

Maryland Veterans Commission Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, April 22, 2021
On-line Meeting: Google Meet

Chairman Tyler called the meeting to order at 10:30 am.

Vice Chairman Thornton gave the invocation and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Chairman Tyler called for a moment of silence to remember POWs and MIAs.

The Chairman asked for a motion to accept the January Minutes. Motion was made by Commissioner Reuter, seconded and passed.

Chairman introduced **Guests:**

- Melissa Kelly, Senator Van Hollen's office
- Cynthia Cavalieri, Federal Executive Board
- Katie Kilby, Serving Together
- Marvella Gray and Jason Scott, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Baltimore Field office
- DAV State Commander Charles Clark
- Mr. Elmer "EC" Wallace, DAV, candidate for Commissioner
- Kim Callari & Todd Troester, Baltimore Station
- Rachele Belt & Julie Riggs, Serving Together
- Steven Schuh – will be joining the meeting later

MDVA:

- Secretary George Owings
- Denise Nooe, Staff to the Commission

Commissioners Attendance:

Attending:

Blair, Burtnick, Calvert, Collins, Fuentealba, Green, Hanson, Hartman, Holcombe, Killebrew, Kimball, Lane, Macri, Martel, Moore, Perry, Reuter, Seidel, Shiffrin, Smith, Stem, Stokes, Thornton, Tyler, Welsh

Absent:

Kirk, Rosas

Chairman Tyler called on Secretary Owings for MDVA report:

Secretary Owings:

- *Good Morning Commissioners. I hope you and your families are doing well*
- *Today, for the second time we are having an all virtual Commission meeting. I am glad that we are still able to continue our meetings, but I am sure we all agree that it will be good when we can meet in person again*
- *I will begin by giving you an update on the Department and then a short legislative update concerning legislation we followed during the 2021 session of the Maryland General Assembly*

Maryland Veterans Trust Fund

- *Since the current Fiscal Year began on July 1st, the Trust has already awarded more than \$185,000 in grants to Maryland Veterans*
- *As you would expect, applications to the Trust fund are up, but Mark Hendricks, the Trust Fund Administrator is having the reviews done quickly by the Review Committee. A completed application is usually reviewed within two weeks*
- *Unfortunately, many of the applications coming in are from veterans with income too high to qualify for the program. The income limit to receive a grant is 250% of the federal poverty level. An income example would be \$31,900 for a single veteran or \$65,500 for a family of four*

Charlotte Hall Veterans Home

- *As I reported at the previous meeting, applications and new admissions have resumed at Charlotte Hall, The census is still down though, so please help spread the word that Charlotte Hall is open and accepting new residents*
 - *While you know there were some cases of COVID in the home early in the pandemic, testing continues weekly and residents and staff continue to test negative and remain safe*
 - *Newly admitted residents are cared for in a separate unit for two weeks before joining the community of residents where they will be cared for long-term*
- *Charlotte Hall has received a number of very generous donations recently and I hope you are reading the MDVA newsletter, because that is the best way to stay on top of Department news*

- *The most recent donation of \$40,000 to benefit the residents came from the VFW Post in Pylesville, MD – because the Post is closing*
- *Another large donation came from the Sons of the American Legion Department of Maryland to provide an awning for the C-Wing Courtyard. The awning will protect the residents of the memory care unit when they go outside in the secure courtyard from sun and rain. The value of that donation was almost \$11,000*
- *Also in the Governor's Supplemental Budget was \$200,000 to purchase a dedicated ambulance for Charlotte Hall Veterans Home. The Mechanicsville Volunteer Rescue Squad serves Charlotte Hall, and the additional ambulance will help when the Rescue Squad has calls for both Charlotte Hall and the community*
- *Second Veterans Home*
 - *Sharon Murphy, Charlotte Hall Director is working on the application to the federal VA and discussions are taking place for site design and layout of the facility*

Service and Benefits Program

- *Two recent office relocations to note*
 - *The Montgomery County office has been relocated to the MVA Service office in Gaithersburg and we are very pleased to be at another MVA location. The Montgomery County MDVA location, which was previously on the campus of Montgomery College has been closed since the spring, because the college campus was closed.*
 - *The Hagerstown office has also been relocated to the MVA location in Hagerstown. This partnership with MVA has worked out very well*
 - *Only two Service offices remain closed to the public/visitors and those are:*
 - *Camp Springs – located in the Camp Springs Senior Activity Center*
 - *Laurel – located in the Howard County Multi-purpose Center*
 - *These locations are not open because those buildings are not state facilities and have not opened to the public as of yet. However the Benefits Specialist return calls and emails and are continuing to file claims on behalf of veterans*
 - *If you hear from veterans who need assistance, please refer them to the MDVA website which is updated immediately with any changes to hours and will give them the contact information to make an appointment*

- *I also want to update you about the backlog occurring with applications for Maryland property tax exemptions for 100% Service Connected Veterans*
 - *As I reported at the January meeting, MDVA was still receiving the applications, but the federal VA at the Regional office in Baltimore was not returning the completed form, due to telework/staffing shortages*
 - *I am happy to report that the backlog has now been resolved by the federal VA.*
- *Service Program Numbers for March*
 - *287 new claims received from veterans (highest month this Fiscal Year)*
 - *90% approval rating on the 249 claims received back from the federal VA*

Cemetery and Memorials Program

- *Burials are continuing as usual*
 - *Cemetery staff work in all weather conditions to ensure the proper burial of our veterans*
 - *I am proud of our staff who have continued with no interruption in service to veterans and their eligible family members*
 - *We follow the guidance from the Governor, so the current number of people inside the cemetery shelters, due to social distancing requirements is at 50% capacity*
 - *Memorial Day – following the Governor’s guidelines, the volunteer Committees who organize the ceremonies at the Cemeteries and Memorials have all been notified that they may proceed with an outside ceremony, but that social distancing and masks will be required.*
 - *As a reminder, the Cemetery & Memorials staff provide chairs, microphones and podiums, but veterans/community groups organize the ceremonies*
 - *At this point we do know there will not be a ceremony at Cheltenham Veterans Cemetery – due to the ongoing expansion construction*

Outreach & Advocacy Program

- *Dana and Denise are continuing to provide briefings and outreach virtually, and have some outside in-person outreach events planned for late April and May*

- *MDVA Outreach will be hosting a live Virtual event on May 26th on Facebook. All MDVA Directors, as well as both Outreach staff will attend. When a flier and link are ready, Denise will forward out to you*
- *Some of you, who also serve on County Commissions know that Dana has organized a Maryland Joint Veterans County Commissions Meeting – which meets quarterly to bring County Commissions together to share information and hear resource presentations*
- *MDVA (Dana) continues to work with the Maryland Department of Health (Joy Ashcraft) on the plan to prevent veteran suicide as required by SB 521 passed in 2019. The plan is due to the Governor and General Assembly on July 1st.*

Legislative Update

The Maryland General Assembly session ended last Monday, April 12th

There were two Departmental Bills this year:

- *SB 0353 Veterans Benefits and Benefits Appeals Services Disclosure Requirements – **BILL PASSED** would require those representing veterans in Appeals and charging fees for those services to disclose in writing that MDVA and other VSOs offer appeal assistance free of charge*
- *(HB1358/SB948 Name Change for MDVA Outreach Program to Office of Communications and Public Affairs **DID NOT PASS***

Other Legislation:

- *For Commissioner Killebrew – SB 0303 the Tuskegee Airman Commemoration Day bill **DID NOT PASS***
 - *I am very sorry to report this*
 - *You tried, I tried, Senator Patterson tried – I cannot explain the lack of action on this legislation by the Members of the General Assembly*
- *SB 0241 (Peters) and cross-filed as HB 0358 - an Income Tax Check-off for the Trust Fund again this year **DID NOT PASS***
- *HB604/SB180 – required MDVA to take possession of Unclaimed Veteran remains **PASSED** – but we were already accepting the remains of unclaimed veterans and interring the Veterans with Honor in Maryland State Cemeteries*

- *There were several versions of property tax exemptions for disabled veterans and Subtraction Modification for Military Retirement income – **NO VERSION PASSED***
- *HB/SB0007 Court Dog Therapy Program expanded Court Dog Services to Veterans Court **PASSED***
- *HB660/SB284 Refining the Definition of the Veteran Service Animal Program - specifically “service dog”, “support dog” and “therapy horse” **PASSED***
- *Denise sent you all a copy of the final list Katie prepared of the legislation we were watching. I don't want to go too deep into questions at this point, because you have a very full agenda today. Please read thru the information that was sent to you.*

Appointments Expiring in 2021

My final topic for today is that the term of Appointment for 15 of you will expire on June 30, 2021. That is more than half of the current Commission members.

- *Three of you have already told me you do not plan to seek reappointment:*
 - *Commissioner Elton Stokes, DAV*
 - *Commissioner Thomas Kimball, VFW*
 - *Commissioner Andy Martel, AMVETS*
- *I thank you the three of you for your dedication and commitment to this Commission and to the organizations your represent. When I called on you to attend a meeting or an event, you did not hesitate to represent the Commission and the Department. I thank you for your service*
 - *Commissioner Kimball said he appreciate his time on the Commission, but it is time for someone else to have an opportunity. If he is needed to help, please call on him, anytime.*
- *Also of note, Commissioner Stokes invited his DAV State Commander Charles Clark and the candidate for the DAV seat, Elmer (EC) Wallace to today's meeting. I welcome both of you gentleman Commissioner Stokes said it was an honor to have served on the Commission. The DAV Commander Charles Clark and Mr. EC Wallace are his guests today. Mr. Wallace will be applying for the DAV seat on the Commission*
 - *Commissioner Stokes said it was an honor to serve on the Commission, and he would always be available, if needed.*
- *The Secretary called on Commissioner Andy Martel*
 - *Who also said it was an honor to serve on the Commission.*
 - *He announced that Denise Nooe was the 2021 recipient of the AMVETS PNC A. Leo Anderson Freestate Award*

- *One Commissioner has already reapplied for Appointment and those of you who are also interested in remaining on the Commission, should apply soon. With so many terms expiring, the Governor's Appointments needs time to process the applications, and there have been applications for some of the seats from individuals not currently on the Commission*
- *I will remind you that the final decision on Appointment remains with the Governor and the Governor's Appointments office*
- *In closing, I would like to thank you for your work on the Commission and your work on behalf of the veterans of Maryland.*

The Chairman called on Denise Nooe for her report:

Denise:

- Roll call of Commissioners who could not be seen on-line or had not announced themselves when calling in was taken
- Thanked the three Commissioners who announced they would not be seeking reappointment. It has been an honor to work with them
- Reminder to file Ethics Report if you have not done so. It is due in April
- Filing for re-appointment is on-line through the Governor's Appointments office. Let me know if you have any questions or problems
- Suggested that since we were running ahead of schedule, we move Baltimore Station up on the Agenda

Commissioner Reuter introduced a motion to change the agenda, seconded and passed.

Chairman Tyler called on the presenters from Baltimore Station, Kim Callari & Todd Troester

Q& A following presentation:

- Commissioner Reuter asked what happened to the downsized veteran population, when the pandemic began. Response: Baltimore Station was only at 70% occupancy. They didn't kick anyone out. The population naturally

decreased as residents found other alternatives. After an outbreak in October, residents were moved offsite into a hotel in Baltimore

- Commissioner Lane asked if Paul Martin was still there. Response: Yes.
- Commissioner Kimball stated the VFW donated \$15,000 to Baltimore Station
- Chairman Tyler indicated he had visited Baltimore Station and was impressed with the operation
- Commissioner Perry asked if they were planning to expand to serve female veterans. Response: Do not meet guidelines/space requirements for housing females at the facility

Chairman Tyler called on Steve Schuh, for his presentation on the current COVID-19 situation in the state

Q&A following presentation:

- Secretary Owings thanked Mr. Schuh for the presentation and the work his office does
- Commissioner Reuter asked if the VA vaccine allotment is separate or if it is counted in the state totals for vaccinated individuals. Response: VA vaccines are separate but vaccinated individuals are entered into the state Immunet system

Chairman Tyler called on for the Blue Star Families Presentation

Q&A following presentation:

- Commissioner Reuter asked if they serve service members and families overseas. Response: Yes, the program is global
- Commissioner Seidel asked about licensing and certification for active duty service member spouses online. Response: Not sure, will look into it.
- Commissioner Macri noted that our military services do not reflect the diversity in our society and the military officer corps diversity needs to reflect the diversity of the enlisted ranks

Chairman Tyler called on Melissa Kelly from Senator Van Hollen's office for any report:
Melissa Kelly:

- Senator Van Hollen introduced the Major Richard Star Act, bipartisan legislation to provide combat-injured veterans with less than 20 years of military service their full benefits
- The Senator Co-sponsored the Veterans Burn Pits Exposure Recognition Act, a bill that addresses a barrier currently preventing many veterans from getting U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care and benefits for illnesses and diseases related to exposure to burn pits. The act would recognize and concede their exposure to toxic substances during deployed service.

Chairman Tyler called for Sub-Committee Reports

Homeless Veterans:

- Commissioner Reuter is the only member of the Homeless Veterans sub-committee, so there were no meetings, but he has been stopping veterans on the street and trying to encourage them to go to the hospital for the COVID vaccination
 - Motion was made and seconded to accept the report

Incarcerated Veterans

- Commissioner Collins reported that she has not been able to visit any facilities due to COVID restrictions, but issues continues at the Jessup Correctional facility with opioid misuse and lack of mental health support
- Commissioner Macri stated the Corrections health care provider does not provide mental health support and there are zero (0) mental health providers at Jessup
 - Motion was made and seconded to accept the report

Opioid Misuse

- Chairman called for a vote for the continuation of the Sub-Committee. Motion was made, seconded and passed.
- Chairman called for a vote for the Sub-Committee name change to “Combatting Substance Misuse Impacting Maryland’s Veterans and Their families”, Motion was made, seconded and passed

Report:

- Commissioner Seidel explained the name was changed to address the wider misuse of substances
- Getting the word out is most important
- VA does not have enough funding, also not enough local resources
- Difficulty capturing data
- Commissioner Reuter stated that he had been in a VA meeting and Chief of Staff Dr. Marshall said there was also a severe shortage of social workers

- Commissioner Macri added it is nearly impossible for community providers to be approved by VA to provide services to veterans. Cannot get VA to respond to inquiries
 - Motion was made, seconded and passed to accept report

Chairman Tyler called on Commissioners to provide updates:

- Commissioner Burtnick – on March 3rd the Jewish War Veterans celebrated the 100th anniversary. Ceremony was held at the War Memorial Building. Governor Hogan sent a Proclamation
- Commissioner Stokes – On May 8th the DAV will be holding a claims clinic at the Dundalk Vet Center
- Commissioner Reuter – Paralyzed Veterans of America will observe the 75th anniversary in May. A Proclamation has been requested from the Governor
- Commissioner Shiffrin – Military Officer Association of America has changed the name of the annual legislative event, no longer “Storming the Hill”, considering recent events at the Capitol building. Legislators were contacted by mail and email. Topics are: comprehensive review of toxic burn pit issue, TRICARE enhancement and the Basic Allowance
- Commissioner Martel – AMVETS Convention will be held on a smaller scale on June 5th. No guest speakers
- Commissioner Killebrew thanked Secretary Owings for his help with testimony for the Tuskegee Airmen legislation. We will try again next year
- Commissioner Moore – American Legion will have a modified convention in Ocean City in July. He provided an update on the Peace Cross restoration efforts – the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission estimates the repairs will cost \$1 million. To date, \$640,000 has been committed by numerous organizations and associations. Corporate support will be pursued
- Commissioner Collins has a \$500 check from the Fleet Reserve Association and needs to know where to send it. She is now certified by the federal VA as a Service officer. She also mentioned the FRA is a member of the Maryland Military Coalition
- Commissioner Hanson asked if the Eastern Shore Cemetery would have a Memorial Day ceremony. He also appreciates the work of the Commissioners who are leaving the Commission
- Commissioner Reuter asked what the problem/the holdup was for the Tuskegee Airmen legislation. Secretary Owings replied it could not be explained – there was no reason the Legislature didn’t pass it.
 - Commissioner Killebrew stated the Maryland Chapter was started by two of the original Tuskegee Airmen. He has a video to share and will send to Denise to send around to the Commissioners
- Chairman Tyler thanked the outgoing Commissioners

- Commissioner Welsh mentioned that she has had two recent events – She spoke during the Maryland General Assembly event for Women Veterans and also at Maryland’s Commitment to Veterans Women Veterans Conference
- Chairman Tyler reminded everyone the next Commission meeting would be held on July 20th, and Commissioners would be notified closer to the event if it would be virtual or in-person

Commissioner Reuter introduced a Motion to Adjourn. Seconded and passed.

Vice Chairman Thornton gave the Closing Prayer and led the Commission in the Salute to the flag

Meeting was adjourned at 1:00 pm