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Weekly Newsgram - September 27th, 2017

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The Challenge of Chaplaincy

Soon the Military Chaplains Association will gather in Newport News for the 92nd Annual Meeting and National Institute. This year our theme is *Religion and Spirituality: The Impact on Chaplains*.



The First Secular Humanist Service at Lackland 2013 courtesy of Vicki Gettman

An article entitled "[Humanist services at Lackland raise eyebrows - but draw crowds](#)" from the San Antonio Express News is worth noting as we prepare to gather and discuss the challenges we face. In the article J.p.Lawrence explores the beginnings and current phenomenon of the secular humanist gathering held each Sunday morning for recruits at Lackland. According to the article, meetings "now attract 1,000 trainees or more, a major share of the 3,800 who attend religious services each week."

The meetings are led by a former Army staff sergeant, Vicki Gettman, who drives to the base and leads the two hour phenomenon. Roughly half of those who attend the service identify as Christian according to Gettman, with others identifying as atheists, agnostics, Satanists, Scientologists, the Norse religions, and others. In researching the article, the author found of 20 individuals who attended the meetings when they were recruits, at the most, four identified as humanists. One of those interviewed indicated she attended the gatherings as she had not found a religious service to she liked and went "to interact with trainees and adults and feel like an equal for a bit."

The meetings are designed to provide opportunity for the attendees to discuss and be heard on

topics of importance them. The author relates that at a recent service more than 30 trainees took turns to offer opinions on why people are less religiously affiliated today than in the past. Another draw of the service is the final 30 minutes where Gettman provides "nerd news" - an update on what is happening in the outside world. A former attendee cited this as a significant reason he attended.

Each of us likely respond to this phenomenon of a plurality of trainees attending a meeting of secular humanists rather than a traditional religious service in a different way. Some may say, "shut it down - it has no place in our system"; some may react with horror or disgust; some may say it reflects the spirit of the age; some may welcome this challenge to tradition; some may be challenged to think of how to reach these individuals with the faith we embrace in a means which draws them in.

As we gather in Newport News later this month as an association of chaplains, we look forward to discussing these sorts of phenomenon and the challenges they present for us. I am in hopes many of you are able to be with us and enter into a time of reasoning together.

Lyman Smith
Executive Director

Suicide Care, Prevention & Research Initiative

Carol Stewart and Dr. Jessica LaCroix will be in attendance during our Annual Meeting in Newport News VA from October 23-26. As researchers developing a Special Operations Force Suicide Prevention Workbook for chaplaincy, they seek chaplains, chaplain assistants, or religious program specialists who have had experiences managing suicide-related events within the SOF community.

Anyone who has been part of such a chaplain care situation is invited to meet with them for a confidential 60 minute interview to better understand the needs and challenges of care providers working with SOF service members and their families in this important area.

Please send a note to chaplains@mca-usa.org to sign up for this opportunity. Sign ups will also be available at the meeting

For more information see the attachment [here](#).

Big Data and Suicide Prevention

The VA launched a system wide suicide prevention program in April called Recovery Engagement and Coordination for Health - Veterans Enhanced Treatment or REACH VET.

The new initiative is in response to the unacceptable statistic that 20 veterans take their own lives each day. REACH VET uses a predictive model to analyze existing data from Veterans' health records to identify those at a statistically elevated risk for suicide, hospitalization, illness or other adverse outcomes. This allows VA to provide pre-emptive care and support for Veterans, in some cases before a Veteran even has suicidal thoughts. see description [here](#)

In a recent segment on NPR Morning Edition discussing the Impact of War REACH VET was discussed. Among the comments -

- Suicide among veterans is 22 percent higher than for civilians of the same age, and broken out by gender, the rate is a startling 2.5 times higher for women. That's according to the latest Department of Veterans Affairs data released this month. Now, the military used to have lower rates of suicide.

- For six years, the Pentagon and VA mined their considerable data to create a program called

REACH VET. It launched in April. The program relies on another conclusion from a decade of research - asking if someone is feeling suicidal does not trigger suicide attempts. So a phone call from a VA clinician can be a surprise, but one that helps a veteran recognize the gravity of their situation

- Bryan (Dr. Craig Bryan, University of Utah) is a veteran himself. He treated combat casualties in Iraq, and he saw suicide there. He published a study this year showing that no-suicide contracts don't work. He's afraid they might even deter some vets who are suicidal from seeking help out of a sense of shame.

- The past decade of research has also determined that some widely used practices don't work, including no-suicide contracts, where a patient makes a pledge not to kill themselves. Something like that is on its way through Congress. It's called The Oath of Exit. Upon leaving the service, troops would swear to reach out to another vet before they harm themselves.

To listen to the entire program go [here](#)

Religion and Spirituality: The Impact on Chaplains

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