

KNOXVILLE REGIONAL VETERANS MENTAL HEALTH COUNCIL



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4812 Asheville Hwy Knoxville, TN 37914
865-336-2624

July 15, 2014 Special Council Meeting– 11:00 a.m.
William C. Tallent Outpatient Clinic (KOPC)
8033 Ray Mears Blvd.
Knoxville, TN 37819

1. Call to Order: 11:02 a.m.
2. Prayer & Pledge of Allegiance by Henry Cleveland
3. Roll Call:
 - For the VA: Ms. Charlene Ehret, Director Mountain Home VAMC
Dr. Heidi Vermette, ACOS Dr. Patrick Sloan, ACOS
Mr. Juan Jordan, Health Systems Specialist
Pamela Berbigler, Executive Assistant to Ms. Ehret
 - For VISN 9: Dr. Cecelia Farina-Morin, MD, MS, Chief Mental Health Officer
 - For Council: Ed Junod, Chairman Fred Owens, Vice-Chairman
Frank Vollmer, Secretary Henry Cleveland
Charles Dabbs Randy Baxter
Ron Morton/Excused Howard Jenkins, Guest
4. Welcome/Open: Ed Junod welcomed and recognized attendees.
5. Previous Council minutes: Chair announced that the scheduled June 12, 2014 Council meeting was cancelled and therefore there were no June minutes to be voted on.
6. Special Council Meeting format:
 - a. Chair announced that the purpose of this meeting was to discuss the complaint filed June 13, 2014 to the VA OIG, the letter of July 3, 2014 submitted to VISN 9 Director John Patrick, and more specifically, the July 7, 2014 Council Action Item letter sent to VISN 9 Network Director John Patrick. Chair reported that he appreciated Ms. Ehret's attendance, and that it was 903 days since the Council's first request for such a meeting.
 - b. Ms. Ehret requested that Action Items 8, 9 and 10 be taken off the table on the basis that no decision would be made at this time. Ms. Ehret acknowledged that "communication problems" complicated issues between her office and the Council.
 - c. Council presented a matrix to score the 10 action items which included three decision options "A" Agree, B Agree with modification, and C. Reject" the Action Item. Best score would equal 10 and worse score would equal 0.
7. Action item #1:
 - a. Ms. Ehret stated that she was a veteran oriented Director who put veteran issues first and her VAMC was considered one of the best facilities in the nation.
 - b. Chair reported the VA refused to support the Council's goal to implement a Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) in Knox County. The VA was very explicit; the Council Liaison telephoned the Knox County Recovery Court Director and instructed him not to use the

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VA's name in conjunction with the VTC and the VA does not support the VTC initiative.
Chair asked Ms. Ehret and received no response.

- c. Chair requested a decision to Action Item 1: appoint a Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) to serve the Knox County Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) and the counties served by KOPC. Ms. Ehret declined to do so.
- d. Dr. Vermette replied that the issue was "very complicated" and they were hesitant to "get involved". Dr. Vermette said she confirmed the two JIV's (Justice Involved Veterans) were registered with the VA. Dr. Vermette never responded to Frank Vollmer's inquiry about the 72 veterans recorded as being taken into the Knox County Detention Center since January 1, 2014 and not receiving any VA service or representation.
- e. Chair reported that Detention Center staff claimed "the VA was the worst agency they have to work with".
- f. It was pointed out that KOPC currently had an employee who was hired as a VJO but never allowed to work in that position, supervised by Christie Cook. This was confirmed by Charles Dabbs.
- g. Ms. Ehret, Drs. Vermette and Sloane denied a VJO was working at KOPC and claimed they have no VJO at Mountain Home.
- h. Council requested justice involved veteran (JIV) services begin immediately. No response from the VA.

8: Communications

Dr. Farina reported she read the Council minutes issued since January, 2014, and said there were no real references to problems the Council was having. She said the minutes must identify problems, not just successes. Communications must be complete and honest.

Chair replied that our responses have been honest, open and concise; however, the Council's communications have been filtered by our Liaison and Mountain Home VAMC ACOS. Chair recommended reading Council's Annual Review FY2013 dated 12-31-13 and Council's 1st Quarter Review FY2014 under "*Concerns brought up during the year that impact Veterans and the delivery of mental health services*".

Chair also presented the Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Mental Health Council Guide and referred the attendees to page 4 of the guide "*Six Barriers and Potential Solutions*"

- a) *Incongruence Between Stated Values and Actual Practice*
- b) *Tokenism*
- c) *Lack of Responsiveness*
- d) *Role Strain*
- e) *Poor Communications*
- f) *Economic Factors*

Ms. Ehret was not familiar with the VMHC guide. The Council has used the guide since its inception and has been trying to get KOPC leadership not only to read it but also follow it. Dr. Campbell and Christie Cook repeatedly refused to use the guide and explained it was "*only a guide*" and up to their interpretation whether to use it or not".

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Dr. Farina stated the fracture between the Veterans Council/Mountain Home needs to be addressed from both sides of the aisle.

Dr. Vermette acknowledged she “filters” Council minutes to Ms. Ehret, but said she respects what we do. Ms. Ehret acknowledged that she has not received our complaints and stated that the Council’s Liaison and the ACOS are there to protect Ms. Ehret. Chair responded that “we (the Council) provide unfiltered information from your clients, the veterans we serve”.

Dr. Sloan reported that the VJO job posting closed on July 9, 2014, and that HR at Mountain Home had been told that filling the position had the highest priority. Dr. Sloan said that everyone at the table wants to do the best they can to serve veterans.

Randy Baxter interjected that (Council members) “are the most dedicated group of veterans, whose hearts are sincere. They follow VA Handbook rules and their frustration is over (VA) employee “interpretation” of those same rules”. Randy provided the attendees with a clear example of the communication breakdown. The Council reported that a VA employee at KOPC was hired as a VJO in 2012 and Ms. Ehret et al stated that “no VJO position at KOPC was ever hired”. This type of response is why so many issues are unresolved.

9. Action Item #2.

Chair then introduced the July 2013 plan for KOPC to provide a “mental first aid” plan for LPG (Legacy Peer Support Group) facilitators and VTC mentors. Our “mental health first aid plan” caused some confusion over this topic. Council discussed two programs for Facilitator support; mental health first aid and VA monthly process support. Council Parliamentarian Ron Morton offered to train peer support members on Mental Health First Aid plan in July 2013. Council has been requesting a VA monthly process

10. Peer Support

Ms. Ehret stated that she was really sorry about our frustrated feelings and was sorry about the miscommunications. She needed to learn more about peer support and asked Dr. Farina if she could help her.

Ms. Ehret said she is a 42 years VA employee and is committed as well as her ACOS’ to the care of veterans. Ms. Ehret stated that she runs a good health care system and is proud of what they do and isn’t lack of commitment to veterans which has caused this recent disagreement

Ms. Ehret stated “What it comes down to is trusting my veterans which we are so proud to take care “but to people I don’t know and who aren’t credentialed. I haven’t got that trust level”.

Ms. Ehret acknowledged her inexperience with mental health and that much of the mental health terms and acronyms used during the meeting were new to her. Ms. Ehret didn’t know about the VA handbook and stated that she needed learn more about what I can allow you to do and develop trust. If I am going to provide resources and Dr. Farina I need to learn more what kind of support can I can provide. Ms. Ehret stated that she was not a mental health provider.

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The Chair reported that the US Department of Health & Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) & National Association of Drug Court Professionals (NADCP) warned about traditional health care providers not accepting or adopting peer support. *“SAMSHA reported controlled trials revealed that those offered consumer-operated services as an adjunct to their traditional mental health services showed significant gains in well-being—hope, self-efficacy, empowerment, goal attainment, and meaning of life—in comparison to those who were offered traditional mental health services only.”*

The Chair reported the VHA 1163.05 states that *“peer support is a fundamental building block recovery of recovery-oriented services. Peer Support is a promising best practice which provides role models for Veteran consumers of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) mental health care program to engender hope, demonstrate recovery, and teach advocacy skills among other valuable practices”.*

Charles Dabbs stated the VA regulations are written so the VA leadership can provide services and are not written to keep you from providing service and often people at this level use the regulations to prevent services and that’s not right.

Ms. Ehret responded that she is struggling with these issues and committed she will learn more, listen better, read the Council meeting minutes and not going to blame anyone. Ms. Ehret said that our Council Liaison Christie Cook was here to protect Ms. Ehret.

The Chair talked about peer support and Ms. Ehret stated that “we are but they are not” talking about peer support and we agree. Council has not received any support or compliance with our original approved agreement. The Chair reported the VA provided funding for VA Peer Support Specialist (PSS) in 2005 which included 3 PSSs in Mountain Home and 2 PSSs in KOPC. The Chair also reported the VHA Handbook directive distributed by Under Secretary Petzel on July 1, 2011 required all VAMC to provide peer support. KOPC’s first PSS was hired in June 2013 but only after the Council threatened legal action for not providing a PSS service.

In June 2012, Drs. Everett Jones and Melanie Hunt requested that we start a peer support group and a Veterans Mental Health Council. Dr. Jones agreed to pay for the transition training and travel pay to veterans when the PSS is hired. Dr. Jones advised us that he had to get Ms. Ehret’s approval for our agreement. Drs. Jones and Hunt reported that our agreement was approved in late June 2012 and the transition plan from evidenced based to peer oriented support would begin immediately.

Ms. Ehret was not familiar with the details of the negotiated agreement but confirmed that she approved Dr. Jones’ agreement. Ms. Ehret could not understand why travel pay should be paid and stated that our veterans are getting travel pay. Currently our veterans receive travel pay once a month and only for one group. The agreement was travel pay for veterans each week. The travel pay did not begin until February 2014. Chair acknowledged they broke our agreement with their unilateral decision not to include all of the peer support veterans and only once a month.

Dr. Farina and Ms. Ehret did not understand the relationship between Legacy Peer Support Group, Vet to Vet TN and the Knoxville Regional Veterans Mental Health Council; three independent groups. The Chair

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gave a brief explanation and provided Dr. Farina with a brochure which provides the reader with a functional statement about each affiliation.

11. Partnering:

Ms. Ehret asked us to go back and talk about partnering with each other which is critical for a successful relationship. Ms. Ehret recognized our foundation was built on conflict and confrontation and polarized each organization. MS. Ehret suggested we start building our relationship immediately and committed to attend the Council meetings on a quarterly basis. Ms. Ehret's next step is to work closely with Dr. Farina to learn more about our group and how we can work together to provide quality care to all of our veterans and looking for ways to improve services with more specialists in for service or possibly out-sourcing for some services

Dr. Sloan said he appreciated today's meeting process and was thankful for the forth righteousness, profound respect and courtesy provided to the VA staff.

Fred Owens reviewed the issues that many veterans who have prostate cancer, including himself, must endure. Many veterans are required to travel 4 hours for a 15 minute visit.

Dr. Farina discussed and provided advice about veteran relapses and suicide ideation and how to cope.

After the closing prayer the Chair requested a written response to items 1-7 from Ms. Ehret; Dr. Vermette agreed to provide the response.

12. Adjournment: Chair closed the meeting at 12:47 P.M.

Next Meeting Date is **Thursday, August 14, 2014 at 11:00 am.**

Respectfully,

Frank Vollmer
Council Secretary

Encls

VA Veterans Mental Health Council Guide
KRVVHC Annual Review FY2013
KRVVHC 1st Quarter Review FY2014
VHA 1163.05 Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Services Peer Support
SAMSHA Peer Support & Peer Providers: Redefining Mental Health Recovery