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VHMACST Meeting Minutes 20 July 2023

Call To Order

Council Chair, Dr. David A. La Pointe called to order the regular monthly meeting of the Veterans Healthy Minds Advisory Council South Texas (VHMACST) on 20 July 2023 at 1305, via Zoom and in person at AACOG, 2700 NE Loop 410, SATX, 78217, Mission Room, 5th floor, of the Titan Building.

PLEASE NOTE: There were several issues with connections to the internet. Approximately 12 minutes of discussion was lost/interrupted, and a portion of our discussions were not recorded at all. We've tried to provide information as best we can.

Dr. La Pointe thanked Angie Bukowski (AACOG) for arranging for us to meet this month. He introduced our Guest speaker, Ms. Michelle Conway. He then identified Wendy Stephens, and Mr. Michael Collins who will be stepping in for Dr. Davis while she is on maternity leave stating they should be joining us online shortly. He introduced Ms. Millicent Nwokolo-Udejaja, Suicide Prevention Coordinator-Veteran's Administration. Dr. La Pointe stated that he had no update concerning Dr. Davis and that her supervisor Dr. Crostley would be our guest speaker for August.

The chair also introduced Ms. Juliana Stith, our newest member. Ms. Stith introduced herself. She stated she worked for United Way, and their military program Mission United as a military navigator helping veterans and active-duty, and family members to connect them with community resources. She stated that she was also an LPC, with Mental Health and is training to become a yoga instructor with the Veteran's Yoga Project, a non-profit organization, they take a “mindful resilience approach” to the training, check it out, goggle it, it's free!

The chair then introduced Leah Smith. He stated that she has been working with for a while behind the scenes. Ms. Smith introduced herself to the group. She stated that she was an LCSW and a licensed clinical social worker with the VISN 17 VA Health Care System with the Center of Excellence. They concentrate primarily on transitioning service members. They are collaborating with the community to train people in the community to be Peer Mentors to transitioning service members (Sponsors). They partner with “Onward-Up,” and the sponsorship program. They connect them to VA Health Care and other community organizations.

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

Dr. La Pointe called council roll.

Rollcall: Present or Excused: Angie Bukowski, Becki Williams, Dr. Betsy Davis, Dr. David La Pointe, Edsel Thomas, Fred Thomas, Kevin Crozier, Juliana Stith, Laura Knoll, Mary Hilton, Priscilla Bell, Dr. Shirley Johnson

Not Present: Carlos Acosta, Dr. Shirley Johnson, Karah Smith, John Nelson, LaKeisha Howard, Larissa Martinez, Mary Hilton, Michael Collins, Wendy Stephens

II. Approval/Review of Previous Minutes/Current Agenda

Dr. Dave La Pointe motioned to accept previous meeting minutes (June 2023) as published to council for review. Angie Bukowski 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

Michael Collins and Wendy Stephens were not able to attend the meeting.

Veterans’ Resilience and Recovery Collaborative: No Report. **(OPEN)**

Mental Health Community of Practice: No Report. **(OPEN)**

VET-to-Vet Program: Dr. La Pointe reviewed that we were trying to secure a location for veterans to be able to meet just to talk amongst themselves while they we are waiting for their formal metal health appointments with VA staff. We are 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. **(OPEN)**

VA National Council: No Report. **(OPEN)**

Veteran Health Education and Information Committee (Dave La Pointe): Dr. La Pointe gave an overview of the program and again 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 are interested, please contact him directly. **(OPEN)**

Unaccompanied Burial Memorial Service (ED Thomas): (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). VHMALST provides floral arrangements and roses for the persons being interned. PLEASE wear your VHMALST badge when attending an event.

Ed Thomas was unable to attend the meeting. He has been having some medical issues to deal with and will be stepping back from the council for a short time. Dave briefed us that we did have an event this month and 8 people were honored at the July Service. Kevin Crozier stepped in to cover for Ed. THANK YOU KEVIN. **(OPEN)**

Website/Communications (Kevin Crozier): Kevin was not able to attend the meeting as he was at another function, but he had submitted the updated Website listing, reflecting the site currently has 670,356 visits! A copy of the report will be included in these minutes. **(OPEN)**

VHMALST Non-Profit Organization (Fred Thomas):

Fred informed the council that all the IRS paperwork had been completed, that he would be in town next week and we would complete the paperwork with SSFCU to get our accounts opened. Fred stated that if anyone ever needs our EIN number, he can provide it and Dr. La Pointe added that the EIN number and non-profit information is at the bottom of the signature block on all the VHMALST correspondence he sends out: **501 (c) (3) Designated NPO 92-3527273. (OPEN)**

PACT ACT: Fred also related that if anyone submits paperwork concerning the PACT ACT, the information will be backdated for claims if you apply by August 9, 2023. **(CLOSED)**

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 VHMCAST meeting. Conversations continued about the program. The conversation turned to CDS, the organization who oversees “paying” the caregivers. There have been issues with every caregiver not being paid on their pay date. And the inability to connect with anyone from CDS or even get a return phone call or any kind of communication with this organization. Veterans, caregivers, VA staff – all voiced their concern about the non-responsiveness of the CDS staff to questions/concerns. Ms. Millicent Nwokolo-Udejaja related many of her concerns about this issue as well. Dr. La Pointe stated that he was going to connect with CDS, ASAP to try and resolve some of these issues. **(OPEN)**

IV. New Business

Guest Speaker: Michelle Conway
Community Engagement and Partnership Coordinator (CEPC)
Suicide Prevention Program
South Texas Veterans Healthcare System
Michelle.Conway@VA.gov
361-243-5754

(Please note, a portion of Ms. Conway’s presentation was corrupted, and we were unable to recover it, we will invite her back to speak to the council again). Ms. Conway introduced herself. She related that her new VA program has been instituted, concentrating on a more community-based program to visit with different groups and facilitate, help create and/or join existing groups to work on the mental health care of veterans. They will be interacting with a variety of organizations to assist in this effort of finding gaps in services, and what other options for suicide prevention are out there. They are making every effort to get out into the rural areas that have been “neglected” in the past. She reviewed handouts she brought (copies will be included in minutes). Ms. Conway then introduced Ms. Millicent Nwokolo-Udejaja (Suicide Prevention Coordinator) and stated she and Dr. Betsy Davis have been key in assisting her in making connections in the community. They are making every effort to meet with different individuals/organizations/functions to assist in highlighting the Suicide Prevention and Awareness programs available to veterans and family members, including children. Ms. Conway stated the suicide rate has fallen from 22 per day to 16.8. She emphasized the use of the 988-crisis line. Ms. Nwokolo-Udejaja reminded us that when Veterans call the number, ensure you press “1” to identify yourself as a veteran. She continued to provide information about the process of these calls and to make sure to get information about who you spoke with as well. **(Again, we lost information here due to internet connection issues).**

Leah Smith informed us in the chat section about resource for use: Vets who may think calling 988 for crises that are not *suicidal crises* but can benefit from other VHA info may find help via Concierge for Care:

1-800-698-2411--lots of help w/ Eligibility questions!

<https://news.va.gov/45608/va-launches-concierge-care-program-connect-recently-separate-service-members/>

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

“Check-In Program”: In an earlier topic from our old business, there was discussion of the VHMACST 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:

- ✚ 32 People this year, (Veterans, Family Members and Civilian connections) have gained employment from information shared online/email from the VHMACST
- ✚ Current VA Suicide Rate: 16.8 Veterans per day
- ✚ Promises – Immediate openings for “Detox” programs at ALL Texas locations; 3550 Normand Drive, College Station, TX 77845, 949-426-0101

VHMACST Outreach:

- ✚ **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 i. 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 floral arrangements and roses for each person being interred. PLEASE wear your VHMACST badge when attending an event



VHMACST Events:

- ✚ **VHMACST Monthly Meeting** – 8-17-2023, 1300
- ✚ **VHMACST Monthly Meeting** – 9-21-2023, 1300
- ✚ **Focus Group** – 9 Aug 2023, 0900 and 1400, (45 min. – 1 hour duration), Endeavors, 6333 DeZavala Rd., SATX 78249, 210-399-4838 x-385, endeavors.org, nwalden@endeavors.org
- ✚ **Got Your Six Meeting** – 16 Aug 2023, 0930 – 1100, 700 S. Alamo 78205
- ✚ **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 Training:

- ✚ Nothing scheduled at this time

VI. Next Meeting 17 August 2023 - 1300

VII. Adjournment

Meeting ended at 1411

VIII: End of Minutes

Minutes Submitted/Approved by Dr. David A. Pointe