

Fairfax County Veterans and Military Families Commission
Meeting Minutes – Thursday, July 11, 2024, 6:00pm
Pennino Building, 2nd Floor Room 206

The meeting was called to order at 6:00 p.m.

Members in Attendance: Dr. Jennifer Drake Patrick; Meredith Ayala; Jamie Hurd; Yonas Wondwossen; Jamie Gaucher; Dr. Natalia Giscombe-Simons; Katrina Wayne; Vonzell Mattocks; Robert Magielnicki; Michael S. Donovan; Angela Howard; Penny Gross; Julie Shepard

Members Participating Remotely:

None

Absent: La Toya Sivells; Julie Austin; Kevin Gaddis; Gerald Krueger, Michael Halligan

Guest(s)/Staff: Fairfax County Board of Supervisor Chairman, Jeff McKay; Braddock District Supervisor, James Walkinshaw; Ashley Whitaker, Service Member, Veterans, and Families Regional Navigator (Region 2) Northern Virginia Regional Projects Office; Phillip Fleming, Program Manager, Community & Military Partnerships; Kelly Tubbs, DC VA Medical Center

Board of Supervisors Remarks

Fairfax County Neighborhood and Community Services Veterans Coordinator Chris Pulley introduced Chairman McKay and Braddock District Supervisor James Walkinshaw.

- Board of Supervisors Chairman Jeff McKay remarked that he hopes the Commission can be instrumental in addressing the gaps in services for our military community including childcare, spousal employment, and affordable housing.
- Braddock District Supervisor James Walkinshaw remarked that he is proud to have put forth the Board Item to establish the Veterans and Military Families Commission. He eagerly awaits any annual reports developed by the commission highlighting the issues facing the Fairfax County military community.

Commission By-laws Overview:

Chris Pulley (Veterans Coordinator) gave an overview of the commission by-laws with an opportunity for comments. No comments were heard from the commission members.

Commission Elections:

Chris Pulley called the election proceedings to order. The Office of Chairman was introduced first with a one candidate slate, Penny Gross. Nominations from the floor were requested three times with none put forth. Penny Gross addressed the Commission regarding her candidacy. Hearing no additional nominations, Chris Pulley asked for a motion to close the nominations and elect Penny Gross by acclamation. The motion to elect Penny Gross as the Chairwoman of the Veterans and Military Families Commission was made by Julie Shepard, seconded by Jamie Gaucher and passed with no objections.

Chairman Gross called the election of the office of Vice-Chair to order with a one candidate slate, Dr. La Toya Sivells. No additional nominations were made from the floor. The chair asked for and received a motion from Jamie Gaucher and second from Dr. Drake Patrick to close the nominations for the office of Vice Chair and elect Dr. La Toya Sivells. Vice-Chair Sivells was elected unanimously.

Chairman Gross called the election of the office of Secretary to order with no current nominations. The duties of the secretary were briefly outlined by the chairman prior to entertaining nominations from the floor. Julie Shepard was nominated with no additional nominations put forth. Chairman Gross asked for and received a motion from Robert Magielnicki and a second from Jamie Gaucher to close the nominations and elect Julie Shepard to the office of Secretary by acclamation. Secretary Shepard was elected unanimously.

Virginia Freedom of Information Act (VFOIA) Briefing and Remote Participation and All-Virtual Meeting Policy Adoption:

Chris Pulley gave a briefing on the Remote and All-Virtual policies, which must be voted on annually by the Commission. Chairman Gross drove a brief discussion highlighting the policy of keeping your camera on during virtual meetings and that back-to-back virtual meetings are prohibited. Patrica Arriaza mentioned that the chat function during virtual meetings must be disabled, and all Commission business must be available to the public. Additionally, all requests for remote participation must be submitted in writing to the Chair and staff person. Requests must include the reason why the member needs to participate remotely and said reason will be recorded in the meeting minutes in accordance with the Remote Participation Policy.

Vonzell Mattocks received clarification on whether an alternate can attend the meeting if a member is unable to participate. Chairman Gross indicated that an alternate can attend but can only observe, take notes, and receive clarification on behalf of the seated member. The motion to adopt the Remote Participation Policy was made by Yonas Wondwossen and seconded by Jamie Gaucher. The policy was adopted unanimously. The motion to adopt the All-Virtual Meeting Policy was made by Jamie Gaucher and seconded by Dr. Drake Patrick. The policy was adopted unanimously.

Remarks by the Chair:

- Chairman Gross asked Vonzell Mattocks if it would be possible to distribute copies of the Northern Virginia Regional Commission's brochure to commission members. If the brochure is available in a digital format, she asked that it be forwarded to Chris Pulley for distribution to members.
- Chairman Gross highlighted topics which the Commission should seek more information on:
 - the insufficient base housing allotment,
 - the skills and talents that veterans possess and how to keep those skills and talents in Fairfax County
 - spousal employment barriers and opportunities for both men and women such as certifications. Julie Shepard mentioned that there are local, regional, and federal groups doing that work such as Hiring Our Heros.

- childcare barriers and opportunities affecting the military community.

Chairman Gross also shared that the Commission needs to discuss outreach strategies and potential partnerships with existing organizations such as Blue Star Families to ensure that work is not duplicated and there is cohesion in the county's and Commission's efforts. She stated that the Commission's open comment period may be valuable to hearing about issues from the military community. Chairman Gross encouraged the Commission to include diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in Commission discussions and thought processes.

VMFC Member Sharing

- Julie Shepard discussed her work with spousal employment and military children. She will be attending the Military Child Education Coalition Conference in late July. She indicated that she is happy to help with outreach in her community group and to share connections around potential outreach partners. She shared information about the General Assembly work specifically around disabled veterans, invisible injuries and their impact on the family. She also discussed outreach initiatives such as Blue Star Welcome Week and her desire for Fairfax County to be welcoming to military families, keeping a "boots on the ground" mentality when helping families.
 - Chairman Gross mentioned that the Commission needs to get the Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) involved.
- Jamie Hurd discussed her work as a clinician with justice involved veterans and that not all veterans are VA eligible for resources. This creates a huge barrier for issues such as housing and financial assistance. She indicated that it is difficult to address mental health issues without foundational resources.
- Jamie Gaucher outlined that economic development is about dignity. He is interested in bringing a lens around economic mobility as it relates to the military family and ensuring that the county is utilizing the veteran skills and talents to enhance economic mobility for both active-duty members and transitioning service members. He shared that focusing on just Ft. Belvoir is difficult because of the scale.
 - Chairman Gross suggested we investigate how to engage personnel who are finishing out their careers at installations such as the Pentagon because they are highly skilled and could remain in Fairfax County to enhance economic mobility.
- Vonzell Mattocks outlined the importance of vetting and connecting county/community resources. It is important to outline how to share information with Chris Pulley so that he can best assist the community in connecting to resources – sharing information via a website is good but a "warm handoff" is always best. The Commission could be a strong advocate for vetted information for the people it wants to help.
 - Chairman Gross clarified that the Veterans and Military Families Commission is not a mirror image of the Northern Virginian Regional Commission. The NVRC is a broader community military and federal body focused on all of Northern Virginia. The VMFC should stay focused on Fairfax County.
- Meredith Ayala mentioned Fairfax County Public Schools military connected students are affected by all the challenges previously mentioned and that there are 14,000 military

connected students enrolled in FCPS. Of the 14,000, 1/3rd of the students are either coming or going. FCPS is committed to becoming a Purple Star District where every school is a military friendly school. They are working on having a peer-led transition team for every school.

- Chairman Gross inquired as to whether the schools are doing better with applying for federal funds. She suggested future discussion with the Commission around ensuring the funds get applied for because of the impact on revenue.
- Dr. Jennifer Drake Patrick discussed her work in the College of Education and Human Development with FCPS. They are working to identify where and how they can lend expertise in the community. She has engaged in conversation with Chris Pulley about a survey for veterans. She also supports FCPS with hosting a student ambassador convening where students spend the day learning how to support their military peers. She is hoping to grow the program with community partners. Her office is exploring how GMU can ensure the graduating students have the skills and knowledge to assist with helping military families. Internships with veterans and families are important for the students to gain expertise with serving the military.
 - Chairman Gross asked how many military-connected college students are at Mason. Dr. Drake Patrick outlined that 10% of the student body indicates they are military connected.
- Michael Donovan mentioned that the Commission needs to be strategic and disciplined around the issues that it tackles. The Commission should address and tackle a few items to present to the Board of Supervisors and move on to the next batch of issues.
- Dr. Natalia Giscombe-Simons mentioned the need to resist lumping all veterans together. Often the women and men have a different set of issues. Transitioning from the military into the workforce is challenging with translating military experience into civilian language. Often, civilians are unfamiliar with the duties military personnel perform. Civilians feeling threatened by military experience is an issue. As a veteran working in the public sector, she has been told “this is not the military.” She has a desire to figure out how the Health Department can better serve the military community. There needs to be a *needs assessment* around the population of the military community. When an initiative and campaign is developed, the Health Department doesn’t make assumptions around what the community needs.
 - Chairman Gross mentioned that “civilianizing” the resume can be difficult. She may need to speak with contacts in Human Resources. Chris Pulley was directed to place the survey as an agenda item for the next meeting. Also, Julie Shepard was asked to share the executive summary and the shorter version of the Blue Star Families Survey. Vonzell Mattocks was asked to pull the surveys for NVRC to see if the Commission can pull any information to use in its work.
- Angela Howard mentioned spousal employment is extremely important and she has been impacted by childcare issues. She faced barriers with working and being a part of the community specifically around Permanent Change of Station (PCSing). Her family has faced barriers with hidden issues simply to get to the 20-year retirement age. Her family resides on post at Ft. Belvoir and has faced hardships with living quarters. A sense of security and community is extremely important.

- Katrina Wayne outlined some of her data on homeless veterans and stated that the Office to Prevent and End Homelessness is making progress in reducing homelessness. The average vet assisted by OPEH is 60-years old and needs supportive services such as the VA. She is discovering new homeless folks that are trending older. Folks are living in their cars and surviving but are not connected to services. The county has vouchers for housing and is focused on prevention and connecting resources early in the process.
 - Chairman Gross asked that Ms. Wayne pull together some of the homeless data for presentation at the next meeting.
 - Dr. Giscombe-Simons asked what kind of housing is being made available for the vets. Ms. Wayne mentioned that Fairfax County does not have transitional housing. Group homes are available but in limited quantity and accessibility is an issue (such as ADA).
- Yonas Wondwossen mentioned that his challenge is understanding the issues that exist and how can Family Services help in making childcare accessible. Family Services has performed a lot of outreach to know how to tether their services and how to address challenges and fix their processes to eliminate those challenges to properly offer services.
- Robert Magielnicki mentioned that every issue raised is important. There are a lot of services out there that people may not know about or appreciate. He is in agreement that a needs assessment is necessary. He wondered if current information is not getting out and mentioned the significant upswing in veteran suicides. He also touched on additional services that are not being presently addressed. The Commission needs to triage the issues that have been raised at tonight's meeting and find out how it can improve or add to the work already being done.
- Chairman Gross indicated that she will work with Chris Pulley on prioritization of issues (bucket list) and that a work plan needs to be developed for future meetings.
- Chairman Gross directed Chris Pulley to pull together the Commission contact list to distribute to members.
- Chairman Gross asked Chris Pulley to check on the use of potential microphones to be in the room for the next in-person meeting.
- Chairman Gross asked that if any members have information on upcoming events to please send the information to Chris Pulley for distribution and members can select which events they can support.

Jamie Gaucher motioned to adjourn at 8:21. The motion was seconded by Dr. Drake Patrick and was carried without objection.