

SPIRIT OF CHAPLAINCY

NATIONAL VA CHAPLAIN CENTER—HAMPTON, VA

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF VA CHAPLAINCY

A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Life Transitions

The songwriter Jennie Wilson wrote, “Time is filled with swift transition. Naught of earth unmoved can stand. Build your hopes on things eternal. Hold to God’s unchanging hand.”

When the editorial committee decided on this theme ‘transition’ for the May edition of the newsletter, I immediately embraced its relevancy. Our nation and government are going through a period of transition which can be both good and unsettling for those moving from one administration to the next.

Recently, I began a transition from one position, Associate Director, to a new position, the VA Chaplain Service National Director.

Transition is more than “change.” It is the inner process through which people come to terms with a change as they let go of how things used to be, and reorient themselves to the way that things are now. *(continued on next page...)*



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SOMEDAY YOU WILL DO IT TOO—RETIRE

Often as I stepped from my car into the VA parking lot in the last several years, my first thought was “How soon will I retire? How soon can I?” I found my work rewarding and challenging, and also wearying. The constant tension of addressing different and, at times, conflicting personalities, the keeping up with the onslaught of the newest and best customer service programs, the dealing with the first-of-the-year-never-enough money for programs Veterans need, and the-end-of-the-year-hurry-up-and-spend-the-extra money you just received, took its toll. The transition to retirement looked very attractive. *(continued on pg 3)*

The Gift of MHICS

When I reflect on my experience last year during the Mental Health Integration with Chaplain Service (MHICS) 2nd cohort, I am humbled that I was afforded the privilege to experience such an impactful program. I didn't know what to expect during the first face-to-face session in St. Petersburg, Florida but I anticipated that participating in MHICS would be the beginning of a journey that would prove to be vocationally transformational.

Many years ago, a wise and seasoned chaplain encouraged me to be "highly visible and very valuable" as I entered chaplaincy, embracing the ministry that God had entrusted to me. Over the years, I have moved toward being integrated within the Interdisciplinary Teams (IDT) that I served. I often contributed by adding insight when issues of spiritual distress or spiritual injury surfaced during team meetings; after all, I was the chaplain and I only dealt with the deep and mysterious issues of the soul.

Before embarking on my yearlong MHICS journey, I believed that I had a good understanding of the individual roles and functions of the IDT. Periodically, I contacted a psychiatrist, a social worker or a psychologist to "compare notes" about a patient with a complex mental health history. My relationship with the IDT was limited to cordial yet infrequent intentional interactions. I respected the work of the individual disciplines in the IDT, but "I stayed in my lane" and I observed the unspoken expectation that the mental health providers would "stay in their lanes." Although the team met weekly, we addressed the needs of Veterans within the silos of our individual disciplines. MHICS challenged me to be intentional as a chaplain, not to work in isolation. I was invited to consider a new way of being a chaplain in collaborating with all disciplines, especially mental health providers, in order to effectively address the needs of the Veterans.

MHICS encouraged me to explore my role as chaplain as an integral member of the IDT. Being highly visible and very valuable, for me, looks much different today than many years ago. I have intentionally built collegial relationships with mental health providers who serve with me in the AVAMC. I focused on developing ongoing collaboration initiatives. The first initiative involved enhancing the Atlanta VA's CPE Fellowship program by creating a curriculum for two 8-week courses to introduce Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Motivational Interviewing (MI), two therapeutic modalities that were introduced during MHICS. I have invited our local psychologists, who are designated trainers for ACT and MI, to establish a collaborative partnership with Chaplain Service and co-teach the courses with me.

In addition to teaching, MHICS aroused in me an interest in chaplain research. I have gained a respect and appreciation for evidence-based practices and one day hope to be the primary investigator on a spirituality research study with Veterans. In the meantime, in an effort to gain research experience, I have been asked by a group of psychologists to lead the Clergy Advisory Board for a research project focusing on providing MI training for African American pastors. Planning for this project fuels my desire for research that was ignited during the MHICS cohort.

I am excited by all of the possibilities that will be ignited as other chaplains embrace collaborative ministry. For you, it may not be found in research or in teaching but there are countless ways to collaborate with the mental health providers in your current context.

Chaplain Valerie Sanders
Atlanta, GA