

Veterans' Healthy Minds Advisory Council – South Texas
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Working with; Audie Murphy VA Hospital, San Antonio TX
“Helping Veterans, Help Themselves”
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VHMACST Meeting Minutes 15 June 2023

Call To Order

Council Chair, Dr. David A. La Pointe called to order the regular meeting of the Veterans Healthy Minds Advisory Council South Texas on 15 June 2023 at 1305, via Zoom & in person at the Northwest VA health Care Clinic, Mental Health Are, Conference Room, (2nd Floor), 9939 State Hwy. 151, SATX 78251.

Dr. La Pointe introduced Ms. Wendy D. Stephens, who will be stepping in for Dr. Davis while she in on maternity leave. Ms. Stephens introduced herself and said that Mr. Michael O. Collins will also be providing - assistance/participation for the council while Dr. Davis is away, and he would be joining us online shortly. They both work in Peer Support for the VA.

Michael Collins did join the meeting later and introduced himself to the council. He stated he is the Lead Peer Support Specialist for South Texas VA and happy to be a part of this.

Dr. La Pointe introduced (excused absence) a new member, Ms. Mary Hilton. She works for Congressman Cloud. They are responsible for an area of Texas with a lot of remote veterans. The chair also introduced a guest. Ms. Juliana Stith who was joining us online. Ms. Stith introduced herself. She stated she was a retired Navy Veteran, currently working for United Way in the Military Program as a Military Navigator. She has been in this position for seven years and is also training as a “Yoga” Instructor with the Veteran’s Yoga Project, a non-profit organization, they take a “mindful resilience approach” to the training.

The Chair had a short discussion about the VA Community MH & Wellness Summit. He spoke about Larissa and Laura’s input and how well the members of the council participated. The “agenda” for what was supposed to be followed was “modified” because of all the personal and illuminating feedback provided by members of the council and other participants online and thanked everyone for their input.

Dr, La Pointe related a story about VA caregiver’s sharing information with Veteran’s and it resulted in a new VHMACST member. He wanted to thank Dr. Davis and the VA Caregiver who referred CMSGT Mike Nemcic to us.

Dr. La Pointe called council roll.

Roll-Call: Present or Excused: Angie Bukowski, Becki Williams, Dr. Betsy Davis, Carlos Acosta, Dr. David La Pointe, Edsel Thomas, Fred Thomas, John Nelson, Kevin Crozier, Laura Knoll, Mary Hilton, Mike Nemcic, Priscilla Bell, Dr. Shirley Johnson

Not Present: Karah Smith, LaKeisha Howard, Larissa Martinez, Leah Smith

II. Approval/Review of Previous Minutes/Current Agenda

Dr. Dave La Pointe motioned to accept previous meeting minutes (April 2023) as published to council for review. Kevin Crozier seconded the motion. Minutes were approved and adopted by the council members with unanimous vote.

✓ **GUEST SPEAKER (S): Opted to wait until “New Business” to speak.**

III. Old Business

Veterans’ Resilience and Recovery Collaborative: Dr. Davis stated that Michelle Conway is going to be taking over. Ms. Conway is to be our Guest Speaker at the next VHMACST meeting and her whole job is to help build and connect coalitions and help promote suicide prevention for veterans in an “upstream way.” They had a good meeting and shared a lot of useful information. Meeting minutes will be forwarded. **(OPEN)**

Mental Health Community of Practice: Nothing to pass along except that is where we are hoping to get more referrals. This meeting is an internal VA meeting across the mental health leads, to problem solve, how can we improve our services, what current issues are they addressing, and the VHMACST won’t routinely be a part of these meetings. **(OPEN)**

VET-to-Vet Program: Currently in discussions about how we might initiate this program. Dr. Davis had asked for input from the council members for ideas to “fill the gap” between when members are asking for help and waiting for their actual VA appointments. Is it time for the council to reinstitute the “Check-in Program” that Wil Seda and Carlos Acosta headed up in the early days of our council? **(OPEN)**

2023 VA Community Mental Health & Wellness Summit: Dr. Davis stated that we can consider that closed! There were about 175 participants involved this year. Dr. Davis stated having a virtual event allowed a lot more providers and veterans the opportunity to attend. There was a lot of positive feedback and Dr. Davis thanked us for our participation and support. **(CLOSED)**

VA National Council: Dr. Davis was not able to participate in this month’s call. But she was able to follow-up on VMHC April Conference. She is attempting to get the recordings of events and will pass those along to the council when they are available. **(OPEN)**

Veteran Health Education and Information Committee: Dr. La Pointe reviewed the flyers, brochures, and trifolds updated or edited by the Committee this past month. He asked that a “female” think about getting involved with this committee, that he had reviewed a few items that concerned topics specifically directed to woman issues/concerns and thought they would be much more capable of providing input on the subjects than he was. If you might be interested, please contact him directly. **(OPEN)**

Unaccompanied Burial Memorial Service: (Bexar County), 3rd Wednesday of each month, Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, 1520 Harry Wurzbach Rd., SATX 78209 (follow the signs when you enter the main gate). VHMACST provides arrangement and roses for the persons being memorialized. PLEASE wear your VHMACST badge when attending an event.

Ed Thomas was unable to attend the meeting. Dave briefed us that we did not have an event this month and expected a large number of veterans to be honored at the July Service. **(OPEN)**

Website/Communications: Kevin Crozier submitted an updated Website listing, reflecting the site currently has 565,626 visits! A copy of the report will be included in these minutes. Look at where we are getting the most traffic. It should be noted that “immediate Assistance” only has 1365 inquiries but if we only helped ONE PERSON, we are doing our job. **(OPEN)**

VHMACST Conversion to A Non-Profit Organization:

Dave informed the council that all the paperwork had been completed, the IRS had approved our application and we are officially a non-profit organization. He stated that the way we do things now would be no different than how we have operated now. The only changes are that we (Fred Thomas) would have to file appropriate paperwork at the end of each year and comply with any IRS reporting requirements. **(OPEN)**

Veteran Letters Committee: Priscilla Bell, Committee Chair, and Becki Williams spoke about the Veterans Letters Committee. **“Victory Mail”** is what they’ve decided to call the project. They want to start out by sending 50 cards per month. There are discussions about council members’ access to MH in-patients and how we can get cards to the individual veterans/family members. The committee will work with VA representatives to resolve whatever issues are needed to institute the program. We will proceed and be prepared to provide more information at the next council meeting. **(OPEN)**

Caregiver Information: There are comments/questions about the “specifics” of the caregiver program, who can be a caregiver, how/who you contact to let the VA know you want to be a caregiver, etc. We will contact the VA office that controls this program and get the current – CORRECT information and/or request that they be a guest speaker at an upcoming VHMACST meeting. **(OPEN)**

VHMACST “Business Cards”: Dr. La Pointe discussed the three different types of business cards the council uses and the availability of getting them from the council or going to Office Depot if you wanted to purchase them yourself or add personal information to the cards. Note that if you modify or make any changes to these cards you MUST send a copy to be reviewed by the council board of directors BEFORE you purchase or start using them. If you have any questions, please contact Dr. La Pointe. **(CLOSED)**

VHMACST Secretary: **We really need to fill this position! Need volunteer ASAP. (OPEN)**

IV. New Business

Guest Speaker: Robin G. Soto

Prior Active VHMACST Council Member, Traveling RN

Subjects: PTSD, Complex PTSD, Military Sexual Trauma and Poetry

bumbarn@aol.com

Robin introduced herself, she is currently in Arizona, working in a crisis unit. She stated that her discussion would be about PTSD, Complex and MST (Military Sexual Trauma). She gave an in-depth briefing on all three subjects and answered questions from council members. She discussed the issues of reporting incidents in the military and the difficulties each member faces. She related her own personal trauma(s) and spoke to the need for disclosure and seeking assistance. Robin turned to poetry to help relieve the anger she felt from all the misdiagnosis, sexual assault, frustration, and harm she suffered as an outlet for her pain. (The VHMACST will attempt to post this meeting online for review – to council members who were not able to attend our meeting.) Robin read three poems and we asked her to send copies so we can share them with you. Many council members thanked her for sharing her experiences and relating her story and instruction on the subjects she spoke to us about. **THANK YOU, ROBIN, – PLEASE FORWARD MORE OF YOUR WRITINGS TO SHARE.**

Press Ganey Survey: The Press Survey is a current VA tool for patients to provide feedback to VA Staff. These are currently being utilized and are being sent out within 72 hours of individual appointments. PLEASE take the time to complete these surveys. It gives us the opportunity to comment/recommend/provide feedback directly to the VA. **(OPEN)**

National Call Center for Homeless Veterans: Dr. La Pointe shared information announcing the new National Call Center for Homeless Veterans – **877-424-3838**. va.gov/homeless.

- ✚ Hotline calls are answered 24 hours a day by national call center
- ✚ Resources are provided by hotline operator
- ✚ Local Homeless Outreach Team returns call within 1 business day **(CLOSED)**

Transfer Your Unused Education Benefits: Dr. La Pointe relayed that Active-duty service members can transfer unused Post-9-11 GI Bill benefits to their spouses or dependent children, including a ward of foster child. Once the transfer is approved, dependents can apply for benefits through VA. [Find out if you are eligible to transfer your GI Bill entitlement.](#) **(CLOSED)**

ITEMS WE DIDN'T GET TO BECAUSE OF TIME CONSTRAINTS.

Presumptive Toxic Exposure Eligibility: VA has expanded the list of health conditions that we assume (or presume) are caused by [exposure to hazardous substances](#). This update helps generations of veterans, and their survivors receive the care and benefits they've earned and deserve. If you have a presumptive condition, you don't need to prove that your service caused it. You only need to meet the service requirements for the presumption. **(CLOSED)**

New Publication by Col. Lisa Carrington Firmin: Our "very own" Col. Lisa Carrington-Firmin, has a new book coming out in November 2023. "Larina Warrior" will be published by Blue Ear Books. www.lisacarringtonfirmin.com **(CLOSED)**

"Check-In Program": In an earlier topic from our old business, there was discussion of the VHMCAST reinstating our "Check-in Program." Essentially council members make calls/visits to other members, veterans, family members or anyone that may benefit from simply checking in on one another to see how we are doing. Previously, Wil Seda and Carlos Acosta had chaired this effort. What we need:

1. Volunteers to make the calls and possibly visits.
2. Names/contact information on participants who would receive calls/contact
3. Frequency of contacts and types of contacts would be determined by each individual wanting to be a part of the program
4. There would be not "formal" reporting for the program (names/numbers, personal information would never be used)
5. There may be some reporting on number of contacts during a particular month, but no personal information would be shared (unless an individual decided to provide that on their own initiative)

We can add, delete, modify, whatever is needed/recommended by council members to get this program up and running again. If you are interested in participating (in any way), please let Dr. La Pointe know ASAP. **(OPEN)**

**ALL – Please be prepared to discuss this at the next meeting so we can move forward quickly.
Thank you.**

OTHER:

- ✚ 27 People this year, (Veterans, Family Members and Civilian connections) have gained employment from information shared online/email from the VHMCAST
- ✚ Current VA Suicide Rate: 22 Veterans per day
- ✚

VHMACST Outreach:

- ✦ **Unaccompanied Burial Memorial Service** – July 19, 2023: at 0900, (Bexar County), 3rd Wednesday of each month, Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, 1520 Harry Wurzbach Rd., SATX 78209 (follow the signs when you enter the main gate). VHMACST provides arrangement and roses for each person being memorialized. PLEASE wear your VHMACST badge when attending an event
- ✦ **Unaccompanied Burial Memorial Service** – August 16, 2023: at 0900, (Bexar County), 3rd Wednesday of each month, Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, 1520 Harry Wurzbach Rd., SATX 78209 (follow the signs when you enter the main gate). VHMACST provides arrangement and roses for each person being memorialized. PLEASE wear your VHMACST badge when attending an event
- ✦ **Unaccompanied Burial Memorial Service** – September 20, 2023: at 0900, (Bexar County), 3rd Wednesday of each month, Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, 1520 Harry Wurzbach Rd., SATX 78209 (follow the signs when you enter the main gate). VHMACST provides arrangement and roses for each person being memorialized. PLEASE wear your VHMACST badge when attending an event
- ✦

VHMACST Events:

- ✦ **VHMACST Monthly Meeting** – 7-20-2023, 1300
- ✦ **VHMACST Monthly Meeting** – 8-17-2023, 1300
- ✦ **STVHCS 2023 Local Veterans Creative Arts Competition** –
 - Visual Artists, Art Exhibit: Friday, 8 September 2023, Recreation Center, 0900-1200, for information contact Tania De Leon, Visual Artist Coordinator, 210-617-5300, ext. 1447 or 15125, deadline: 25 Aug 2023
 - Performing Artists, Performing Show: Friday, 8 Sep 2023, Recreation Center, 1300-1430, for more information contact Brittney Mora, Performing Arts Coordinator, 210-317-7138
- ✦ **VHMACST Monthly Meeting** – 9-21-2023, 1300
- ✦

VHMACST Training:

- ✦ Nothing scheduled at this time
- ✦

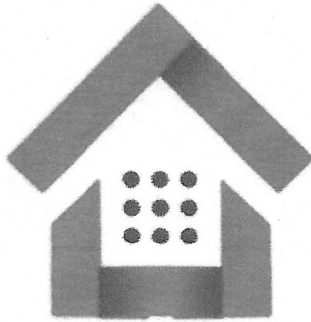
VI. Next Meeting 15 March - 1300

VII. Adjournment

Meeting ended at 1406

VIII: End of Minutes

Minutes Submitted/Approved by Dr. David A. Pointe



National Call Center
for Homeless Veterans

877-424-3838

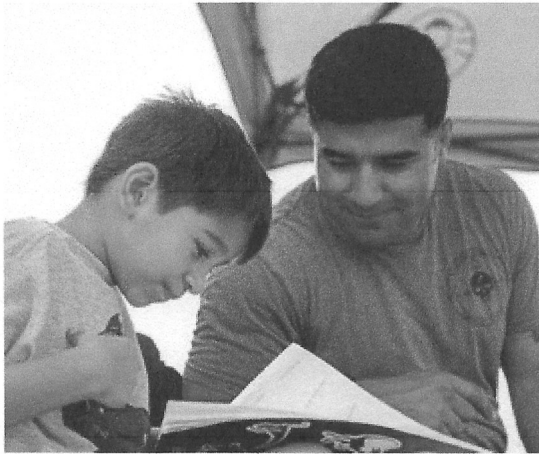
va.gov/homeless

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[Learn More](#)



Transfer Your Unused Education Benefits

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STVHCS 2023

Local Veterans Creative Arts Competition

This event is the prelude to the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival/Competition.
First place entries will compete in the National Competition.



NATIONAL VETERANS
CREATIVE ARTS
COMPETITION

VISUAL ARTISTS!

Art Exhibit:

Friday, September 8th, 2023
Recreation Center
9 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

For information on categories, rules, and restrictions
for the National Competition contact:

Tania De Leon,
Visual Art Coordinator, 210-617-5300
ext. 15447 or 15125.

*Entries are being accepted by appointment
only.*

Entry deadline: August 25, 2023

PERFORMING ARTISTS!

Performing Show:

Friday, September 8th, 2023
Recreation Center
1:00 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

For information on categories, rules, and restrictions
for the National Competition or to make a
Performance Recording appointment contact:

Brittney Mora,
Performing Art Coordinator,
210-317-7138

*Performance recordings will take place
by appointment only.

In-Person exhibit and show is contingent on COVID-19 restrictions



CARRINGTON FIRMIN, LLC

Transformational Change Through Leadership

Latina Warrior

by Colonel Lisa Carrington Firmin, USAF retired

Bronze Star-decorated combat commander Colonel Lisa Carrington Firmin is pleased to present *Latina Warrior*, her collection of poems, prose, and art. She shares the trials of not fitting in, surviving sexual assault, harassment, discrimination, leading in combat in Iraq, living with PTSD and how she has been able to pick up the shattered pieces of her life to emerge stronger, whole, and unashamed.

She outlines her early years as a young Latina growing up all over the world through her often-perilous journey in the military. She also shares outstanding experiences she had as a leader serving her country, the difficulty of transitioning into the civilian workforce, emerging stronger after divorce, starting her own business, and how writing became her salvation. In *Latina Warrior*, she weaves her journey in a deeply personal, sometimes humorous, intense, and explicit expression. Her poetry is an anthem of overcoming barriers to come out stronger, never letting the demons of discrimination, sexual assault, or combat be victorious. She captures, kills, and finally begins leaving behind her pain, shame, and guilt, moving forward with her healing journey.

Latina Warrior is a collaboration with fellow Bronze Star-decorated combat veteran and artist Major Christina Helferich-Polosky, who illustrated the poems with original art. The two veterans have joined together to present their art in a book that expresses their interpretations of one Latina's journey to emerge stronger and empowered after trauma, hardship, and disability to find her voice to help others as well as herself. Both veterans want others to know they are not alone, that there is power in art, that there is life after the military, and that one can indeed lessen the burden of multiple traumas. In March 2023, "Invisible Veteran", one of the poems in *Latina Warrior*, was featured by the Department of Veterans Affairs in a historic announcement of a new, more inclusive mission statement.

Latina Warrior will be published by Blue Ear Books (www.blueearbooks.com) in November 2023. Stay tuned to www.lisacarringtonfirmin.com for more information about preordering, the book release and art exhibit on 10 November at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. You can learn more about Major Christina's journey and her art at <https://woundednotworthless.com/>.



For speaking or consulting services, or to place a bulk book order, please submit a request at www.lisacarringtonfirmin.com/speaking-request-consulting.