

Veterans Administration Planning Workshop

Tuesday, 20 December 2023

Present. *(In order by First Name)*

1. Andy Johnston, Director of Programs, The PATH Foundation (serving Fauquier, Rappahannock, and Culpeper Counties),
2. Angela Jameson, Community Engagement and Partnerships Coordinator, Suicide Prevention Program, Central Virginia VA Healthcare System, Massaponax CBOC, VISN6, and 15-year Veteran,
3. Bruce Campbell, Warrenton VFW, Post Services Officer,
4. Dan Carlton, Pastor, Culpeper Baptist Church,
5. Elizabeth Leach, Strategic Planner, Martinsburg VA Medical Center,
6. Elliott Madl, DBHDS Region 1 Navigator for Service Members, Veterans, and their Families (SMVF), serving the Region Ten Community Service Board, Charlottesville, a Marine, having served in Afghanistan,
7. Janelle Huffman, Community Health Worker (CHW), Director of Programs, of Hero's Bridge (a Veteran-serving nonprofit with a focus exclusively on Veterans 65 and older),
8. Jeff Say, Manager of Community Engagement, UVA Health Culpeper Medical Center,
9. Jennifer Sztalkoper, Ph.D., North Regional Assistant Manager, Virginia Veteran and Family Support (VFS) Program, Virginia Department of Veterans Services, works with Caleb Johnson,
10. Jim LaGraffe, Executive Director, Encompass Community Supports (formally known as Rappahannock-Rapidan Community Services), Facilitator,
11. MacKenzie Heidelberg, District Coordinator, The office of Congresswoman Abigail Spanberger,
12. Samantha Strong, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Program Coordinator and Community Specialist at UVA Physicians Group,
13. Scott Bennett, Board Member, representing Madison County, Encompass Community Supports (formally known as Rappahannock-Rapidan Community Services), also the Chairman of the Board of Madison Department of Social Services, former Veterans Service Officer for Madison American Legion Post 157, and 28-year Veteran,
14. Tammy Keaton, Executive Assistant, Encompass Community Supports (formally known as Rappahannock-Rapidan Community Services)

Invited. *(In order by First Name)*

Ann Mullenix, Administrative Assistant, VA Health Care Systems - Martinsburg, West Virginia,
Anthony Barns, Military & Veterans Affairs Director, The office of Congresswoman Jennifer Wexton, 10th District,
Anthony Swann, Peer Services Director, Virginia Department of Veterans Services,
Ben Shaw, Regional Director, Central Region, Virginia Veteran & Family Support Program,
Brad Hales (Pastor), Board Member, representing Culpeper County, Encompass Community Supports (formerly known as Rappahannock-Rapidan Community Services),
Brandi Jancaitis (Director, Virginia Veteran and Family Support Program),
Caleb Johnson, Northern Regional Director, Virginia Veteran and Family Support (VFS) Program, Virginia Department of Veteran Services,
Cory Will, Former Director of Peer Recovery Services at Encompass Community Supports (formally known as Rappahannock-Rapidan Community Services),
Dannielle Cullers, Veteran Resource Specialist, Virginia Department of Veterans Services,
Elisha Jones, Lead Patient Advocate, Central Virginia VA Health Care System (CVHCS), Richmond,
Jennifer Kelley, Community Engagement Partnership Coordinator, Community-Based Interventions-Suicide Prevention Program, VHA Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, Martinsburg WV, VISNS,
Ken Allensworth, Medical Center Director, Martinsburg VA Medical Center,
Kim Baskerville, Program Director, SSG Fox Suicide Prevention Grant Program (Veterans Services), Volunteers of America Chesapeake & Carolinas,
Kim Marvin, Strategic Planning Officer at the Department of Veterans Affairs, VHA,
Molly Brooks, CEO & Founder, of Hero's Bridge (a Veteran-serving nonprofit with a focus exclusively on Veterans 65 and older),
Renee Norden, Executive Director, Mental Health Association (MHA),
Stephen Mosher, Chief Engineer, Central Virginia VA Health Care System (CVHCS) in Richmond (works very closely with the Associate and Executive Director to help plan for expansion projects on the local campus or within the community areas. He is also very involved in the Health Care Center (HCC), and the CBOC expansions that are currently planned),
Steven A. Jones, Sr., Retired Marine Combat Veteran of 20+ Years of Service, former Virginia Department of Corrections Veterans Coordinator,
Tom Pratt, Board Member, representing Orange County, Encompass Community Supports (formally known as Rappahannock-Rapidan Community Services), a 17-year peace-time and war-time Veteran, is 100 % permanent-disabled.

The meeting began at 10:00 AM.

Jim LaGraffe welcomed everyone and asked if there would be any additions to the agenda, and there were none.

Community Veterans Engagement Board (CVEB). He proceeded to recall in the last meeting, they had a presentation by Ken James of the Loudon County Community Veterans Engagement Board on which he wanted to follow up. He asked what people's thoughts were on it, getting engagement, and how can we get a group to step forward and say they were willing to start taking on this project. We need a foundational group of Veterans to do this.

Scott Bennett shared he has been in that presentation with his American Legion Post, and they loved the idea. He can help but not sure he can take the lead. He recommended getting the VFW and the American Legion involved and that we could have a pretty strong organization because he got a really good response from his American Legion Post. The only county that doesn't have one of those two organizations is Rappahannock.

Bruce Campbell added that he too briefed the District VFW level and has reached out to the American Legion Post in Warrenton, and they're favorable on the initiatives. He's not sure how much of a commitment we could get from individuals to take on the workload that would be involved in setting something like it up. It's always a challenge with working with the posts, they've got their priorities that flow down from the national and state level, and adding to the work total effort might be something to take some serious thought, and we'd have to get some commitments.

Angela Jameson shared that she has been working with a CVEB in Richmond and they have a great lead down there who used to be the Commissioner of DVS, John Maxwell. He's done a really good job of kind of setting one up and he might be able to offer some advice on some of this, but he was able to help them with some of the technical assistance of getting things started. Doing things like a needs assessment specific to their area, to Service Member Veterans and their families, and it's kind of helped them move forward a bit into hopefully starting to implement some changes for their areas. They have five different work groups and had all their Members kind of pick which work group they wanted to belong to and they're now meeting separately. It's been slow but steady and kind of moving forward and it helps get more engagement when you do things like a needs assessment so that everybody can kind of feel part of the solution. She's happy to help if the CVEB gets started to do the same thing that she's done with Richmond.

Elliott Madl shared that he has not had a lot of experience with CVEB but is more than happy to provide any sort of insight that he can.

Jim noted so far that we have Scott, who is kind of throwing his hat in the ring a little bit but we're going to need others and he's trying to figure out a way we can get others to kind of jump on board, who would start some of the beginning process work. How do we get the message out? He mentioned how he appreciates the work Bruce has been doing with some outreach in his area but in not having Veteran connections, not being a Veteran himself, he doesn't know how to replicate that in ours.

Bruce Campbell shared his perspective that what he took on in the last month was because he arranged for a presentation at the District. All the Post Commanders were there, and the response was very favorable about having a planning group. He didn't get into the CVEB idea too much, as his focus was on the Veterans Task Group, a task force for mental health. They were very open to having him make the pitch on that. The suicide prevention issue gives us a narrower focus and it's primarily awareness and then getting existing organizations to see how we can collaborate.

Having the VFW and the American Legion lead the CVEB concept is a bit more ambitious. We definitely need to engage them at the higher levels and see. Perhaps you can give them a good pitch and see if they can make these things a priority. Some concerns might be that their footprints will be different from yours. For example, the District goes all the way out to Spotsylvania, Fredericksburg. We also don't have Rappahannock in the VFW.

Perhaps, because there are so many posts, we should try to engage at a higher level, and Bruce offered to take that on. Then, perhaps we identify one of our Members to reach out to the other. That would help with communication too, because they can broadcast, as they're all keeping their membership rolls up to date and can get a wide distribution of Veterans who are in these organizations.

Recruiting. Another thing is that these organizations are always recruiting. Our recruiting events could very well be leveraged for awareness and we're happy to go to gun shows or provide a good communications capability. The Veterans who are hard to get to are those who are transitioning. We don't know when new vets are arriving in the community or what their issues are, and that's something the task force is going to try to take on. He's had a conversation with DVS and asked them if they had any ideas about how we can get information on the newly transitioned (or about to be transitioned) Veterans who are destined for our community and it's a problem.

Scott Bennett added that Madison and Orange are in District, and he has constant contact with the District Commander, from his relationship as former Post Commander in Madison, and can reach out to him again to see what else can be done, but his District goes from Madison all the way down to Bumpest, Virginia.

Jim wondered if it could be something we look at as we're putting together the mini-conference. Perhaps bring in the gentleman from Richmond, the former Commissioner of DVS, John Maxwell, as one of the breakout sessions in the afternoon. Perhaps we can have some of the leadership of some of the VFW and the American Legion groups attend the conference in the afternoon as part of a breakout session. If we asked for their participation, we could end up with their engagement. Let's focus our efforts on this item for this group on getting local Veteran leadership to that conference to then hear about the ideas and engage. When we get someone or a group signed up, we can make the pitch and invite them to take some active roles or leads in the committee.

Angela Jameson loved this idea and was happy to send an introductory email today, between Jim and John to start with.

Jim reinforced his position that if we're actually going to make a substantial change, we need to have some sort of Veteran-led group and this group was a good kickoff to get people together to start having the conversation, but it needs to be outside of this group and within the Veteran community to take the lead on this initiative, so just trying to figure out how we get that group. With all the little things happening in lots of different places, it seems very disjointed but trying to figure out how we can have a centralized point, local planning seems to be the model that the Veterans groups are working around, where they have kind of an effective collaborative adequacy.

Bruce Campbell suggested that the next level would be at the state level and the VFW. At the beginning of the year, we could have a call with the Virginia State VFW Commander. He thinks they'd be open to it and it would just be a question of setting up a phone call and having a good pitch to explain the intent and announce how we'd like to have the District Commanders convene at the mini-conference at the breakout sessions to generate interest and volunteers. Jim asked

Bruce if he would be capable of taking the lead on this, and it would be greatly appreciated. Bruce agreed to make contact with the state commander. The group agreed it was a good idea to make a goal for that form of engagement. It's something that they will look forward to after the first of the year. Jim reminded everyone that we are on a fairly short time with the conference scheduled at the beginning of March. It would be ideal to provide as much time (out of the two months that we have left) as possible, so we can get the word out, it will be critical.

Jim called for any other thoughts or comments on the follow-up to the CVEB presentation from last week, and there were none.

Update on the conference. Jim shared that he has lots of announcement postcards available for people to hand out for the conference. He suggested that if anyone is attending any other events, hand them out or make them accessible. Some have cards already but if more is needed, let him know and copy his assistant Tammy Keaton, and one of them will make sure they get them. You may swing by and grab them, or we are also more than happy to mail them to you, we have a couple thousand of them and can have more printed up as needed. It would be ideal if we could flood the market with the cards, announcing the conference just to get people engaged. There are also professionals in the field who come into contact with Veterans, their Families, or caregivers, if you're working with clients, hand them out. If your office has multiple locations just send us a note, and Tammy Keaton can drop a stack in the mail, you'll get them in a couple of days. Jeff Say, Bruce Campbell, and Samantha Strong all noted they need some.

Bruce requested a soft copy to send to all the members of the mental health task force. He also mentioned Hero's Bridge has a great networking capability and is planning to see Molly Brooks in the next week or so. He'll ask her to use her media too.

Registration. Jim shared that we are already seeing some registrations trickle in, not a lot, but a few. We really need to get the word out to try and have people register if at all possible. It would help in many ways.

If you have social media and those types of things that your organization uses, or if you have email lists and chains and all that type of stuff and want to push out the message. Let us know and we can have our communication department work up the social media artwork.

Jim inquired if there are any other thoughts on how we can best get the word out and the other avenues or pathways. Angela Jameson asked if we have sent a request to have the VA post it to their social media at all, but we have not. She will provide that information to Jim.

Jeff Say shared that his team is going to post it on their social media. Their marketing communications team has it to go after the first of the year and he's received a ton of requests for information. He recently spoke at the Fauquier Senior Center, and they'd like him to drop off some. He suggested dropping them off at all the Senior Centers, there are a lot of Veterans that attend there. Also, Downtown Historic Smoke is very Veterans-friendly and focused, and he plans to take some there as well. They have a group of Veterans that come by every Thursday.

Jim added that there are tons of those little groups that are meeting our community that he doesn't have insight on, and if you know of any more to add them to the list of recipients for a stack of cards.

Bruce knows of a Virginia vets magazine, VFW, and thinks the next issue is coming out in February, probably the end of the month. It'll be a little late, but we could still try it. He knows who to send that to, just so we're not duplicating efforts. He'll take on sending the flyer to the editor of the Virginia Events magazine. Even if it may be that they have an email distribution list or something like that, he'll ask if they have any more expedient way to get it out.

Breakout Sessions. Scott asked if we have anything set for breakout sessions yet. Jim responded that we hadn't yet, and this was going to be the next question.

The smaller event planning group will talk about this in the next meeting. These will be the next components we'll need to nail down. If you have thoughts on people specifically, that's great. Let us know. We have talked about potential topics, but if you have other ideas, also let him know.

Bruce asked if DVS would be able to come with their representatives who can assist with claims, and if there'll be that type of opportunity there. Jim believes there's the opportunity to do the enrollment/registration piece, but nothing further. If anybody has any more information from DVS on that at all at this point, we'll need to know.

Benefits Enrollment. Jennifer Sztalkoper (DVS) advised that we can ask Guy Dinkins, who is their Benefits Regional Director in the north, to potentially assign somebody up for the conference. Processing claims in person is a much more extensive process, each claim is different depending on the person and their needs and so on, so it is not recommended this be at the event. But at least to provide information, this is honestly how we partner all the time with benefits for events. She doesn't think he'll see an issue with that, and it is something that Jennifer (DVS) can coordinate. Our VFS program team can coordinate with their sister service on the benefits side. The group agreed it was a good idea to make this a goal for the event.

Exhibitor and Breakout Session Leads. Angela Jameson offered to send Jim and Tammy the list of exhibitors and the breakout session leads she had sent a while back, so it is at the top of our emails again. She has a list of contacts for people who may be interested in that, so she'll send it again and include the public affairs stuff. She asked if there would be a registration mechanism for the exhibitors that she could share internally with VA counterparts. Yes, we can figure out a registration piece for exhibitors/vendors.

Agenda. Jim shared that the morning sessions, securing speakers for the pinning ceremony and panel discussion, are in good shape. We have the welcome remarks being performed by our local Congressional Office; Congresswoman Spanberger will be doing that. It is then followed up by the pinning ceremony that Anthony Barns has been able to secure. He is also working to get the military band as part of the pinning ceremony. We'll then have a moderated question and answer session hosted by one of the directors from the new Fredericksburg office that Tom Pratt has been able to arrange. And we will then have lunch for people.

Food. The other critical thing to try and figure out is approximately how many people we need to plan lunches. He inquired if anyone had ideas on food providers and shared his position to try and make it fairly simple. He happened to catch one of Jersey Mike's national commercials recently which indicated they do a lot with local Veterans services, and suggested we see if they can cater. Lunch could be as simple as having several sandwiches, drinks, chips, and cookie options. Jeff cautioned Jim that the local Jersey Mikes is no longer locally owned and the person who did locally own it opened Steak and Cheese Please. Mission Barbecue was mentioned but we do not have one locally. The group agreed it was a good idea to make this a goal for the event.

Bruce asked if there would be an opportunity for some of the service organizations to recruit. It could pull in some of the veteran men because that's always a motivator for posts, becoming all-American, and getting their rewards at the end of the year. They've got to hit their recruitment targets and so it might draw the post commanders or representatives in if they had an opportunity. There could be multiple tables or a single table with multiple representatives from different posts and localities.

Jim couldn't see why not, especially if some of those service groups wanted to have a vendor table or something like that where people could get information, sure.

Jim called for any other questions on the mini-conference.

Update on Resource Specialist. Caleb was not able to join today therefore Jim asked Jennifer if there were any updates she could share on the hiring of the resource specialist for the region. Jennifer Sztalkoper (DVS), Assistant Regional Manager for the VVFS team shared that the VFS staff has conducted interviews over this month. There is a final round of interviews that is happening this week for the position, and then they're hoping to onboard the resource specialist on January 10th. She is meeting later this week with Tammy Taylor at Encompass to discuss the training schedule and office space. Probably next month, she'll have some more updates for everybody on it. She could potentially ask them to join us for the next meeting. Jim added that Encompass Community Supports is in the process of hiring a Suicide and Opioid Overdose Response Support Specialist. The job was posted, and the staff has begun interviews. Hopefully, this person will be all set to start next month. Both positions are moving forward.

Partner updates. Angela brought forth some information about the annual report for suicide prevention from the VA which came out right around Thanksgiving. She put the link in the chat for the group. Jim also emailed it to everyone. She added that there is a brand new website that's user-friendly and has very helpful information. The report is pretty lengthy, detailed, and helpful, but the website actually kind of just breaks things down. It goes over what's happening, what the VA is doing, what's next, and what communities can do to support those efforts. Take a look if you all have some time. It's great information and if there is any need for her to dig into any of this further with you, let her know. Bruce shared that he has a Vets Task Force meeting on Thursday.

Jim called for any other updates, and there were none.

Next Meeting. Jim advised the group would get back together after the first of the year.

The group wished each other Happy Holidays.

Adjournment. The meeting was adjourned at 10:41 am.