

Hudson Valley Veteran Task Force Meeting

Minutes/Notes from March 13, 2019

FINAL

OPENING: The HVTF meeting was called to order approx. 9:10 am on Weds. March 13th, 2019, at the Department of Mental Health, 30 Harriman Drive, Goshen, NY, by Larry Neumann. Bill Sestrom led attendees in the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. Larry welcomed all. Larry read the Task Force Mission Statement.

PRIOR MONTH: Did an overview of the past meeting in January (February's meeting was cancelled due to inclement weather).

GENERAL ANNOUNCEMENTS: Larry brought up the State Budget. Peer services (Vet2Vet) and legal services (LSHV) for veterans are currently not in the Governor's budget. A form letter from LSHV to Senators James Skoufis and Jen Metzger were circulated for signatures. Also mentioned Millie and her major contributions to assist with the Task Force meetings (she is currently out sick).

INTRODUCTIONS: Larry introduced Special Guest and Presenter; Janelle Marina Mendez on Military Sexual Trauma (MST). He spoke of his own discomfort with the topic and how it is necessary to rise above our comfort zone in order to come to terms and deal with this important issue.

Welcomed special guests and presenters; Laurene Sandstrom and Michael Flower of The Warrior Promise Wall, honoring all NYS Veterans who have served and since died, and Tommy Zurhellen, commander of Poughkeepsie VFW and his "Walk Across America" to raise awareness of Veteran suicide and homelessness.

Both of these topics, MST and Veteran Suicide, are difficult to talk about and are surrounded by stigma. We welcome our guests so that we can overcome our own feelings and bias, in order to educate ourselves and begin to have meaningful conversation, leading to action, to surmount and solve these issues.

SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENTS: Larry introduced several guests who wished to make special announcements about their programs and services, including; Danielle Whitely, Paula Coppin and Shannon Hester-Jenkins of Central Hudson about their Good Neighbor Fund to aid veterans and military who are in financial crisis to help with their utility bills.

Derek Brown on Veteran Drug Court Mentors Boot Camp.

Eva Usadi on TRR's upcoming Warrior Camp and program information.

PRESENT: Numerous veteran and service agencies serving Orange, Dutchess, Putnam, Rockland & Sullivan Counties were represented. Guests and Presenters are listed below. There was a total of 41 in attendance.

GUEST SPEAKERS/PRESENTERS:

Janelle Marina Mendez: MST Presentation. Janelle began with a question; "What percentage of homeless female veterans are victims of MST. Several guesses were made which led Janelle to

share her personal story of sexual abuse in the military. From being an 'above average' student who couldn't afford college and saw the Marine Corps as a way of not only serving her country, but to get GI Bill benefits to pursue her career in biology or engineering. What began as an innocent act between her and her boyfriend soon became a nightmare of abuse at the hands of her tormentors causing her to go AWOL as she and another female soldier fled for their lives. Ultimately, she ends up with a dishonorable discharge, without benefits, homeless and hopeless. Janelle stated that 80 of 100 veteran suicides are committed by non-combat veterans. 70 of 100 veterans with a history of MST are likely to commit suicide. Consequences of MST include; homelessness, substance abuse and suicide.

Janelle seeks to increase MST awareness, change military culture and treatment of victims (who are often re-victimized as they traverse the legal process). Her MST movement looks to bring the issue of vulnerability to the surface. She hopes to inject new energy into military leadership to take responsibility and be the catalyst for change within the organization. She also seeks change in public policy through her petition for a "Victim Bill of Rights".

Janelle received an extended and emotional standing ovation following her presentation. She fielded questions from the members and one of the members shared their own story of MST and raised the issue of sexual abuse towards males in the military.

Lauren Sandstrom – The Warrior Promise Wall: Lauren and Michael Flower brought parts of the wall for display purposes. The wall is comprised of portable panels which have been imprinted with pictures, letters and images of other memorabilia to honor each person on the wall. There is also a panel which describes the wall's purpose and mission. Lauren is a Gold Star Sister. The wall was established in December 2018. Their mission is to honor New York Military who have fallen in the war against Veteran Suicide. She seeks to honor the service and lives of those New York State service members who are no longer with us and to exhibit the wall across the state. She and Michael seek funding to build panels. Currently they fund the wall on their own. More panels are needed at a cost of \$180 each. The wall is currently on display at the Orange County Government Center DMV. Six families have shared their stories and Laurene hopes to get more families involved. Larry offered to bring it up with the Veteran Appreciation Day planning committee to have the wall on display at the upcoming August 31st event.

Tommy Zurhellen – Walk Across America: www.veteranzero.org Tommy introduced himself as the Commander of the Poughkeepsie VFW. His goal is to raise awareness of veteran suicide and homelessness by walking across America from Portland, Oregon to Poughkeepsie, NY over a 133-day period beginning April 1st and ending August 23rd. He will walk 22 miles per day to represent the nationally reported average of 22 veteran suicides per day. He also plans to raise over \$40,000 to represent the number of reported homeless veterans on any given day in America. This money will be donated to local veteran service agencies. Tommy is a big guy and joked about his physical condition and ability to complete the mission, although it is clear he will have no problem and looks forward to shedding a few pounds along the way. "My biggest fear is bears!", he said. He plans to meet with veterans and veteran service agencies along the way, to hear their stories and find out why our veteran community is hurting. Tommy shared his personal cell phone number, 845-309-4119 for anyone who has any questions or would like to support his cause in any way.

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Mike Speed of Mended Swords spoke about the upcoming paintball tournament on April 6th & 7th (see calendar entry on Veteran Task Force website for additional info). There is no cost to veteran who want to participate and ride in “The Tank”, a specially equipped off-road vehicle designed for paintball events. He also spoke about the Spartan Race, whereby a WWII Veteran is carried over an obstacle course in a grueling all-day event to honor those who served and raise awareness of the military’s “No Man Left Behind” mentality.

Danielle Whitely of Central Hudson gave a brief overview of the Good Neighbor Fund, a Central Hudson program designed for military and veterans to help with utility bills during financial crisis. The program is administered by the Salvation Army. Accessing the service is as easy as calling the Salvation Army to schedule an appointment. (Brochures were distributed to Task Force members). This year, \$20,000 has been granted. For more information, call Lisa K. at the Poughkeepsie office; 845-471-1210.

Derek Brown of the Newburgh Veteran Drug Court Mentoring Program spoke about training for the mentoring program and gave an overview of the Veteran Drug Court program, which started in Buffalo, NY. The mentor’s role is to guide and support the veteran in their recovery, to connect them back with their military heritage and to give their lives purpose and meaning. Violent felony perpetrators are not allowed to participate in the program. Currently, six veterans are in drug treatment court. So far, the program has graduated 20 veterans, many of whom have gone on to obtain employment, schooling and self-sufficiency. Many also stay connected with the program in order to help others who are experiencing what they went through.

Eva Usadi is founder and Exec. Dir. of Trauma and Resiliency Resources (TRR). She spoke on the topic of the upcoming Warrior Camp retreat which had a cancellation creating a vacancy for one more veteran. She spoke about the week-long program and all of the activities and supports the veteran receives, including EMDR, working with horses, yoga, narrative writing and introduction to Native American sweat lodge. The retreat is held in Warwick. The veteran completes a brief screening conversation and is assessed for their readiness to attend the retreat. It is a free program.

Mike McCary of the 20th Regiment, presented Larry Neumann and the Hudson Valley Veteran Task Force with a check for \$500 on behalf of Ester McCary, to help cover meeting costs which have increased along with attendance and membership. Thank you, Ester & Mike for your generous donation! This will greatly help in procuring meeting supplies without impacting program funds. Thank you!

Andy Finnigan of VFW spoke about the upcoming (6/23) Orange County Council Benefit Luncheon. There is a Luncheon Journal Ad Request form to buy advertising space for your program/agency. Rates vary depending on size. April 5th is the cut-off date, so submissions need to be entered soon! April 5th deadline. Note all large ads (full page, half page) have already been filled.

Angela Jo Henze of MHA in Orange County, spoke about The Orange County Crisis Call Center which is going live on April 1st at the county's Emergency Services Center. Also, on May 1st, Behavioral Health Urgent Care is offered through Access Supports for Living.

Bill Sestrom of Honor Flight, spoke about Mission #22 on April 13th. 6:30AM at Stewart Airport (time altered due to construction). There is currently a waitlist for guardians.

Stacey from Jewish Family Services (JFS). Friendly Visitor Program. Have had requests for transportation for a veteran to Albany. Everett Cox took the vet there. Looking for volunteers and if interested in working with veterans, it would be a great resource. Also spoke on program for Holocaust Survivors and May 5th concert.

Larry Neumann of Vet2Vet spoke about the lack of veteran housing in Orange County and the recent tours of the Giordano Bros. facility in Goshen and the buildings procured by the Veteran Victory Center program on Grand St. in Newburgh. Also, a recent tour was conducted at the Veteran House in Putnam County. Karl Rohde gave a tour of this operational facility. A lot of information was shared on best practices and what makes it successful.

Larry also spoke about the Hudson Valley Veteran Task Force website, found at; www.hudsonvalleyvets.org which currently lists meeting agendas, meeting minutes, news and calendar entries. A veteran resource listing will be implemented at a future date, tbd.

Other issues included; the Homeless Point-In-Time count, Warming station closing dates, the Veteran Appreciation Day planning committee (to host 750 veterans and family) and current status of the membership of the Veteran Task Force (currently 240 members representing 60 agencies across 5 counties!)

Task Force Homeless Case Status:

- WestCOP, Newburgh- Tanisha Terry

VETERAN SERVICE & COUNTY UPDATES:

- **Dutchess County:** Rep not present.
- **Orange County:**
Christian Farrell - Director, Orange County Veteran Services
- **Putnam County:**
Karl Rhode, Director, Putnam County Veterans Service Agency
- **Rockland County:**
Vet2Vet, Ismael (Izzy) Quintana Jr., Veteran Outreach Coordinator
- **Sullivan County:** Rep not present
- **Office of US Representative Sean Patrick Maloney, Khristian Silvis & Cullen Lyons**
Veteran Advisory Board meeting to be held. Date TBD

Next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, April 10th, 9:00 – 11:00am

Location: Dept. of Mental Health, Melville Conference Room, 30 Harriman Drive, Goshen, NY