

**Maryland Veterans Commission Meeting Minutes**  
**Tuesday, October 15, 2024**  
100 Community Place  
Crownsville, MD 21032

Chairman Tyler called the meeting to order at 10:34 am

Vice Chairman Moore led the invocation and Pledge of Allegiance.

Commissioner Reuter made a motion to approve July minutes. Seconded and passed.

Chairman Tyler introduced guests attending:

- Penny Collins, representing the Fleet Reserve Association
- Heather Gerald, DVMF Maryland Trust Fund Executive Director
- Robert Finn
- Lindsay Livingston, DVMF Director of Communications, Outreach & Advocacy
- Dr. Vishal Vaghela, VA Maryland Health Care System
- Laurie Calhoun, Foxy G Foundation
- Audrey Moore
- Bernadine Blair
- Harvey Thomas, Sheppard Pratt
- Joy Ashcraft, Maryland's Commitment to Veterans
- Jason Marshall, Serving Together
- Dr. James Dula, Prince George's County Veterans office

Commissioners absent: Bowers, Childs, Rosas,

Chairman Tyler called on Deputy Secretary Cohen for his presentation:  
Deputy Secretary Ross Cohen –

- Welcome to Commissioners and Guests
- As you know, the Department is now the Department of Veterans and Military Families and you may have seen some of the changes already on the website, in the newsletter and other DVMF materials.
  - As you do outreach/talk with Veterans about the Department, please use the new name and acronym.
- Veterans Day will soon be here and I appreciate all of you who have volunteered to attend events and read the Governor's Veterans Day Proclamation.
  - We count on you to help extend the reach of the Department.
- I will be providing some updates on the Department since the Commission met in July.

## Communications, Outreach & Advocacy

- A new Director has been hired for the program, Lindsay Livingston. She is a military spouse and is well qualified to lead the program. Lindsay joined us a little over a week ago, and she is already contributing to the Department.
- We are planning to transfer the Service Animal Program under the Trust Fund, as these are both grant programs, so I am providing a final COA update on the successes of the Service Animal Program, before the transition:
  - 541 Veterans have been served
  - 2,881 equine-assisted therapy sessions provided
  - 5 Service Dogs have been placed with Veterans
  - 90 Staff & volunteers have been trained in military cultural competency and Veteran suicide prevention

## Service and Benefits Program:

- The service program filed 5,073 claims in FY 24, the most since 2015, with an approval rate of 95%.
- \$44,700,000 in monetary benefits was awarded to Maryland veterans, their dependents and survivors who were represented by DVMF in FY 24. That is the highest amount ever for the Department.
- 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 Bel Air, Gaithersburg, Glen Burnie and Frederick offices.

## Maryland Veterans Trust Fund

- Heather Geraldles, the new Executive Director of the Trust Fund attended the July meeting and is with us again today.
- An accountant is joining the program and we will be recruiting for a grant specialist.
- We have converted from paper grant applications to an online grants management system and expect to relaunch the program by Veterans Day.
  - We have been processing applications received when the program was paused, and have awarded \$84,580, so far. These applications provided testing for the new grants management system, before the public roll-out.
- 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.
  - Stay tuned for an announcement in November addressing food insecurity and upcoming partnerships.

### **Charlotte Hall Veterans Home**

- Charlotte Hall Veterans Home was awarded a 2024 (AHCA/NCAL) American Health Care Association and the National Center for Assisted Living Bronze Quality Award. This award demonstrates the organization's dedication to providing quality care and continuous improvement. The award ceremony was to take place last week in Orlando, Florida, but was postponed due to Hurricane Milton.
- In August the Charlotte Hall Veterans Home was inspected by the Joint Commission. The inspector provided a positive out brief. After our plan of correction is submitted to the Joint Commission and reviewed, we will be notified on whether we have been awarded Accreditation status.

### **Second State Home – Sykesville**

- SFCS, the architect completed the design development phase in August. Construction design is next and that should take about 6 months.
- The Home Commission met on September 18<sup>th</sup> and received a presentation from the architects.
- The project is on the VA priority one list, but we rank at 84<sup>th</sup>. If all goes well with finding both state and federal, we hope to begin construction summer Of 2025.

### **Future Home**

- We are talking with the leadership on the Maryland VA Medical System about procuring land at Perry Point.
  - We are awaiting review and comment from VA on an MOU drafted by the Maryland General Services Administration.

### **Cemetery & Memorials Program**

- There will be no unaccompanied Veterans ceremony this quarter, as there were no unclaimed veterans transferred from the Maryland Anatomy Board. The next date scheduled for Unaccompanied Burials, if needed will be: January 31, 2025
- The US VA's Veteran Cemetery Grants program has released the state cemetery construction list for 2025, and the **Crownsville Veterans Cemetery** expansion was ranked 22<sup>nd</sup>, so we hope the expansion will be approved soon.
- The VA plot allowance increased October 1<sup>st</sup> to \$978. As you know, there is no charge for Veterans or spouses.
  - This amount is charged for Reservists and members of the National Guard and their dependents if they are not eligible for the plot allowance from the US VA.

### **Fiscal**

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

Thank you for all you do to support the Department. Enjoy the fall and we will meet again in January.

## Q&amp;A

- Commissioner Reuter – have blueprints for the second home been shared with PVA. There was a lawsuit and now it is a requirement that anything built with VA funds be reviewed by the PVA Architectural office. Robert Finn responded that it has not been submitted to the PVA yet.
- Commissioner Reuter – are paper applications available for the Trust Fund. Heather Geraldles responded, yes.
- Commissioner Davis asked about the monetary limit for organizations applying to the Trust Fund. Heather Geraldles responded \$15,000.
- Commissioner Macri asked about the 5% denial rate on benefits – how many were female veterans? Answer was unknown at the meeting. Phil Munley Director of the Benefits Program was consulted, and DVMF does not track claims by gender. Answer was sent to Commissioners by email.
- Commissioner Foxworth asked how we measured the effectiveness of claims. Deputy Secretary responded by percentage of approval rating.
- Commissioner Hanson asked about the status of the plans for a Veteran Home on the Eastern Shore. Robert Finn responded that we are looking for a vendor to do test borings of the property to determine if location is acceptable for building, then property has to be transferred to DVMF.
- Commissioner Killebrew said that claims processing can be long for senior Veterans in their 80's and 90's. Do we track that? Question could not be answered at the meeting and Phil Munley was consulted. DVMF makes every accommodation possible to submit claims as quickly as possible for older Veterans. Often, it is the family member contacting DVMF about filing the claim for the Veteran. We do not have statistics on how long it takes for the VA to adjudicate claims for older Veterans. Answer was sent to Commissioners by email.
- Commissioner Hartman asked about the additional DVMF office opening he didn't hear. Denise answered the part-time office in Baltimore County.
- Penny Collins asked about the status of the Women Veterans Memorial. Final report has been sent to the General Assembly. It is up to the Legislators to extend the work of the Commission.

Chairman Tyler called on Denise Nooe for her report:

Denise Nooe –

- Took Roll Call
- Thank you to everyone who has accepted Veterans Day events. We have everything covered at the moment, but there may be more invitations coming. We appreciate all you do to extend the reach of the Department.
- We have Veterans Day posters on the back table and you may take them with you.
- Lunch today is provided by a Veteran-owned business. Please give her a warm welcome later in the meeting. She will introduce herself to the Commission.

Chairman Tyler called on Dr. Vishal Vaghela for his presentation.

#### Q&A

- Commissioner Reuter asked about internet connectivity, not all Veterans have it or live in an area where they can get it. Response: Veterans can go to nearest VA location and have a video appointment there with their provider.
- Commissioner Davis asked about eligibility for VA care, can anyone receive VA care, what about emergencies? Response: Veteran needs to be enrolled but can be enrolled if first visit is to VA at Urgent care.
- Commissioner Davis follow-up question regarding 3<sup>rd</sup> party insurance billing. Response: Depends on priority status. VA is permitted to bill for non-service-connected treatment, except for Medicare. VA can not bill Medicare, because that is another federal program.
- Commissioner Wallace asked about the elimination of urgent care at some VA locations. Won't this lead to more emergency room care? Response: Veterans can use Urgent Care facilities in the community. In-network pharmacies can provide short courses of medication. Also noted the transportation officer position at Perry Point is currently vacant.
- Commissioner Hanson asked if an enrollment center could be added to the Cambridge CBOC? Response: Yes, we will look into it.
- Commissioner Reuter: Walgreens is closing many locations. Response: Most of the in-network pharmacies are in the Optum network. Commissioner Reuter added only 6 Optum locations are in Baltimore City, and 4 are near the VAMC.
- Commissioner Foxworth asked about Veterans coming repeatedly to the Emergency Room. Response: Often the issue is transportation. Sometimes not knowing what services the VA offers. The VA is trying to address health equities.
- Commissioner Schlesinger mentioned the Jewish War Veterans have a Post in Israel. What services are available? Response: VA care is not provided in other countries. Medications can be provided for travel, but VA will not mail prescriptions to other countries.
- Mr. Harvey from Sheppard Pratt asked how the VA defines "family" for the Veterans. VA accepts the Veterans' wishes on family. Mr. Harvey also asked about children attending appointments with Veterans. Response: he will have to check on routine appointments.
- Commissioner Davis volunteers in the psychiatric ward for holiday events and children are not permitted there.
- Dr. Dula from Prince George's County asked for more information on the remote monitoring system. Response: Veteran needs to come into the VA in person to enroll. Primary Health provider grants access and provides I-pad. As long as the Veteran remains enrolled and has appointments, he/she keeps I-pad.
- Commissioner Hardebeck worked with Baltimore City previously on internet connectivity. There is federal funding for connectivity.
- Chairman Tyler noted that My HealtheVet is being replaced by a newer program.
- Commissioner Calvert gave an update on the Women Veterans Memorial Commission – Delegate Bagnall will be meeting with Secretary Woods about a new bill concerning the Women Veterans Memorial.

The Chairman called on Laurie Calhoun for her presentation on the Foxie G Foundation

Q&A:

- Commissioner Davis – horses can be moody, one kicked his sister and knocked her out. Response: Program trains and empowers participants on warning signs. All staff are trained, but as much independence as possible is given to the participants. There are future plans to expand interior space now that exterior plans are complete. Will be able to accommodate 1,000 participants per year. Also want to offer days of respite.
- Chairman Tyler asked about children being around the horses. Response: the horses love kids and are gentle with them.
- Commissioner Davis asked if they have any horses from Arlington National Cemetery. Response: No, all horses at the facility are retired racehorses and retired park police horses.
- Commissioner Reuter asked about accessibility. Response: Very accessible. Have pavers so those using wheelchairs can navigate the barns but have not completely solved the challenge. Are still working on it.

The Chairman called for the Subcommittee reports;

Homeless Subcommittee, Commissioner Reuter:

- HUDVASH vouchers, none are available now, but more are expected to become available in the future.
- Fifty new homes for Veterans are being built on the Perry Point campus.
- Commissioner Reuter requested help from other Commissioners, to cover areas outside of the Baltimore area. He is the only person on the Subcommittee.

Subcommittee Combatting Substance Misuse, Commissioner Macri:

- Also help needed on the Subcommittee. Please volunteer.
- Substance misuse is a risk factor for suicide. We are trying to improve Veterans lives.
- She was recently appointed to the Governor's Task Force on psychedelics. These topics are intertwined.
- New medications are being developed. Additional staff are needed for treatment and research.
- Trying to encourage the Veteran population to train for this work and this population.

The Chairman called for the Round Robin portion of the meeting:

- Commissioner Reuter – No homeless Veterans lost their lives in the Baltimore area during the summer heat wave. Paralyzed Veterans of America is preparing for elections. PVA held a Caregivers weekend last weekend in Ocean City. Others provided respite care for the Veterans, so the Caregivers could get away.
- Commissioner Blair – In early September he participated in the Gold Star Mother's program in Berkeley Springs. On 12/7 he will attend the Coast Guard Cutter 97 program at the Inner Harbor for Pearl Harbor Remembrance Day.

- Commissioner Foxworth – The Howard County Fair provided free admission for Veterans on a particular day, and he set up a table and provided information for Veterans,
- Commissioner Collins – Fleet Reserve Association 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary is coming up on November 11<sup>th</sup>. The National Convention is scheduled following Veterans Day and will be held in Annapolis this year. Secretary Woods will speak. FRA will be sponsoring the Veterans Day ceremony in Annapolis on 11/11. A Veterans Claims Clinic will be held on 11/12. She participated in the Maryland Military Coalition listening session. MMC is planning an award ceremony for legislators. The DAV recently held a fundraiser at the Texas Roadhouse. 10% of the proceeds for the meal went to the DAV.
- Commissioner Hardebeck – no update.
- Commissioner Smith – no update.
- Commissioner Davis – VFW State Commander, Joe Cicchillo could not attend today. Commissioner Davis recently attended the Naval Academy ASPIRE program. He spoke with Officers and Staff about the Commission. On Veterans Day, he will be coordinating a program at the DC VA Medical Center. One of the activities is Bingo in the psychiatric ward with prizes for the residents. October 13<sup>th</sup> was the 249<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Navy.
- Commissioner Schlesinger – The Jewish War Veterans are hosting a program for Veterans Day in Wheaton. He is now the Commander of the JVA for Maryland, DC and Israel, after the merging of those Posts.
- Commissioner Hanson – He will be attending the Veterans Day ceremony at Ocean Pines. American Legion Post 91 has been sending much needed supplies to the flood victims in North Carolina.
- Commissioner Wallace – DAV has spent 742 hours volunteering to help their fellow Veterans and attended 31 outreach events. That translates to 348 Veterans helped.
- Commissioner Hartman – honored to attend the headstone dedication for Samuel Neal a Veteran of the War of 1812. He was an African American and his grave had been previously unmarked. Commissioner Hartman's VVA Chapter will make sure there is a wreath on Mr. Neal's grave for the holidays and a flag on Memorial Day. Mr. Neal was from Hagerstown, serving as a Steward, an Aide to an Officer, although he was not Commissioned. Toured with staff from Baltimore National Cemetery. Held claims clinic during the summer. Claims were filed for 50 Veterans on 8/17 and attended by VVA State President. 225 Veterans & family members participated in Warriors on the Bay on 8/22. His Chapter funded four wounded warriors in a golf tournament and funded some patient needs at Martinsburg VAMC.
- Commissioner Stem – there are 15,000 Veterans in Carroll County and she also serves on the County Veterans Commission. On May 5<sup>th</sup> there was a Carroll County Celebration of Veterans at the Farm Museum. The County Department of Aging also held a well-attended event for Veterans. There will also be a Veterans Day event at the senior center. Next year, October 9-13, 2025, the Vietnam Traveling Wall will be hosted in Carroll County. A lot of volunteers are needed to make the event a success. Would like Secretary Woods to attend. Jim Webb is a possible speaker.
  - Commissioner Hanson added that the Traveling Wall was hosted on the Eastern Shore a few years ago.
- Commissioner Killebrew – the Tuskegee Airmen East Coast Chapter is hosting a youth fly day in Prince George's County on 9/14.

- Commissioner Thornton – named to the Veterans Honor Roll at the Atrium Senior Living.
- Commissioner Holcombe needs three Proclamations for Veterans Day for the events he is attending.
- Commissioner Moore – American Legion Post 136 in Greenbelt gathered to stuff and send 140 military care packages to the troops of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion/8<sup>th</sup> Cavalry deployed in Lithuania. This request came from Greenbelt Deputy Chief of Police, Tim White whose son is a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the unit. He need two Proclamations for Veterans Day, for the Greenbelt ceremony with Mayor Emmitt Jordan and for Wiltshire Estates Retirement Home in Silver Spring.
- Commissioner Denise Perry – will be attending the Veterans Day observance at Roxbury Prison. Noted the passing of NABVETS State Commander Bernard Watts.
- Commissioner Macri added that she has also attended the ceremony at Roxbury previously. There is a Veterans Day observance at the Japanese American Memorial near Union Station in DC. She will be speaking at Partners in Care in Anne Arundel County on Memorial Day.
- Chairman Tyler – On 11/9 he will be attending the Montford Point Marines observance of the Marine Corps birthday. On 11/11 he is attending an event at the Reginal Lewis Museum. He also mentioned the passing of Commander Watts.

Guest:

- Dr. Dula thanked the Commission for the work they do and said that it has been a pleasure attending the meeting today.

The Chairman called on Monica Alvarez from the Bread & Butter Kitchen to introduce herself and her business. She was providing lunch for today.

Meeting adjourned at 1:05 pm.