

Anne Arundel County Veterans Affairs Commission 2024 Annual Report



ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY, MARYLAND VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMISSION 2024 ANNUAL REPORT

Submitted on January 31, 2025



Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the Anne Arundel County Veterans Affairs Commission is to advocate and help to enhance the quality of life for veterans of military service and their families who live or work within Anne Arundel County by advising the County Executive and the County Council on the coordination and development of government policies, programs, services, and the allocation of resources for veterans and their families.

Members

John Dove Jr.	Commission Chair	Executive Committee Membership Committee
Ron Borro	Commission Vice-Chair	Executive Committee Membership Committee
Vicki Swingle	Commissioner	Executive Committee Education/Employment Committee
Curtis Jones	Commissioner	Outreach/Quality of Life Committee
Debra L. Luzietti-Myers	Commissioner	Legal/Legislative Committee Chair Membership Committee Nominating Committee Chair
George Matthews	Commissioner	Membership Committee Education/Employment Committee
Cathy McKinney	Commissioner	Outreach/Quality of Life Committee
Dave Myers	Commissioner	Legal/Legislation Committee
Kevin Peyatt	Commissioner	Executive Committee Outreach/Quality of Life Committee
Matthew Phillips	Commissioner	Legal/Legislative Committee
Dr. Krista Roberts	Commissioner	Assignments Pending
James Mastrodomenico	Commissioner	Outreach/Quality of Life Committee
Kathleen Schorr	Commissioner	Education/Employment Committee Membership Committee
Ethan Dietrich	Non-voting	Education/Employment Committee Legal/Legislation Committee

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Meetings

January 16, 2024

Guest: Yolanda Rayford from Blue Star Families reported on the Veteran History Project.

- Discussed each sub-committee sync and organize goals for CY2024.
- VA can no longer reject a claim for simply missing a CNP exam, which is a big change.
- Brooks Tucker update about Mr. Henson project.
- There are several bills out there that will enhance veterans lives in Maryland. As veterans, they should exercise their right to reach out to elected officials.
- Veteran and Military Families office should be added into the County Budget.
- Discussed authorization for commission of a Veteran and Military Families Office.

February 14, 2024

Guest: Juan Dominguez, Congressional Candidate provided a brief summary of his political platform issues. Mr. Dominguez lives in Severna Park, West Point Graduate served in Desert Storm and is running for office.

- Discussion on the Purple Star Schools program for AAC Schools in 2024. Ryan Vogtlin is the POC.
- Employment discussion to look into SkillBridge program and see if there is any way we can help businesses in the County to increase the use of this program.
- There are around 25 bills that are pending that impact veterans in the Maryland legislature.
- Discussed merging the Outreach Committee and the Quality of Life Committee.

March 13, 2024

Guest: Lindsay Kinslow, Founder of Optimal Business Solutions and is a former service member.

- John Dove attended the MMIC meeting.
- The Purple Star Schools: McArthur Middle, W. Meade Pre-elementary, and Meade HS.
- John met with Chad Jones at the Ft. Meade Alliance and Friends of Meade to discuss veterans needs.
- There is a Navy Community College in Quantico that will be relocated to the Naval Academy.
- Ft. Meade Massing of Colors 19 May. Ross Cohen attended in place of Secretary Woods.
- The L&L Committee is on draft 5 of letter to the County Executive to address the Crownsville facility.
- There is a lot of legislation in the state legislature dealing with military families.
- The Education and Employment committee would like to discuss the transferability of licensing.
- Hanna Breakstone works at ACDS and reviewed their website.
- The Mr. Henson project is going well. The ramp is complete and we have raised a little over \$80,000.
- Presentation from Final Salute.
- Akosua Osei at the Veterans Service Coordination Center. She did outreach for 80 veterans.

April 9, 2024

Visitors: Kunjal Jha, Akosua Osei, John Church

- Discussion of AACC Veterans Claims Clinic and the possibility of another one in Anne Arundel County.
- George Matthews gave an update on SkillsBridge and career transition.
- Legal and Legislative Committee Update.
- Discussed Purple Star Program and whether it should (or can) be expanded to children of veterans.
- Discussion of letter to the CE about establishing veterans space at Crownsville

May 8, 2024

Visitors in attendance: Hannah Breakstone, Denise Bourdeaux, James Kitchin, Dan Tootle, Akosua, Alex Adler

- Vicki Swingle volunteers for the Memorial Day Weekend event.
- Debra Luzietti-Myers gave an update on the Law and Legislative Committee.

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- Ron Borro gave an update on the Law and Legislative Committee's involvement with the budget process.

June 12, 2024

Visitors in attendance: Akosua Osei, James Kitchin, Dave Dragics, Dan Tootle

- John Dove announces that Ron Borro has accepted being the vice chair.
- Dave Dragics gives a summary of relevant legislation from the Maryland General Assembly's 2024 session.
- The commission discusses the possibility of taking action on the Predator Law.
- Kevin Peyatt provided updates on the work to provide resources to veterans.

July 10, 2024

- Discussed voting to recommend that the County Executive change the name of the Veterans Affairs Commission to include military families
- Discussion of Veterans Center/Crownsville/Gaps Analysis
- Dan Tootle said that a lot of this groundwork had already been done, and that recommendations were made.

August 14, 2024

- Commission recess

September 11, 2024

Visitors: Akosua Osei, Mavis Brown, Dana Burl, Hanna Breakstone, Bobbie Sullivan, Elisha Harig-Blaine

- Hannah Breakstone led the group in a discussion of needs in the veteran community. This discussion helps inform their consolidated strategic plan that guides their investments for the next 5 years.
- Akosua showed the quarterly veterans newsletter that the VSCC puts out and the Newsletter.
- The EngageArundel initiative was discussed as well as other events participated by the Commission.

October 9, 2024

Visitors: Joelle Ridgeway, Dan Tootle, Mavis Brown, Dana Burl, Hanna Breakstone, Elisha Harig-Blaine

- Continued discussion on the rehabilitation of Crownsville Hospital and Veteran use of the facility.
- The VSCC received 24 calls or emails for service in September and received an additional 19 calls for general resource coordination. 64% were looking for VA benefits assistance, 14% were pension related, 14% were housing related, and 7% were education related questions.
- Debbie Myers gave an update on the letter the commission sent to County Executive Pittman requesting support for changing the name of the commission to the "Anne Arundel Commission on Veterans and Military Families". The CE sent a letter back that was positive and endorsed the change.
- Ron Borro gave a brief update on the work being done to study how other counties set up their veterans work with the goal of being able to advocate for expanded services in Anne Arundel.
- Kevin Peyatt gave an update about the events and networking that the group did over the past month; includes POW/MIA Day, Walk Maryland Day and working with the VSCC on the veterans resource list.
- Discussion of someone to read the Proclamation at Crownsville Veterans Cemetery on Veterans Day.
- Dan Tootle discussed the Crownsville Memorial Park Master Plan, how a veterans mental health clinic fits into the plan. Also provided an update about a veterans memorial in Severna Park.
- Debbie Myers gave an overview of the vacancies the commission, the process to fill them, and that they have started working with the CE's Office to advertise the positions to generate applications.

November 13, 2024

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- Debra Luzietti-Myers gave an update about Bill 82-24 that raises the assessed value of homes that are eligible for retired veterans tax credit from \$500,000 to \$800,000.
- Ron Borro gave an update on how other counties set up their veterans services operations.
- Ron Borro also discussed wanting the commission to support the plan to get a Veterans clinic in as part of the Crownsville Memorial Park Master Plan.
- Ron Borro gave an update that he and Debra Luzietti-Myers have been working on draft language for code changes.
- Kevin Peyatt gave an update about the events and networking that the group did over the past month that includes Disability Day at the Severn Center, Veterans Day Event at Crownsville Veterans Cemetery, Fort Meade Vet Job Fair, and Mission Strong Summit).
- Hannah Breakstone shared that according to the US Interagency Council on Homelessness, that the number of veterans experiencing homelessness is at a historic low, since 2008.

December 11, 2024

Visitors: Akosua Osei, Hannah Breakstone, Dan Tootle

- Seven new applicants that will be interviewed by the Commission to fill identified vacancies.
- The Nominating Committee recommended Vicki Swingle and Kevin Peyatt to serve as part of the executive committee for a one-year commitment.
- VSCC Akosua Osei gave updates to include the total number of veterans who helped in November was 38. Charlotte Hall Veteran Home has a wishlist of items it would like people to donate for the holidays.
- The Legal and Legislation Committee was asked to contact Dave Dragics so he could attend the January meeting and discuss upcoming legislation for the state.
- James Kitchin mentioned that the budget town halls start on January 9th.
- Purple Star status briefing.
- Dan Tootle contacted the Arundel Department of Health regarding licensing for the behavioral health clinic to be established in Crownsville.
- John Dove also shared that a number of delegates are working on a bill regarding African American cemeteries and issues they have identified.

2024 Areas of Focus

Membership Committee. A critical part for the sustainability of the Commission is the activity of the Membership Committee. At the close of 2024, the Commission received seven applications and will interview for several open vacancies.

Legislative Committee led by Debra L. Luzietti-Myers continue to track Federal, State, and County Legislation.

- The Legislative committee prepared written testimony to support AA County Bill 82-24 recommending support/approval of the Bill.
- Members have been influential in crafting legislation to help the county's veterans. Our committee drafted Commission's letter to the County Executive recommending a change to the name and goals for the AA County Veterans Affairs Commission to include Active Duty Military members and their families to reflect changes at the Maryland State Department of Veterans and Military Family Affairs.
- Advocating for the creation of a Veteran and Military Family Office (VMFO) within AACO government structure and supported the creation of Veteran and Military Family Mental Health Center as part of the Crownsville Hospital Memorial Park planning process.

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Education and Employment Committee led by Kat Schorr continued to progress the Purple Star school and SkillsBridge program.

- Purple Star Program honors schools that go above and beyond to support military-connected students and their families.
- Supporting Transitioning Veterans. The Department of Defense SkillBridge program partners with counties across the country to develop internships in county government. The Anne Arundel County VAC could consider developing a direct partnership with the SkillBridge program.

Outreach Committee led by Kevin Peyatt represented the Commission by attending and/or speaking at various community events sponsored by veteran and military family organizations.

- Veterans Day Proclamation read by Matthew Phillips at MD Veterans Cemetery Crownsville.
- *Department of Aging and Disability Day* at the Severn center.
- *Gold Star Mothers of Maryland* event at Fort Smallwood "*Maryland Walk to Honor the Fallen*".
- Fort Meade *Veteran Resource Fair* and American Legion Post 175 Severna Park *Vet Resource* event.
- National POW/MIA Day, a Retreat ceremony was held at the Maryland WWII Memorial in Annapolis coordinated by Denise Robinson. Attendees included AA County Executive Stuart Pittman, several Commissioners, Delegates Shanka Henson and Mike Rogers, Beryl Downs, Post 304 Annapolis VFW, John Church, and Family members of unaccounted for Maryland service members Bill Purham (nephew of Lt. Vernon Monroe Moreland), Carol Bowers (niece Sgt. Charles Emory Zepp) and other relatives of the Zepp family. The number of Maryland unaccounted service members remains at 1275.
- Maryland DVMF Mission Strong symposium, *Strengthening Maryland's Military & Veteran Community*, a collaborative summit bringing together stakeholders, community partners, and key leaders to address critical issues impacting our military families, Veterans, and the communities that support them. The symposium kicked off with opening remarks from Dana Burl, Deputy Secretary for Maryland DVMF, followed by a fireside chat with Garrison Command Sergeant Major Moore and Secretary Woods moderated by Lindsay Livingston, DVMF Director of Communications, Outreach, and Advocacy. The symposium was attended by over 50 participants that focused on solution sessions pertaining to Military transitioning members, Spouses and Children.
- Association of the United States Army (AUSA). This annual three day event is held in DC with 650+ exhibitors that included many organizations that provide resources to military families and veterans.

Quality of Life Committee works with Veterans and communities to identify systemic issues and concerns that our Veterans are experiencing.

- Drafted a combined list of Veteran resources that include food, housing, health care, and employment to provide information available to our Veteran community across the state.
- The Commission supported the Robert Henson Support Project to improve the living conditions of Mr. Robert Henson, veteran and Annapolis resident. Robert Henson, 85, and his daughter Robin Henson, 43, live together in a small home and Social Security and public assistance are their only sources of income. Both require wheelchairs. The VAC worked with the County to ensure the Henson's were working with the right departments/offices in an effort to ensure they received the support needed. The VAC did monitor the progress at the Henson home and was pleased to see that the necessary updates to the Henson home were completed, making the home safe and wheel chair accessible.
- Commissioner Curtis Jones and VSCC Akosea Osei are certified through the VA and work with Veterans on filing claims as well as supporting Veteran needs at Veteran Service Centers.
- Commissioners supported the Governors Challenge to prevent suicide among service members, veterans, and their families by accessing Maryland's DVMF training and education portal to develop strategies to support this initiative.

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Crownsville Hospital. Dan Tootle, I-CDR, USN (Ret) continued to advocate for creating a Veterans & Family Center at the Crownsville Hospital Memorial Park in Anne Arundel County. This would be a centrally-located place of information, service, representation, and support for AA County veterans, military members and their families. The concept is similar in concept and operations to Veterans and Military Families offices in Howard, Montgomery and Prince George Counties. The effort is "in step" with Governor Moore and Maryland Department of Veterans and Military Families initiatives aimed at serving veterans and families upon completion of active military service. The VAC has spent a considerable amount of effort in working with leaders at the Crownsville Hospital Memorial Park and will continue to do so in 2025.

Considerations for 2025

Explore ways to improve interaction between the Commission and AACO government departments, offices and cost centers engaged in veteran/military family issues and veteran and military family service/support groups operating in AACO.

- Advising the County Executive. The Commission will endeavor to meet with the County Executive on a bi-annual basis to discuss upcoming events, legislation, and current issues impacting our veteran population. As well as increase communication and interaction with the County Council.
- Liaison with the Department of Aging and Disabilities to meet quarterly, and with other County departments to establish a veterans/military staff resource in appropriate departments.
- Continue support for creation of a Veteran and Military Family Mental Health Center as part of the Crownsville Hospital Memorial Park development.

Legislative Activities. The Commission would like to see these tax cuts continue for veterans, which includes increasing the exemption levels to much higher numbers. In May 2023, Governor Wes Moore signed the largest military tax cut for veterans in a generation and highlighted the administration's commitment to strengthening the military and honoring veterans in Maryland. H.B. 554/S.B. 553, Keep Our Heroes Home Act, increases the military retirement income tax exemption for veterans, spouses, or anyone receiving military pensions in Maryland. The exemption will be increased from \$5,000 to \$12,500 for individuals under the age of 55 and from \$15,000 to \$20,000 for individuals over the age of 55. Expected 2024 budget shortfall made it hard for the Governor to get military pay 100% exempted. States near Maryland provide better incentive for retirees by not taxing retirement pay as much and are pulling veterans to live in those states. 38 states totally exempt military pension income from state tax.

- Continue progress on providing support to the Office of Law to revise the County Code to reflect the addition of military families to the Commission's name and responsibilities. Work on updates to Bylaws to reflect changes to the County Code.

Participate in community and Veteran organization events to provide education on the Commission as well as network with other resource agencies.

Continue to advocate for creating a Veterans & Family Center at the Crownsville Hospital Memorial Park in Anne Arundel County.

Veterans Center. Town hall meetings continue in each of the seven districts offering an opportunity for the veteran community to endorse the VAC recommendation for a veterans and military family center. The VAC will dedicate additional resources to this effort throughout 2025. The VAC may also reach out to the Maryland National Guard Family Support Centers to see if there's any synergy with that group. Family

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Support Centers are located throughout the State of Maryland and are tasked with helping service members and their families from all branches of service.

Continue to work with the ACDS for Homeless Veterans.

Special Acknowledgements

¹ Farewell to Brooks Tucker and we appreciate your service to our Commission!

- Thank you to James Kitchin, current Veterans Affairs Liaison to the County Executive.
- Thank you for continued support from John Church, Dan Tootle, and Hannah Breakstone.
- Acknowledged support from the State Office of Veterans Affairs including Dana Burl, Phillip Munley, and Denise Nooe.



John Dove
AAC-VAC Chair