Project SEARCH Montgomery is another County hiring program that provide education and training to young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities through an innovative workforce and career development model that benefits the individual, the workplace and community.

Commissioners can contact Phil with follow-up questions at [Phil.Andrews@montgomerycountymd.gov](mailto:Phil.Andrews@montgomerycountymd.gov).

## **Introduction of Christina Williams, Veterans Benefits Specialist (VBS), Maryland Department of Veterans Affairs and Military Families (DVMF)**

Christina Williams is a new VBS working at the Gaithersburg DVMF office located within the Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration Service Center, 15 Metropolitan Grove Road, Gaithersburg, MD 20878. She will be working alongside David Skisano, VBS.

## **Introduction of Donny Williams, Regional Manager, ServingTogether**

Donny Williams is the new ServingTogether Regional Manager for Montgomery County, Prince George's County, Southern Maryland, and Washington, DC. He is replacing Destiny Nettles and can be reached via email at [dwilliams@every-mind.org](mailto:dwilliams@every-mind.org)

## **Discussion on Establishing the Two Policy Issues for the Upcoming Year for County Council HHS Committee Meeting on October 16, 2024**

The Commission's priorities last year were housing vouchers for housing homeless veterans and their families, and continued funding for ServingTogether and Warrior Canine Connection. The Commission also prioritized promoting suicide prevention awareness, promoting social connectedness and veteran inclusion in county activities, participation in Operation Green Light, enhancing economic opportunities, financial literacy and entrepreneurship training for veterans; and working to increase participation of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans in veteran service organizations the Commission.

This year the HHS committee of the Council is asking Boards, Committees and Commissions to submit two policy issues.

It was suggested that the Commission have a policy to look to the federal government and the state for funding programs and services and will advocate for programs that are not funded by the federal or state government such as Warrior Canine Connection, ServingTogether and the housing vouchers for veterans that are not eligible due to discharge status. It was also suggested a policy of increasing of recognition of veteran's services and education on veterans needs which could include Operation Green Light, suicide prevention, the County Cable show Homefront, Memorial Day and Veterans Day.

It was suggested that the Commission ask the County Council to put pressure on the state to fund a Veterans home like Charlotte Hall in Montgomery County. Michael Subin, Commissioner, offered to approach several County legislators regarding this issue.

There was a question regarding Maryland Veterans Trust Fund. The fund has been temporarily paused due to overwhelming demand and staff turnover. Donny reported the new fund administrator will be presenting an update to the Montgomery County Veterans Collaborative meeting tomorrow. Betsy will send the meeting registration link to Commissioners.

## **Discussion – Veteran Bus Designs – Montgomery County Department of Transportation (MCDOT)**

MCDOT is planning to have one Ride On bus have a design for Veterans Day. Commissioners reviewed several bus wrap designs used by various jurisdictions across the country that honor veterans. Commissioners would prefer that any photos of veterans used include as much diversity as possible. Any use of military seals should include all six military branches (U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Coast Guard and U.S. Space Force) and both U.S. Uniformed Services (U.S. Public Health and NOAA Commissioned Corps). It was suggested that the design include a website that would feature resources, a phone number for veterans to contact, or a QR code. Commissioners were asked to further review designs and send Betsy Luecking, Staff, their comments and preferred design. She will be meeting with MCDOT on Friday to discuss.

## **Chair and Vice Chair Updates – Michael Wilson & Anneke Vandenbroek**

Military retiree tax exemptions were a discussion item at the June meeting. Michael will have a discussion later this month with Commissioners Miguel Sapp and Christopher Thomas to look further into this issue. It was suggested that this topic be revisited at the Commission's next meeting scheduled for October 15.

## **Updates from Commissioners**

None.

## **Adjournment**

7:16 p.m.

## **Attendance**

**Commissioners Present:** Grace Caulfield; Drew Garza; Elwood Gray; Jameelah Johnson; Miguel Sapp; Scott Schlesinger; Joanna Starling; Michael Subin; Christopher Thomas; Anneke Vandenbroek, Vice-Chair; Michael Wilson, Chair

**Commissioners Absent:** Bernard Chesman; Veronica Pei; Charles von Goins

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

**Non-Voting Congressional Representatives Absent:** Vikki Garcia (Congressman John Sarbanes); Ethan Navarre (Senator Chris Van Hollen)

**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; Michael Moses; Michael Theard; Jane McCarthy; Wayne Miller; Donny Williams; Christina Williams; Phil Andrews, former County Councilmember