

Veterans Services staff provides support for veterans on good days and bad

By Molly Walsh

After almost two decades of working within the [Travis County Veterans Service Office](#), Susan Lewis has developed a golden rule for her employees: to meet each veteran where they are at. The Travis County Veteran Service Office is often a first point of contact, a bridge between veterans and the services that are provided by the state or federal government. The Travis County Veteran Service Office has a “boots on the ground” style of working directly with veterans to connect them with both governmental or nonprofit services.

“We meet the veteran where they are,” said Susan Lewis, director of the Travis County Veteran Service Office. “A lot of veterans get turned away because they're out of sorts. They've been drinking...didn't check this box, you have a bad discharge. And...we don't do that.”

This kind of support can also extend to veterans with specific needs, including women veterans and veterans who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community. The Travis County Veteran Service Office decided earlier this year to expand the women veteran coordinator position, to also serve LGBTQ+ veterans.

Care coordinator positions dedicated to LGBTQ+ veterans are becoming more common on a national level since the implementation of the Veteran Health Administration's [LGBT Veteran Care Coordinator](#) program [in 2016](#). The program stipulates that every Veterans Health Administration location must have a dedicated LGBTQ+ Veteran Care Coordinator.

Katherine Molina, the women veteran and LBGQ+ Coordinator for the Travis County Veteran Service Office said the office implemented an LGBTQ+ coordinator at a county level because of an increased demand from the veterans themselves, as well as the greater cultural shifts taking place within the VA.

The support that Lewis and Molina provide includes day to day administrative tasks, like helping a veteran access their VA benefits or filling out the proper paperwork. Services can also be more specialized, like connecting a transgender veteran to transition-related healthcare. The job of a veteran service officer can also run deeper, becoming a trusted confidant when a veteran is in crisis.

Molina said the office has a very clear line of communication with their veteran clients. Having served in the Marines, Molina has developed a level of solidarity with the veterans that she works with, knowing firsthand the experience of life in the military and as a veteran.

“We have that understanding of what they're going through,” said Molina. “It may not be exactly the same, but you know there's stuff that I've been through, that Susan's been through that, it may not be similar, but it's pretty close to understanding what was going on...Our main concern and our main priority is helping the veteran, whatever it may be.”

And by developing these relationships, clients turn to the veteran service office during odd hours, when they are experiencing a mental health crisis, or other situations where they are in need. Although Lewis and Molina are grateful to have developed a deep level of trust with

clients, it can also be difficult at times to manage several complex cases with only a set number of resources available.

“If we can't help you, we will find someone within the county, within the state, within federal, somewhere,” said Molina. “We will find the help that you need.”

And for Army veteran Mariola Nieronow, the Travis County Veteran Service Office helped her submit a disability claim to the VA. Over the years, Nieronow worked with multiple veteran service organizations in the Travis County region, but this was the first time she had worked with Travis County Veteran Service Office. With the help of the veteran service office, Nieronow had support in navigating the sometimes-complex requirements needed to submit a claim, from procuring certain medical records, to service history paperwork.

When Nieronow first set out to submit the disability claim to VA, she started working with another veteran service group that she thought could help her.

“It was supposed to be so great,” said Nieronow. “But they were not so great. They were awful.”

To vent about the situation, Nieronow then reached out to Molina, who she knew from a previous job. Molina invited Nieronow to submit the disability claim with the help of the Travis County Veteran Service office. Nieronow said Molina helped get the disability claim back on track and ready to submit to the VA.

“They were very, very helpful,” said Nieronow. “They helped me to get to the next level of stuff...I was very appreciative of how hard they work for the veterans, as well. Because I know a lot of them are veterans, as well. So, they know how frustrating it is to work with the VA.”

Throughout her career in the Air Force, and now working directly with veterans, Lewis has gained a unique perspective where she is able to observe gaps in veteran services, particularly for women. Along the way, Lewis has dedicated her time to not only working directly with veterans, but also advocating for greater access for healthcare for female veterans and for expanded services to veterans in vulnerable situations.

When Lewis started working for the Travis County Veteran Service Office in 2002, she noticed that women veterans had few choices for healthcare in the Austin area and were often forced to drive to other cities, like Temple, to access OBGYN care. Lewis said that when visiting the VA hospital in Temple, women also had longer wait times to receive care, because the hospital didn't have the infrastructure in place to treat female patients.

“We banded together and raised a little bit of hell,” said Lewis.

Throughout the years, healthcare access has gradually improved and more services are now available to women veterans. Although there is still room for improvement, according to Lewis, there are now women's health clinics for veterans located in Austin, Temple and Waco.

In her role as women veteran service coordinator, Molina can often lend an ear to a wider range of clients. Molina said that sometimes veterans, particularly female veterans, are more comfortable speaking with a female veteran service coordinator when sharing traumatic events

from their military service. That is even more apparent when speaking with clients who have experienced military sexual trauma, Molina said. Many women are not comfortable disclosing those events with male service officers.

Female officers can “give them that security, that safety that they need to be able to express,” Molina said. “Because sometimes it’s very difficult for them to open up and maybe not even recall it, because it was traumatic for them.”

As video conferencing grew in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, Lewis and Molina were also able to uncover new avenues to serve women veterans, including those who are incarcerated. Through video conferencing, the veteran service office has greater access to incarcerated women veterans and increased privacy during their meetings. By providing incarcerated veterans with the services they need, Lewis said the veterans can begin the rehabilitation process before they are released.

Now, Molina and Lewis can “actually file the claim and get the process started or start gathering benefits for this person,” Lewis said, “so that when they get out, they have a head start or they have some other safety net or they're not so far back in the line.”

Most recently, Lewis and Molina have been grappling with how to help veterans at risk for losing their housing. According to Molina, many veteran housing assistance programs are only available to veterans who are currently experiencing homelessness, or for veterans who have spent at least one night in a homeless shelter.

But for veterans, shelters may have very stringent requirements, or may only accept certain genders, which can make shelter access difficult for women or for families with children.

“They had some spaces at the VA for the women,” said Molina. “But before that they were going to... Temple and then Waco for the shelters and they only had a certain amount of rooms, because everything was basically male, again, male dominated. Whether you're in the service or out of the service, it's always been a male dominant need... They've really never focused on what do women need. It's more of, okay, well, here you go, here's the veterans and it's always focused on the males, not the women.”

Both Lewis and Molina are working with the VA to help amend these issues with veteran housing assistance, so that the veteran can seek support before they lose their housing.