

Maryland Veterans Commission Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, July 16, 2024
American Legion Talbot Post 70
29511 Canvasback Drive
Easton, MD 21601

Chairman Tyler called the meeting to order at 10:32 am

Vice Chairman Moore led the invocation and Pledge of Allegiance.

Chairman Tyler introduced guests attending:

- Penny Collins, representing the Fleet Reserve Association
- Joe Cicchillo, VFW State Commander
- Dana Karpf, Maryland's Commitment to Veterans
- Dana Burl, Deputy Secretary, DVMF, Presenter
- Heather Geraldes, DMVF Maryland Trust Fund Administrator
- Adobolia Buford (VetWorks), Presenter
- Polliette Wheeler, VetWorks
- Paula Stewart, VetWorks
- Janiya Pendleton, Vetworks
- George Bodmer, Port 70 Past Commander
- Celia Bodmer
- Audrey Moore
- Elliott Matthews (Easterseals) - online

Commissioners absent: Hardebeck, Rosas, Stem, Thornton, Welsh (appointment ended June 30th)

Chairman Tyler called on Secretary Woods for his presentation:

Secretary Woods:

- The Fiscal Year ended on June 30th, so I will provide some updates for the past year.
- As of July 1st, we are now the Department of Veterans & Military Families. Dana Burl has been promoted to the Deputy Secretary of the Military Families Program

Service and Benefits Program:

- DVMF filed 5,076 claims in FY 24, the most since 2016, with an approval rate over 90%.
- Over 44 million in monetary benefits were awarded to veterans, their dependents and survivors represented by DVMF in FY 24.
- The service program added new locations at the Elkton Motor Vehicle Administration and the VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic in Eastern Baltimore County in FY 24.
- We have hired additional staff at the Glen Burnie and Frederick offices and they will start later this month. We are also planning another hire for the Gaithersburg office.

Communications, Outreach & Advocacy

- The Communications team increased social media efforts tremendously in FY24 resulting in 218,000 social media views.
- Ask the Question and suicide prevention trainings have now been facilitated to 425 federal, state, and local government and community partners.
- Website updates have been made to reflect the name change.
 - If you find an update that was missed, such as a PDF attachment, please email Dana or Denise.
 - In addition, all State Public Information Officers have been asked to update their Department websites throughout State government.
 - Please notify your own Veterans Service Organizations of the change so their websites can be updated as well. If new logos are needed, please let Dana or Denise know.
- We are required by legislation to use existing marketing materials before ordering new ones with the name change. If you have materials, please use them up and then let us know when you run out.
- The first meeting of the new Commission on Veteran and Military Families met July 11.
 - Meetings will convene monthly for the duration of the calendar year and the report on making Maryland the best state for veterans and military families is due to the MGA and GOV by December 1.
 - A multidisciplinary team has been convened to research and write the plan. Two MVC commissioners are represented, Chairman Tyler and Commissioner Spiegel. Dana is the chair.

Maryland Veterans Trust Fund

- A new grant administrator was hired, and we will soon hire an accountant.
- We are converting from paper grant applications to an online grants management system.
- Our trustees approved the addition of organizational grantmaking. This will eventually be a tool to make grants to other nonprofits that similarly provide support to veterans and their families.
- Our grant administrator and grant specialist are working on strategies to address the application queue backlog. We aim to invite veterans eligible for grants to a soft launch of the grant database in late Summer.
- We will implement new data collection and impact measures for the Trust Fund.
- We will deepen partner relationships with our donor agencies to ensure consistent revenue streams.

Charlotte Hall Veterans Home

- Charlotte Hall website has been updated.
- CMS quality rating has increased to three stars.
- Charlotte Hall has been awarded the 2024 (American Health Care Association/National Center for Assisted Living) AHCA/NCAL Bronze National Quality Award.
- CHVH received a gold star from the Maryland Healthcare Commission for its administration of flu vaccinations for 2023-2024.
- The census at Charlotte Hall has increased to 253, which is the highest in over a year.
- Moving to more permanent staff and less contract and agency staffing.

- The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations will survey Charlotte Hall in August (survey at our request).

Cemetery & Memorials Program

- There will be no Unaccompanied Veterans ceremony this quarter, as there were no unclaimed veterans. The next one is scheduled for October 25th pending receipt of eligible unclaimed cremains.
- An erosion control and beautification project was recently completed at Vietnam Veterans Memorial.
- Crownsville Superintendent Pat Ritter retired after 26 years of State service. We are grateful for all she's done for the Veteran community and wish her well in her retirement.
- Keith Brown, who formerly directed the Memorials program has been promoted to the Deputy Director of the Cemeteries & Memorials program.

Fiscal

- Tremendous progress has been made in the last Fiscal Year reducing unfilled positions in the Department.

Q&A for Secretary Woods

- Commissioner Calvert – Charlotte Hall residents have not been able to come to American Legion Post 206 breakfasts recently, because there is no one to drive the bus. Secretary Woods replied that there are plans to buy one or two smaller vans where the driver will not need a commercial license.
- Commissioner Reuter asked for the balance in the Trust Fund: \$725,000. Also, will the new vans be wheelchair accessible: Yes.
- Commissioner Davis asked what the \$\$limit will be on Trust Fund organizational grants: Will always prioritize individual grants, but if money is available, we will do an organizational grant or two. Commissioner Davis is interested in maintenance funds for Posts.
- Commissioner Foxworth is glad to hear that the focus is shifting to more full-time medical staff at Charlotte Hall. What caused the use of so many temporary & contract staff? Staffing has been a challenge for a while and COVID certainly played into it. Private contractors can adjust wages much more quickly than state salaries. What about training? Yes, Pruitt Health has a commitment to training. Currently staff is being trained in fall prevention.
- Commission Wallace – what about using VSO's? DAV has lots of volunteers to drive vans. Commissioner Reuter replied that VA does not allow volunteers to drive the wheelchair accessible vans.
- Chairman Tyler asked about any update for the second Veterans Home – No major changes, we are progressing through design phase. Buy American legislation risks driving up costs significantly. It could impact the cost of Sykesville home.
- Commissioner Reuter – when will it open? Unknown, hopefully 2028.

Chairman Tyler called on Denise Nooe for her report –

Denise Nooe –

- Commissioner Kelly Welsh just had a baby daughter and is not here today. She is not planning to reapply, so her seat is currently vacant.
- Commissioner Robert Hanson has also decided not to pursue reappointment, but he will stay involved until a new Commissioner is appointed to represent the 1st Congressional.
- Bay Bridge Tolls – I need your EZ Pass receipt to submit with your travel form if you want to be reimbursed for the toll. If you don't want to wait, and just want to be reimbursed for your mileage, let me know and I will submit your form right away.
- Thank you to American Legion Post 70. They have been terrific to work with – Commander Wayne Hall, George & Celia Bodner and Kaki, who prepared the luncheon today. It was a pleasure working with all of them.

Chairman Tyler called on Adobolia Buford for a presentation on VetWorks

Q&A

- Commissioner Davis asked if the training was classroom/academic based. Response: we have both in-person and hybrid online training. Davis added that culinary has to be in-person? Yes, we train at Gas Light Square in Baltimore.
- Commissioner Reuter – is your program 502 compliant? Yes.
- Commissioner Schlesinger asked about faculty and students – we have trained 80+ students. We have four instructors and assistants, and also utilize volunteers.
- Chairman Tyler – do you assist incarcerated Veterans/returning citizens? Yes and they have volunteer employers who help them prepare for interviews and work.
- Commissioner Davis asked if they do outreach inside the prison – No, not inside the prisons, but we do have a relationship with Reveille Grounds and nearby organizations.
- Commissioner Foxworth was on the Board of MCVET before he came on the Commission – his focus is on helping Veterans who have challenges returning to the workplace.
- Commissioner Moore – certifications are important in today's workplace. Do you help with those? Yes, we train to entry level, but for jobs that have a ladder for growth, such as electrical Apprentice.
- Mr. Buford added they always want to help those who need assistance. Also, they provide support to the 231st Transportation BN group – Korean War Veterans.

Chairman Tyler called on Dana Burl for her presentation on Ask the Question:

Dana Burl:

- Thank you for all the good wishes on her promotion.
- She will be training on the Governor's Challenge and Ask the Question (Presentation is attached)
- An Ask the Question training has been prepared by Maryland Public Television and will be available for state employees to view.

Q&A

- Commissioner Reuter stated that evidence based has been used as a means to cut services to Veterans. At the VAMHCS they only give Veterans 15 mental health sessions. Reply – I do not speak for the USDVA, but have never seen this much money poured into suicide prevention. Believes that if a Veteran needs more than 15 sessions, it can be reviewed and approved.
- Commissioner Davis – we ask question about “have you served?”, but Reservists are not considered Veterans. Also, most Veterans are not retirees. VA does not have services that are for family members connected to Veterans. Response – that is why we ask the question as, “Have you ever served?”, so that reservists and National Guard also answer yes.
- Commissioner Calvert – agencies are trying to digitize everything and get everything online. We need to keep paper options for those who are not computer literate. Response: Yes, we serve a very diverse population, and we want information to be accessible to all of them.

Chairman Tyler – Thank you to the presenters.

Chairman Tyler called for the Subcommittee Reports

Homeless Subcommittee – Commissioner Reuter provided the following report:

- *The Annual count in time was canceled this year due to weather*
- *Speaking of weather, the current heat wave is affecting everyone and people who have no place to go are especially vulnerable. So far there have been no reports of any Homeless Veterans who have died because of the heat. The fire dept reports many (over 60 per day) heat related hospital runs and so far no deaths and no reports of any veterans.*
 - *While the actual number of homeless veterans is unknown but is reported to be stable neither growing nor shrinking.*
 - *the current number of HUD VASH vouchers is static with more coming in the future (more on this below).*
 - *The VA Medical system has had the federal rules of eligibility changed so, persons with “less than honorable” discharges to potentially able to use the VA medical system, Many Homeless persons fall in this category so getting the word out is high on list of priorities, take DD 214 to VA hospital to have it verified at the registration center just to the left of the entrance.*
 - *The VA Annex on Fayette Street is the location where most services for veterans who are homeless are located, unfortunately this facility was closed for about a month due to damage at the BUILDING NEXT DOOR to the Annex not the Annex itself. Note: the building has now reopened.*
 - *Everything has been repaired and the building stabilized and has reopened with ALL services resumed.*
 - *Now about those HUD-VASH vouchers, 50 more housing units are almost finished at the Freedom Village on the Perry Point hospital campus. These*

will come with HUD VASH vouchers so there will be 50 additional family friendly units at the facility.

Subcommittee Combating Substance Misuse – Commissioner Macri provided the following report:

- She thanks the Chairman for the time he spent talking with her.
- Welcomes Penny Collins back to the sub-committee.
- Showed her Gold Medal – she will be in the upcoming Senior Olympics.
- Requesting a meeting with the new Deputy Secretary.
- We need to increase the drug treatment workforce.
- VA has cut jobs in the client facing sector
- She has transitioned off the Montgomery County Commission

Chairman Tyler called on Commissioners to provide information for the Round Robin portion of the meeting:

Commissioner Shiffrin – no updates from MOAA.

Commissioner Schlesinger – Jewish War Veterans Convention will be held at the end of the month.

Commissioner Foxworth – TREA is trying to gain more active members. Meetings moved to Zoom, members are getting older, but they are trying to recruit. Presented for Memorial Day at the American Legion. He is also a member of the Howard County Commission on Veterans Affairs. Participated in the County 4th of July observance.

Commissioner Hartman – represents the VVA on the Commission. He represented Secretary Woods at a Gulf War Veterans event and also at Rocky Gap. He attended the Family Fun Day in Burtonsville – more than 300+ attended. Saturday will be Frederick County Veterans Appreciation Day – Denise will attend for the Department. The next Claims Clinic will be held in Dundalk.

Commissioner Davis – There will be a Claims Seminar this Saturday at Post 9619 in Suitland.

VFW Commander Cicchillo – It's coming up on the time for the National Convention. VFW is combatting Claims Sharks as an important issue.

Commissioner Davis mentioned that Betsy Luecking from Montgomery County had sent around an article that he hoped all Commissioners would read. Denise sent the article to all Commissioners.

Commissioner Holcombe – presented three Proclamations for Memorial Day. The presentations at today's Commission meeting were very good and he will pass on the information.

Commissioner Calvert - Honor Flight loaded up a bus in southern Maryland for Veterans to visit the memorials in Washington. Of those attending, there were five women Veterans, including one army nurse who was 102 years old. She also asked that a question be relayed to Secretary Woods about having Rt. 260 in Calvert County named after former Secretary George Owings. She would like to hold a Commission meeting at the American Legion Post 206 in Chesapeake

Beach when the road is dedicated. Also, Warrior Canine Connection is going to name a puppy after her brother, Dennis O. Rice, CPL, US Army who served in Vietnam with the 101st Airborne.

Commissioner Perry – NABVETS has been in discussions with the NAACP about partnering on issues. The NABVETS National Convention is 9/4 – 9/10 in Louisville.

Penny Collins – she is continuing to attend meetings for the Fleet Reserve Association, since her appointment ended. The 234th birthday of the United States Coast Guard is coming up. A celebration will be held on Sunday, August 4th at the FRA in Annapolis.

Commissioner Hanson – Welcome to the Eastern Shore! Is there any news on the state budget cuts and how it will affect DVMF? No. Veterans on the shore are concerned that they can't schedule in-person appointments at the VA. VA staff are overworked and are leaving. Especially true of Cambridge CBOC. If you need surgery and other specialty care, it works well – more a problem with routine, primary care.

Commissioner Moore – Suggested we invite someone from the VA Ombudsman program to talk to the Commission about these issues.

Commissioner Wallace – had to go outside the VA system for cardiac care. Following up on the Secretary's comment about the wait time to see a Benefits Specialist, DAV has many certified VSO's. Also, when a DAV member makes a call to a Commissioner for information, please call them back.

Commissioner Smith – no report.

Commissioner Reuter – gave Proclamation to leadership at Baltimore National Cemetery for Memorial Day. PVA went to the Hill, lobbying for Veterans issues. He was also sent out to community care by the VA – in his case the University of Maryland.

Commissioner Childs – online, did not respond when called on by Chair.

Commissioner Bowers – online, did not respond when called on by Chair.

Commissioner Macri – represents Congressional District 8. Montgomery County does give a property tax break to Veterans, limited by what the state allows. Women Veterans are disproportionately married to other Veterans. When you look at the household income threshold, many dual Veteran couples are denied because they are over the income limit.

Commissioner Killebrew – Tuskegee Airmen National Convention is Aug. 15-17. They will be recognizing two Top Gun pilots.

Commissioner Spiegel – He is President of the Maryland Military Coalition. Working on some legislative goals for next year. Concerned about reciprocal licenses for spouses. Also building upon the Freedom to Serve Act.

Commissioner Moore – Department of Maryland American Legion Convention is happening right now in Ocean City. Secretary Woods is scheduled to speak at the convention. On June 14th the Greenbelt Post hosted an Eagle Scout who is building a Memorial. Gave him a check to purchase an anchor. He serves on Congressman Ivey's Veteran Advisory Board.

Chairman Tyler will be meeting with the Foxy G Foundation about a future presentation to the Commission. He has been appointed to the new DVMF Veterans and Military Families Commission.

Penny Collins added for any VSO or CSO VA is considering how they will handle Other Than Honorable Discharges when a Veteran is seeking services. It is a case-by-case individual review for health care.

Chairman Tyler – please reach out to him for sub-committee ideas. Also, it is his birthday today.

Motion was made and accepted to adjourn the meeting.

Vice Chair Moore led the closing prayer and Salute to Flag.

Meeting adjourned at 1:20 pm.