



## Greetings of the Season!

from MEAAG Chair, Debbie Trent

The Montgomery County, Maryland, Middle Eastern American Advisory Group extends greetings of the 2021 holiday season to all. It is a time of reflection, gratitude, hope, and community. In our fourth e.newsletter, MEAAG (ME-ag) shares the upcoming and previous months' activities of our 17 volunteer members, two interns, and Middle Eastern Liaison. MEAAG was established in 2008 by the Montgomery County Office of Community Partnerships to better connect the linguistically and culturally diverse Middle Eastern American communities with county government and to encourage greater participation of Middle Eastern Americans in local, economic, civic, and cultural life. We are a non-political, non-religious, welcoming, intergenerational group. Our monthly public meetings feature guest speakers and discussions of our communities' interests. We implement demand-driven projects to facilitate connections with county service providers, businesses, and ongoing nonprofit projects. Our members engage with and advocate for our community, representing our shared interests with the County Executive (who appoints each advisory group member) and other elected officials. MEAAG represents one of the smaller heritage population groups in MoCo, but we make up for that geographically, stretching from Morocco to Pakistan and Turkey to Sudan. Visit us on Facebook and YouTube to check out our latest news.



**Members:** Sara Abdel (Egypt), Lina Abdul Wahid (Iraq), Karim Chaibi (Tunisia), Amjad Chaudhry (Pakistan), Sahar Fahmy (Egypt), Sughra Hussainy (Afghanistan), Mumtaz Jahan (Pakistan), Farideh Jahanbin (Iran), Karen Leggett Abouraya (Egypt), Zaffer Mirza (Pakistan), Shahrzad Nakhostin (Iran), Subhi Rawi (Iraq), Mahasty Sharifi (Iran), Sam Shihadeh (Palestine), Gihan Tammam (Egypt), Debbie Trent (Lebanon), Akhtar Zubairi (Pakistan). **Interns:** Sarah Edwan (Palestine), Anahita Javadi (Iran). **Middle Eastern Liaison:** Arwa ElBoraei.

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### *A Message From Us All*

In this holiday season, we are grateful that the county's Covid-19 vaccination rate continues to rise and that booster shots are now available for those five years and older. Keep updated [here](#) and enjoy



safe gatherings with family and friends. MEAAG has continued to meet virtually, launching our Voter Education Initiative outdoors on November 7th and holding other indoor-outdoor events (see pages 2-3). In addition to upcoming events, listed below, in January, we are looking at a Martin Luther King, Jr. service project tied to the Voter Education Initiative. Come March, we will hold a hybrid celebration of the annual Middle Eastern American Heritage Month, featuring a wedding theme! Our members need help exhibiting wedding customs in the countries we represent, from Morocco to Pakistan and Turkey to Sudan. If you want to join in the preparations, or if you run a wedding-related business, please [contact our Middle Eastern Liaison](#).

Standing for local-to-global, intercultural peace and understanding,

The Middle Eastern American Advisory Group

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### Upcoming Events

November 27, 2-3:30 pm, [The Muslim Community Center Seniors Committee](#) presents "The Problem with Afghanistan, Collision of Empires," by guest speaker Barry O'Connell, Senior Fellow, Academy of Oriental Rugs and former U.S. Government contractor. Contact 301.384.3454 or [zmirza44@gmail.com](mailto:zmirza44@gmail.com) for the Zoom link and more information.

December 2, 1:45 pm, the Montgomery County Board of Education will discuss and take action on the final 2022-2023 school calendar. The day's meeting agenda is [here](#). The agenda will include the setting of the Eid holiday in April 2022 and in 2023. MEAAG will be submitting to the BOE a letter of support for excused absence on the Eid holiday and others in the community are encouraged to as well. Community members may also wish to weigh in on a posting of the April, 2022 Arab American Heritage Month on this year's calendar and in 2023.

December 15, 5 pm-6:30 pm is the next monthly MEAAG meeting. MEAAG will provide updates from the Office of Community Partnerships and community news and updates on MEAAG's ongoing and upcoming activities, including the Voter Education Initiative, MEAAG's Heritage Month in March and MEAAG's e.newsletter. MEAAG will dedicate most of this meeting to planning for the heritage month celebration. For more information about the meeting, please contact the OCP [Middle Eastern Liaison](#) or please click this [link](#) to register to receive the Zoom link.

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### Recent Events

**Voter Education Initiative Potluck.** *"The vote is precious. It is the most powerful nonviolent tool we have in a democratic society. And we have to use it"* – Former Rep. John R. Lewis. In October, 2021, MEAAG launched its Voter Education Initiative (VEI), which was designed by MEAAG member, Ms. Sahar Fahmy. On November 7<sup>th</sup>, in collaboration with the Montgomery County Board of Elections, MEAAG organized a successful potluck and community conversation about the VEI. During this event,

MEAAG helped to educate our community about the importance of voting by connecting different communities with Montgomery County voting resources and facilities to help residents learn more about voting as a civic responsibility. Participants were also provided information about accessing resources for learning about ballot initiatives and all candidates running for public office as well as getting to the polls to exercise the right to vote. MEAAG thanks the Board of Elections team who participated in this VEI event, especially Dr. Gilberto Zelaya, Community Engagement and Public Information Officer, who briefed attendees about the Board's voting programs and provided an opportunity for everyone to ask questions while they enjoyed many home-cooked and locally purchased Middle Eastern dishes. A video recording of the event will be available on [MEAAG's YouTube Channel](#) by the end of November. Special thanks to Ms. Shahrzad Nakhostin, one of MEAAG's members, for producing the video.



**MEAAG's November Monthly Meeting.** On November 17, MEAAG convened its monthly public meeting. The Middle Eastern Liaison provided updates about OCP activities, MEAAG members provided updates about previous and upcoming activities, and the guest speaker, Ms. Tracy Rezvani, Administrator of the Office of Consumer Protection, presented the role and services offered by the "other OCP" and tips on how consumers can protect themselves from scams. For more information about the monthly meeting, please contact the OCP's [Middle Eastern Liaison](#). To receive a copy of the presentation, please send an email to: [consumer@montgomerycountymd.gov](mailto:consumer@montgomerycountymd.gov).



**The Day of Dignity.** The Islamic Center of Maryland (ICM) was among the 29 locations in the U.S. that partnered with Islamic Relief USA (IRUSA) to host The [Day of Dignity](#) on November 21. The Day creates an opportunity for caring individuals from diverse communities to provide services to their neighbors in need. Entertainment was also on offer. With facilitation by long-time MEAAG member Ms. Mumtaz Jahan, the VEI lead, Sahar Fahmy, and VEI team, MEAAG organized two activities during the Day of Dignity.



Diane Hibino (LWV), Sahar Fahmy, Gihan Tammam, Mumtaz Jahan, Officer Sherif Almigabbar

The first was MEAAG's *New Jackets 4 Kids Drive*, designed and led by MEAAG's member Ms. Gihan Tammam. During the Day of Dignity, 112 brand new coats were distributed for kids-in-need. Thanks to MEAAG and wider community members who donated so many comfy winter jackets. ...



Left: Diane Hibino (LWV) at the VEI resource table



Right: Operation New Jackets 4 Kids

The second activity on the Day of Dignity was in collaboration with the League of Women Voters of Montgomery County (LWV). LWV distributed educational flyers encouraging people to vote. MEAAG distributed approximately 200 face masks and many MEAAG flyers. The partners were grateful to the ICM for the opportunity to interact with the diverse community members. MEAAG looks forward to implementing more projects with ICM and LWV.

**Thanksgiving Voter Education Initiative event.** On November 23, MEAAG held the third VEI activity. The event took place during the Interfaith Thanksgiving dinner convened by the Colesville Community of Congregations and hosted by the Baitur Rehman Mosque. In partnership with MEAAG, the Board of Elections team participated in the event to help educate our community voters on their rights and duties. Thanks to the following, from left to right in the photo: long-time MEAAG member Dr. Amjad Chaudhry, Board of Elections' Dr. Gilberto Zelaya and Mr. Greg Humes, and VEI team leader Ms. Sahar Fahmy, for their efforts. MEAAG again is grateful to the Board of Elections for providing the opportunity to interact with our diverse community members. MEAAG looks forward to implementing more activities with the Board of Elections. For more information about the VEI, please contact [Ms. Sahar Fahmy](#).





## Voter Education Initiative

### September 2021-June 2022



MEAAG, of the Office of Community Partnerships (OCP), is partnering with Montgomery County Board of Elections (MCBE) and a number of community-based organizations on a nine-month *Voter Education Initiative*.

**Goal:** Strengthen local communities' knowledge and skills about voting procedures and processes to enable citizens in making informed decisions about electing their official representatives.

**Activities:** MEAAG, with MCBE, educational institutions, and relevant non-for-profit organizations, including those working with marginalized and under-represented groups, is implementing the following activities:

1. Launch a digital outreach educational campaign titled "Every Vote Counts" to disseminate information about voter registration, voting timetable, voting venues, and other related matters, and encourage community members to vote.
2. Disseminate MCBE flyers widely.
3. Organize a number of voter education virtual webinar sessions.

The initiative is intended to support voter administration services of MCBE, including recruitment of volunteers to facilitate access to the polls. Volunteers will assist with transportation, babysitting for single moms when they go to vote, and other efforts to make voting easier for all. The Maryland Board of Elections will be adding two early voting sites in the county, and MEAAG will place special emphasis on preparing especially newly registered women voters to prepare and submit their ballots in 2022. If you are interested in participating in or receiving voter education information about this democracy-building effort, please email Arwa ElBoraei, OCP Middle Eastern Liaison.



## Membership & Internship Information

Adults interested in exploring membership in MEAAG, and middle and high school students interested in earning Student Service Learning credits through internship, should visit the Montgomery County Volunteer Center.

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**A Member's Reflection ~ Mr. Karim Chaibi**

Each of our stories starts somewhere. Mine was in Tunisia, a small North African country flanked by Libya and Algeria. When I made it to the U.S. in 1991, I knew I had to belong to something big. No one in his right mind would try to place Tunisia on a map. My journey continued, getting lost on the map, until two years ago when I was given the chance to join MEAAG. It wasn't a group per se or an organization, it was an embrace of warmth.

MEAAG stretched its arms not just to hug me but to introduce me to the group that became in no time my new family. It was a Middle East that stretches from Morocco to Afghanistan, with arms extended south to eastern and western North Africa and north to Turkey and Iran.



MEAAG was not only a group of friends but an opportunity to redraw the borders of my identity. Growing up, the expanse of my identity never went further than Arabic as a language and Islam as a religion. Yet, once I joined MEAAG, my world took a turn like a free eagle.

Yes, the Middle East, need not feel claustrophobic, for the arms of MEAAG are a breath of vastness in a world of atrophy.

I have within my short life with MEAAG experienced two events that were and still are meaningful, yet playful and cheerful examples of how one can experience life in this group.



Oil on canvas~24x30~Roots~November 2021

I participated in a group exhibition with fellow MEAAG'ers and other local artists. In general, he who paints sees colors, and so I was blessed to share my colors with my co-MEAAG'ers and cherish the beauty of theirs. Oh boy! The promiscuity of colors was

in itself a welcoming handshake. Exhibiting my work next to an Iraqi and an Afghani and a Pakistani was an answer to a colorful Middle East without borders or passports. Colors were our *laissez passer*.

Then, the icing on the cake came when the pandemic eased enough to meet outdoors. I was reminded of God's command to Moses to remove his shoes in his presence. In fact, MEAAG's replica was "Bring a dish from your country, for you are in the world where all flavors and spices originated."

Indeed, we met, shared colors, then dishes and more than anything else a loving, friendly identity.

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**Member Snapshot**

Mr. Zaffer Mirza is a Pakistani Muslim American who came to America almost 50 years ago and has lived in Montgomery County for more than three decades. Zaffer's professional career in pharmaceutical sales and marketing for approximately 43 years ended in retirement. He has been associated with MCC (Muslim Community Center, Silver Spring) for almost 30 years. The MCC is a 501©(3) tax-exempt community, social welfare organization. In addition to



social welfare activities, MCC has operated a full-time medical clinic since 2003. Last year MCC Clinic had 18,000 patient encounters.

Zaffer was introduced to MEAAG in 2008 by Ms. Lily Qi, when she was the chair of MEAAG. He invited him a few times to some of the MCC's programs, particularly to Ramadan dinners for county and state elected officials. Ms. Qi asked him to consider joining MEAAG, and he served from 2008 to 2012. A couple years ago, MEAAG's current vice-chair, Akhtar Zubairi, nominated Zaffer for a second MEAAG membership, and he was appointed by the County Executive. Zaffer believes "MEAAG's diversity and productive work for Montgomery County's communities has contributed to the high quality of life here." Zaffer considers MoCo the most diverse and best place to live not only in Maryland but in America and believes we all should be proud of it.

Zaffer entered his second appointment to MEAAG with an eye to help increasing community service and leadership development opportunities among young adults that will prepare them for future services in the county or elsewhere in the state and make it easier to pass the leadership baton to the next generation. Zaffer has been pleasantly surprised that MEAAG is already engaged in building leadership bridges across generations.

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### Final Notes

- ✚ MEAAG's e.newsletters are kindly being posted [here](#) by MEAAG member Karen Leggett Abouraya.
- ✚ Please contact the OCP's [Middle Eastern Liaison](#) if you would like to be added to the mailing list.

*MEAAG operates on land originally inhabited by the Nacochtank or Anacostans.*

**~ We wish you and your families and friends peace and joy this season ~**

