

Maryland Veterans Commission Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, January 21, 2025
Online Meeting – Google Meet

Chairman Tyler called the meeting to order at 10:33 am

Vice Chairman Moore led the invocation and Pledge of Allegiance.

Commissioner Reuter made a motion to approve October minutes. Motion was seconded and passed.

Chairman Tyler introduced guests attending:

- Heather Geraldles, DVMF Maryland Trust Fund Executive Director
- Lindsay Livingston, DVMF Director of Communications, Outreach & Advocacy
- Roslyn Jones, DVMF Women Veterans/Inclusion Program Manager
- Cory Carfagno, Director, Serving Together
- Jason Marshall, Regional Manager, Serving Together
- Eric Johnson, Director, VAMSA
- Lei Ellison, Deputy Director, VAMSA
- Gene Davis, Deputy Director VAMSA
- Rick Reed, Maryland's Commitment to Veterans
- Dr. James Dula, Prince George's County Veterans office

Commissioners absent: Hardebeck, Perry, Shiffrin, Thornton, and Wallace

New Commissioners attending: Penny Collins (reappointed – Fleet Reserve Association), Michael Detmer (1st Congressional), Joan Sabree (Women Veteran) and Candyce Harris (5th Congressional), who attended as a guest, as she has not taken her oath yet.

Chairman Tyler called on Secretary Woods for his presentation:
Secretary Woods –

- Good morning. Welcome and Happy New Year!
 - Let's start with the Maryland Veterans Trust Fund, which was paused for a period of time.
 - I will testify later today on a Claims Shark bill. Maryland will add penalties to those who charge Veterans and do not disclose that there are free services.

Trust Fund

- We have focused on increasing our staff capacity and implementing technology and best practice models for our activities for the past six months with rewarding results. A few end-of-the-year statistics:
- Since our relaunch in September 2024, we have awarded **\$328,872.79 to 42 applicants across 15 counties In Maryland.**

- The total grants to applicants for 2024 was **\$492,780**. We are starting 2025 with an additional 115 clients with pending applications.
- This fiscal year, our **Service Animal Grant Program granted \$193,500** to nine partner organizations.
- Our new organizational grant program has approved **disbursements of \$95,000 to 5 partner organizations**.
- Total 2024 donations to the Trust Fund equaled: **\$528,239**.
- We are poised to fill our last staff position - Agency Grant Specialist I, in the new year.

Service & Benefits Program

- Made 149,217 contacts
- Filed 5,073 claims
- 94% approval rate for claims submitted to VA
- Maryland Veterans & dependents represented by DVMF received \$44.7 Million in VA payments
- Verified Veteran-status for 329 Veteran Owned Small Businesses

Constituent Services

- In addition to the services provided by the Benefits staff, DVMF now has a full-time Constituent Services staff person, Mauricio Reyes.
 - In 2024, Mauricio assisted 739 individuals who contacted DVMF on a variety of issues.

Charlotte Hall Veterans Home

- 17% female
- 12% are spouses
- 45% are ages 70-79
- 80% are wartime Veterans
- Average census is 255
- Occupancy rate is 57%
- Nursing Care team is fully employed in-house now and no longer dependent on outside agency staff, leading to consistent, high-quality care.

Second State Home in Sykesville, Maryland

- In 2024 the focus was design development
- The team also looked at the property's slope and where the building would be located on the site, as well as where services would be located within the planned three-story structure.
- Includes 64 residences for memory care and 64 residences for skilled nursing care for Veterans and spouses.

- Will include a community center, wellness center, beauty/barber shop, gift shop, movie room, physical therapy/gym and chapel.
- In addition, medical services will include a dialysis unit, pharmacy, optometry suite and dental care suite.
- Goal is to complete architectural drawings by summer 2025

Cemetery & Memorials Program

- 3,374 Veterans and dependents were interred at the 5 cemeteries.
- Cheltenham improvements: included curbs replaced, potholes filled, drainage system improved, front gate repaired.
- Eastern Shore cemetery: Space Command flagpole at front entrance installed, POW/MIA and Women Veteran monuments placed, Purple Heart monument refurbished.
- Garrison Forest Cemetery: memorial pond installed, Space Command flagpole added.
- Rocky Gap Cemetery: enclosed storage area built, grant from the MD Department of Natural Resources received to plant 25 trees on the grounds.
- Vietnam Veterans Memorial: retaining wall built and 100 trees planted.
- Gold Star Family Monument: grounds renovation project completed, grass planted, added ADA compliant walkway, 20 space parking lot, and lights installed

Communications, Outreach & Advocacy

- Attended 420 events, meeting with 7,856 contacts
- Newsletters were opened 2,448,695 times
- Facebook reach: 787,113 and X/Twitter: 12,615
- 147,088 visitors to the website

Dana Burl was appointed the new Deputy Secretary of Military Family Policy & Programs. A Community Partner Summit was held at Ft. Meade, in the first of a series of Summits to be held at military bases in Maryland.

Upcoming Legislative Priorities for 2025 Session:

- **Modernize veteran commissions** to enhance their ability to connect with and support veterans across the state.
- **Expand burial eligibility to** National Guard & Reserves, ensuring all who have served are honored with a dignified resting place.
- **Protect veterans from fraud** by addressing the growing issue of claims sharks and safeguarding veterans' economic well-being.
- **Form stronger interstate compacts**, making it easier for families to integrate smoothly into new communities.

Questions?

Q&A

- Commissioner Davis – question about expanding burial benefits to the National Guard. Response: Yes, the plan is to allow burial for National Guard & Reservists, as well as their dependents.
- Commissioner Macri – is a member of the Commission charged with looking at Psychedelics for Veterans Mental Health. Subcommittee meets every two weeks, and she wanted to make Secretary Woods aware of the work.
- Commissioner Moore - asked about new Commissioners – will they get a full term? Response: Yes, if it is a full five-year appointment. No, if they are being appointed to fill out the rest of a term.
- Commissioner Foxworth – Does DVMF look at Veterans in terms of employment? Response: Secretary of Labor measures and tracks those statistics. Good question – what are the relevant stats from other agencies? He will do some homework.
- Commissioner Davis with follow-up question for Dr. Macri – which ones are we talking about? Response: Psilocybin. He also thanks Secretary Woods for speaking with the gentleman who was the candidate for the Secretary of Veterans Affairs in North Carolina.
- Chairman Tyler asked about the Claims Sharks bill – would no attorneys be able to be paid? Response: Secretary Woods was referring to filing an initial claim – there are plenty of services available which are free. If it is an appeal, fees may be charged.

Chairman Tyler called on Denise Nooe for her report:

Denise Nooe –

- Roll Call
- Thank you to everyone who accepted Veterans Day events. In the two weeks surrounding Veterans Day, the Secretary, DVMF staff and Commissioners attended 63 events. We think that it might be a record. We appreciate all you do to extend the reach of the Department.
- The Electronic Financial Disclosure form is due by April. Please complete this requirement.
- April meeting location has been set by the Chairman – Reveille Grounds in Baltimore.

Chairman Tyler called on Cory Carfagno and Jason Marshall from Serving Together for their presentation:

Note: Slides from the presentation were sent to the Commissioners.

Q&A

- Commissioner Davis asked how the organization is funded. Response: County, state and federal support. There is no charge for services to participants.
- Commissioner Reuter mentioned that PVA is a resource for spinal cord injuries, as well as MS and ALS.
- Commissioner Moore said he appreciates the work Serving Together does and that Jason Marshall consistently attends the Veterans Commission meetings.

Chairman Tyler called on Eric Johnson and Lei Ellingson from VAMSA for their presentation:

Note: Slides from the presentation were sent to the Commissioners.

Q&A

- Commissioner Davis asked how the VFW was supporting VAMSA. Response: the Grasonville VFW gives them \$5,000 each quarter. The American Legion also gives them annual grants.
- Eric stated they have plans to open a satellite location on the lower shore
- Eric also provided the link for the Veterans Health and Wellness Foundation: <https://myvhwf.org/connection/> which has a tool to search for resources in your area.
 - VAMSA/Center for the Military and Veteran Family - Contacts: (1) Eric Johnson, Executive Director / Email
 - executive.director@vamsa.us; (2) Lei Ellingson, Deputy Director / Email deputy.director@vamsa.us; Phone 844-MIL-VETS
 - <https://myvhwf.org/connection/resource-search-tool/>
 - - We also helped fund a tool for access to mental health resources--nationally. You can actually book appointments through this site: <https://www.veterancheckin.org/s/>

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

- Commissioner Foxworth – In November he presented with VetWorks at Carver High School. The Chairman also attended. He also presented on the Eastern Shore. He also serves on the Howard County Veterans Commission.
- Commissioner Childs – AMVETS A. Leo Anderson Freestate Awards ceremony will be held the second week in April. The Awardee is not selected yet.
- Vice Chairman Moore gave an update on the new U. S. Senator and Congresspersons who have been elected to serve Maryland.
- Commissioner Macri gave remarks on Veterans Day at Partners in Care. She also shared the Silver Spring Town Initiative for Art as Therapy. Suggests that this initiative be presented at a future Commission meeting. There is a 50% shortage of mental health providers in the state of Maryland, so creating a path for Veterans to become Drug & Alcohol Counselors would help both the Veteran needing employment and the need for mental health providers.
- Commissioner Holcombe reported that Commissioner Thornton is well – he is just not able to participate virtually. He attended three Veterans Day events and presented the Governor's proclamation at each. Today is his 70th birthday.
- Commissioner Detmer – it is an honor to join for his first meeting as a Commissioner. Former Commissioner Robbie Hanson sends his greetings and reports that his last activity as a Commissioner was being the guest speaker at the Ocean Pines Veterans Day ceremony. Both then Commissioner Hanson and incoming Commissioner Detmer met with Governor Moore at American Legion Post 91 in Cambridge on Veterans Day.

Commissioner Detmer is also a Dorchester County Councilman. He also does VA casework for Congressman Harris.

- Commissioner Stem – the Vietnam Veteran Traveling Wall will be coming to New Windsor in Carroll County from the 9th – 13th of October and would like Secretary Woods to attend. She is organizing the speakers. Also reminded Commissioners of the Gilchrist Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans event on March 30th.
- Commissioner Smith thanked the presenters for today – they were very informative. He recently attended the reunion of the Ripcord Association. He also attended the Veterans Day ceremony at Crownsville Veterans Cemetery.
- Commissioner Bowers represents the 6th Congressional District and he tries to make it a point to talk to 100 Veterans he hasn't spoken to before, each quarter. The Hagerstown Aviation Museum is looking for a decommissioned A-10 aircraft. The A-10 was made by Fairchild Aircraft in Hagerstown.
- Commissioner Collins announced she was re-appointed and is officially back on the Commission representing the Fleet Reserve Association. The FRA organized the Annapolis Veterans Day ceremony and the Commandant of the Naval Academy was the guest speaker. On 11/12, FRA held a claims clinic at the Doubletree in Annapolis. Physicals were done on the spot in the VA mobile units. DAV is holding an awards ceremony on 3/22. There does not seem to be any legislation pending in the General Assembly for the proposed Women Veterans Memorial.
- On February 4, 2025, the Legislative Committee of the Joint Veterans Committee, in collaboration with the JVC Women Committee, will be hosting Operation Annapolis. The team will be going to the State House to advocate for bills on behalf of our veterans. The Joint Veterans Committee consists of AMVETS, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Catholic War Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, and the Marine Corps League. We are asking that all veterans join us at the State House to support us in this endeavor.
- Commissioner Schlesinger stated that there will be a ceremony honoring Erwin Burtnick on May 4th. Military.com included a photo of a Jewish Service member and negative comments were posted online. Military.com did pull down the negative comments. Militaryonesource.mil provides excellent information on funerals and military honors.
 - Commissioner Reuter said the sources offered were overbooked and did not provide military honors.
- Commissioner Hartman has heard significant positive feedback on the services offered by DVMF staff in Hagerstown and Frederick. Thank you to Phil Munley and his team. The American Legion and VFW in Frederick partnered for the Veterans Day ceremony he attended. He represented Secretary Woods and the Department at a ceremony honoring Samuel Neale who served in the War of 1812, but who was just granted Veteran status in 2024, because he was a person of color. Commissioner Hartman's VVA Chapter will make sure that Mr. Neale has a wreath on his grave for the holidays.
- Commissioner Reuter stated the Baltimore Point in Time Count was supposed to happen last weekend, but it was postponed due to weather. He had to use the Narcan he carries for an individual who overdosed last week. He has had trouble getting it replaced at the VA. He went to the Baltimore National Cemetery for Veterans Day and also attended the ceremony at the Black Soldiers Memorial in Baltimore.
- Chairman Tyler attended the VetWorks Junior ROTC ceremony. He also attended the NABVETS Congressional Gold Medal event. For Veterans Day he attended the

Montford Point Marines ceremony. He would like to establish the Commission visitation to the Veterans group at Jessup Correctional Institution. The next Commission meeting will be on April 15th at Reveille Grounds in Baltimore. Please notify him if you would like him to attend an event your organization is holding.

Vice Chairman Moore led the Benediction and Salute to the Flag.

Chairman Tyler called for a Motion to adjourn. Meeting was adjourned.