



**MINUTES
SPECIAL COMMISSION FOR SAFE COMMUNITIES - REGULAR SESSION
THURSDAY, May 22, 2025, 1:00 PM.**

The Special Commission for Safe Communities convened in regular session in the Government Center Boardroom at 1:00 PM, on May 22, 2025. Chairperson Denton called the meeting to order.

Roll Call

Attendee Name	Title	Status
Scott Denton	Commissioner	Present
Cathy Lust	Commissioner	Present
Elizabeth German	Commissioner	Present
Ryan Bertrand	Commissioner	Present
Robert Harris	Commissioner	Present
Kaitlyn Selman	Commissioner	Absent
Kevin Crutcher	Commissioner	Absent
Timothy Harris	Commissioner	Absent
Cierra Aiden	Commissioner	Absent

Staff Advisors Present:

Aaron Veerman, Staff Liaison

Public Comment

No public comment was received via email or in person.

Approval of Minutes

The following item was presented:

Item 4.A. Consideration and action to approve the Minutes of the April 24, 2025, Regular Special Commission for Safe Communities Meeting.

Commissioner Bertrand made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Lust, to approve the Item as presented.

Chairperson Denton directed the Staff Liaison to call roll:

AYES: Lust; German; Bertrand; R. Harris

Motion carried.

Regular Agenda

The following item was presented:

Item 5.A. Presentation and discussion by the Bloomington Police Department on the current status of gun violence in the Bloomington-Normal area.

Staff Liaison Veerman shared there was one gun shooting incident in Bloomington since the last commission meeting. On May 1, 2025, a dispute over a parking space resulted in a

shot fired at an inanimate object, and the bullet ricocheted off the object and grazed a person. The shooter was arrested.

Item 5.B. Presentation and discussion by Del Saam regarding Veteran suicides.

Del Saam served 27 years in the United States (US) Army and is currently the Program Coordinator for the McLean County Veterans Treatment Court (VTC). VTC is designed to help adult veteran offenders who have been convicted of non-violent offenses and have been diagnosed with a serious mental illness or substance abuse. It is similar in operation to drug court. It is held weekly on Tuesdays at the McLean County Courthouse. Approximately 10% of the cases in VTC are gun related.

Currently, there are 29 veterans in the program. Many of the program participants are combat veterans who served during the Korean War, Vietnam War, and current conflicts. In the program's history, the age range of participants has been 21-89 years old. To be admitted into the VTC program, a veteran participates in two assessments to determine the risk of reoffending. They work with Veterans Affairs (VA) on treatment plans that vary by participant and are 18-24 months in length. The treatment plans are challenging and require commitment and dedication from the offenders. Treatment plans include regular court appearances, passing random testing for drugs and alcohol, receiving substance abuse counseling, cognitive behavior therapies, and more. If offenders successfully complete the treatment plan, the charges against them are dropped by the court. VTC has successfully graduated 90% of its participants.

Military veterans with trauma are more likely to carry firearms and the firearms are more likely to be high caliber. They are comfortable with them and often feel "naked" without their military uniforms and armor. Additionally, during their military training, veterans learned breathing techniques to use while shooting, which is calming for them. Veterans are most likely to turn their guns over to one of their buddies than to a stranger, even if the stranger is a police officer. Military medics can be exposed to more trauma during deployment than infantrymen. Veterans who were in the Special Forces are given a shot after they leave the theater to help temper their fight or flight response upon returning to a non-war environment.

For veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), some of the risk factors leading to an increase in suicide are:

- pain in their joints from activities during deployment
- substance abuse (usually alcohol)
- poor sleep issues (fractured sleep/not enough sleep)
- Symptoms related to Traumatic Brain Injuries, such as headaches, confusion, memory loss, tinnitus, vision issues and more
- An increase in suicidal ideations added to easy access to guns

In the United States, approximately 4,700 veterans commit suicide every year. That averages to 17 veterans dying each day by their own hands. In 2024, McLean County had zero suicides or overdoses by veterans.

Veterans are typically very independent and hate asking for help from anyone. An important factor for veterans successfully integrating back into civilian life is connection, support and community. That support can come from their formal family or their veteran/military family. Veterans with a supportive community are less likely to have problems. The goal of veterans' programs like VTC is to help give veterans stability.

Besides PTSD and potentially a lack of support, two big challenges facing veterans are adequate medical care and housing. In Bloomington, the Salvation Army and Home Sweet Home Ministries may be able to help homeless veterans with separate housing specifically for veterans.

Other communities, such as Atlanta, IL and Quincy, IL, have developed tiny home programs for veterans. Each tiny home cost approximately \$50,000 to build and furnish, and if a veteran maintains their tiny home for 10 years, the home becomes theirs. One sticking point for tiny home communities like these is that current building standards require new homes to have EV chargers added to the homes. Most veterans do not need an EV charger and adding them to tiny homes drastically increases the cost of building the homes.

Once a veteran's housing has been sorted and they have a mailing address, they can apply for Medicaid, get prescription medications and have regular access to medical care. Mr. Saam mentioned there are four hospitals in the US that offer free medical care for veterans. One of those hospitals is Rush Memorial in Chicago, IL. The other three are UCLA Health Center in California, Emory Healthcare in Atlanta, GA, and Massachusetts General Hospital.

Veterans Treatment Court is held every Tuesday in Room 4C of the McLean County Courthouse.

Item 5.B. Presentation and discussion by Art Rodriguez regarding Veteran suicides / crisis prevention.

Art Rodriguez served in the US Army during the Cold War. Currently, he is on the Board of America's Gold Star Families, chairs the McLean County Veteran's Assistance Commission and the Veteran's Committee for the Bloomington Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and is a lobbyist for the Illinois AMVETS, among other roles.

Mr. Rodriguez stressed that when veterans return home from deployment, there is no "normal" anymore. Their families have had experiences their veteran hasn't been with them for, music can change, fashion can change, societal expectations can change, and more. The veteran needs to relearn how to inhabit the outside world again. The sooner a veteran gets mental health help, the faster you will see better results for that veteran. Additionally, for families with veterans who are experiencing domestic violence issues, there is a program called Strength at Home that can be beneficial.

He works with a multitude of community organizations to create partnerships across the county to assist military veterans. He advocates for more education and public awareness of what resources are available for veterans. He actively works toward building community for veterans and educating them on what services and organizations exist for them. He asked if Bloomington is spreading the word about veterans' services at every opportunity, and mentioned placing information in water bills and property tax communications as examples of how different departments in the city could assist in that effort.

Mr. Saam mentioned veterans being comfortable with weapons. Mr. Rodriguez added that for veterans, they view their gun as their partner. Mr. Rodriguez advocates for locks on gun safes and hands them out for free. If a veteran is having suicidal ideations, the simple delay of having to open a lock to get to his/her guns can make a difference in whether they follow through with suicide. Experience has shown that if you can keep someone with suicidal ideations from the means with which to kill themselves for 15-20 minutes, the person probably will not go through with it.

Mr. Rodriguez mentioned focusing more responsibility on gun owners if someone gains access to their gun and hurts someone with it. He said if he could recommend only one thing for the commission to recommend to city council as an action item, it would be to require gun safety education and training.

He brought forward the information that people who are in the military reserves often do not get military healthcare. To qualify for military healthcare, someone in the reserves must serve on active duty for a minimum of 181 days per deployment. Military reserve deployments are typically 179 days.

One impact to veterans in receiving needed treatment is that the VA has a big shortage of nurses. Another impact on veterans is it can take days, weeks or months for a veteran to get an appointment with the VA. In terms of therapy, a veteran with PTSD and in crisis needs help immediately. To that end, therapy via Artificial Intelligence (AI) can be helpful for veterans. One of the benefits of AI therapy for veterans is that it is available on-the-spot so there is no lengthy wait between a veteran requesting a therapy appointment and seeing someone in person. It can be used frequently and for longer appointments, so veterans are not relegated to one hour once a month or so; they can talk to an AI in therapy for hours if needed. Additionally, veterans sometimes are more comfortable and willing to tell AI something in therapy that they would be afraid to tell another person.

Mr. Rodriguez also brought up "gateway therapy" for veterans, such as equine therapy, art therapy and outdoors therapy like fishing. He specifically mentioned a group called Outdoor Veterans, which was founded by a Bloomington Police Officer. Being active with a group of veteran buddies while being hands on with an activity can be therapeutic for a veteran.

Service dogs can also be of great benefit for a veteran, particularly a veteran with PTSD. Service dogs can be trained to help a person who has PTSD. These dogs are trained to recognize when their veteran is experiencing agitation and can interrupt the symptoms and distract the veteran. They can conduct room searches for a veteran when they arrive home, to help the veteran feel more secure, and they can block people from getting too close to their veteran by moving to stand between the veteran and another person. They can retrieve medications and many other tasks that assist their veteran.

Item 5.D. Presentation and discussion by Giselle Lee, regarding her perspective on violence in the community.

Ms. Lee was unable to attend the meeting.

New Business and Commission Member Comments

Commissioner Bertrand emailed his draft out. He broke it into three sections:

- Data
- Patterns
- Recommendations

Commissioner Denton stated the commission needs to make concrete recommendations and he requested for each commissioner to develop two recommendations to give at the June meeting.

Commissioner Lust spoke with Jennifer Gant, Director of the Victim Witness Division in the McLean County State's Attorney Office.

Adjournment

Commissioner Bertrand made a motion, seconded by Commissioner Lust, to adjourn.

Motion carried (viva voce).

The Meeting Adjourned at 3:05 PM.

CITY OF BLOOMINGTON

ATTEST



Scott Denton, Chairperson



Aaron Veerman, Staff Liaison