

# WRIISC *Advantage*

Winter 2022

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## DIRECTORS' CORNER

As we start a new year, we reiterate that the main commitment of WRIISC staff is to work hand in hand with Veterans toward the most positive health outcomes for difficult to diagnose conditions and those potentially related to environmental exposure. Educating both Veterans and Veteran providers is a core component of bringing this commitment to fruition and keeping best practices for Veteran care at the forefront. By offering a Veteran class series on environmental exposure concerns and providing on-line and live training for providers we offer up to date scientific and medical information as to the best practices to care for and communicate with the Veterans we serve. We are also happy to announce that our training on evaluating environmental exposures of Veterans will soon be a mandatory training for all VA providers! Stay tuned!

*Helena Chandler PhD*  
Director, NJ WRIISC

*Matt Reinhard, PsyD*  
Director, DC WRIISC

*Wes Ashford, MD, PhD*  
Director, CA WRIISC

### NJ WRIISC'S NEWLY APPOINTED DIRECTOR

WRIISC IS DELIGHTED to announce that as of early November, Helena Chandler, PhD was officially named as Director of the NJ WRIISC. Dr. Chandler's near 20-year history with the WRIISC is only one of the many reasons she will be exceptional in this role.

Dr. Chandler joined the WRIISC in the early days (2002) as a Postdoctoral Fellow in Behavioral Medicine, training in research through the New Jersey Medical School affiliated Chronic Fatigue Center for one year. She then received a National Research Service Award from the National Institute of Health to study medically unexplained symptoms for the remainder of fellowship in addition to being a member of the WRIISC clinical core.



In 2008, Dr. Chandler transitioned to the VA NJ healthcare system's Mental Health and Behavioral Science Service while still continuing to collaborate with WRIISC researchers. Returning to the WRIISC full time in 2009, over the years Dr. Chandler has served as Assistant Director of Research, Acting Associate Director of Clinical Services, Associate Director of Data Management and Administration, Assistant Chief (Deputy Director) and most recently Acting Chief/Director.

**Dr. Chandler has been indispensable and essential to the growth of the WRIISC and is the perfect Director to lead WRIISC into its next evolution!**

### Highlight of WRIISC Employees Who've Served

*Our greatest heroes work alongside us.*

#### NJ WRIISC

**Steven Greer, MS, EP-C**

U.S. Army/Army Reserve, 1999-2007

Mr. Steven Greer is a Health Science Specialist/Exercise Physiologist for the clinical team. Mr. Greer enlisted in the Army as a technical engineer 12 days after turning 17 to "Be All I Can Be". As a soldier, he learned that no assigned job was too big or too small. "I can empathize with our WRIISC patients on many levels because of my personal involvement and experience. I'm motivated and dedicated to providing the best services that I can for Veterans."

**Melissa McSwain, MS**

U.S. Navy, 1993-2003

Ms. Melissa McSwain is the lead Research Coordinator. Her military service

(Naval Flight Officer/Naval Intelligence) helped prepare her continuing work with Veterans by providing a strong foundation in leadership, discipline and project management. "I'm honored to continue the tradition serving others by working alongside WRIISC staff who care so deeply for our nation's Veterans."

#### DC WRIISC

**John Barrett, MD**

U.S. Army/National Guard, 1984-2019

Dr. John Barrett, Deputy Director, is a proud Army Veteran with over 35 years of service. He started as an Army medic immediately after high school and after three years stationed at Fort Ord, CA, he continued service in the California Army National Guard while attending college. Dr. Barrett retired after 28.5 years of commissioned service as a Colonel serving in a variety of leadership positions, with several overseas assignments and deployments. He is an Occupational and Environmental, Aerospace and Family



Medicine specialist, as well as a specialist in Preventive Medicine and Public Health. "The opportunity to continue serving Veterans means a great deal to me both personally and professionally."

**Michelle Kennedy Prisco, MSN, ANP-C**

U.S. Army, 1995-2009

During her service Ms. Michelle Prisco had the privilege of working in military hospitals caring for service members and their families. This experience definitely shaped her work as a nurse. "As a nurse practitioner at the DC WRIISC, I regularly work with our clinical team on improving our understanding of health impacts related to military environmental exposures. When discussing military environmental exposures or thinking about new research ideas to address these concerns, I often think of my military experience and the valuable lessons I learned during my time in the Army."



## Rebecca McCullers, RN

U.S. Air Force, 1995-2018

Ms. Rebecca McCullers is a Registered Nurse, Registered Yoga Instructor, and Certified Health and Wellness Coach. In the military she served as an officer, leader, nurse, and Inspector General. Ms. McCullers has worked in many diverse clinical and operational settings in the military health care system. "I'm passionate about health promotion and wellness and how these practices can help Veterans with chronic multi-symptom illnesses."



Certified in Preventive, Occupational and Environmental Medicine, and is a Fellow of the American College of Preventive Medicine. As Director of Post Deployment Health Services and Clinics at the CA WRIISC, Prof. Katz provides her expertise in Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Chemical/Biological/Radiological/Nuclear exposures, Preventive Medicine, Public Health, Internal Medicine, and Oncology to the team. "It is an honor and a privilege to care for and educate Veterans about their health and environmental concerns. It is essential to positive health outcomes and wellbeing for this much deserving population."

## Ansgar Furst, PhD

Allied German Air Force, 1989-1991

After completing basic training in '89, Dr. Ansgar Furst (a native German) was assigned to the Tactical Air Force Wing 33, the largest fighter-bomber wing of the German Air Force (Luftwaffe). He worked closely together with the embedded U.S. Air Force's 702nd Munitions Support Squadron concerning nuclear capabilities. Dr. Furst was honorably discharged at the rank of 2nd Lieutenant (O-1). He joined the WRIISC in 2010 and has led neuroimaging efforts since. "I love making a difference in the health of Veterans through the work I do and sharing important findings within the Veteran community."

## Tamera Guess

U.S. Army, 1989-1997

Ms. Tamera Guess is a Program Support Assistant. A significant portion of her duties include partnering with providers for the Telehealth Comprehensive and Health Coaching Clinics. She is an eight-year Army Veteran of Desert Storm who worked as 63B10 H Vehicle maintenance specializing in HUMVEE repair. Ms. Guess is honored to serve Veterans and has been with the VA for over 10 years. "Being a Veteran and also having post-traumatic stress issues, I have understanding and compassion toward every Veteran I have the privilege of interacting with."



## CA WRIISC

### Colonel Ronit Katz, MD

CA State Guard, 2010-Present

Colonel Dr. Ronit Katz is The Surgeon General for the CA Guard, consultant to NASA Medical Unit and a Clinical Professor of Medicine at Stanford University. Dr. Katz is Board



## Vincent Torres

U.S. Marine Corps, 1994-1998

Mr. Vincent Torres was a Military Policeman and a Special Reaction Team (SRT) member who gained experience in effective communication in emergency situations. He served with some great leaders who helped him form strong leadership traits he continues to build on today. "My training, experience, and Veteran status has allowed me to establish an immediate bond with the Veterans we evaluate."

## We thank all of our WRIISC staff past service members including:

NJ WRIISC: *Frank Molina, Duncan Ndirangu, Josette Scolari*; DC WRIISC: *Jeremy Chester, Walter Jachimowicz*

## Dr. Susan L. Santos, founding member of the NJ WRIISC, Moves to a New Role at WRIISC

**Dr. Susan Santos, an expert in risk communication, began at WRIISC in 2001. Passionate about changing the way that communication occurred between Veterans and their providers, Dr. Santos immediately began working with WRIISC clinicians about how to best partner and communicate with Veterans regarding their health concerns.**



Regular training sessions for WRIISC staff were held by Dr. Santos for many years, where she taught the fundamentals of risk communication and illustrated when/how to apply it. During these early years, Dr. Santos developed many WRIISC educational products and fact sheets, realizing our printed materials needed to be sensitive and address Veteran concerns and the importance of language in doing so. After all, it was these products that represented the WRIISC and our values.

Dr. Santos became the Director of Education and Risk communication in 2002. Her contributions to the WRIISC in this role in the last 20 years were immeasurable. Dr. Santos continued to delicately entwine principles of risk communication into the WRIISC program's mission and practices. Her expertise and leadership were further highlighted through numerous activities in provider education that included development of a continuing accredited webinar series and several accredited e-learning modules. She also led Veteran education initiatives, created a podcast series for the Veteran community, and was the Editor of this newsletter.

Dr. Santos helped give the WRIISC the highest standard for all communications and education products and services since WRIISC's inception. By remaining on the WRIISC team as a Senior Advisor for Education and Risk Communication, Dr. Santos will continue to be a key team member essential in shaping WRIISC's future.

*"I'm extremely thankful to have been a part of furthering education of our providers and Veterans and working with our Subject Matter Experts and an excellent team. I am particularly proud of my past work with the WRIISC Education team and our accomplishments and look forward to continuing to stand by them as their important work continues."*

- Dr. Susan Santos

# Former WRIISC Trainees- Where are They Now?

**The WRIISC Training Program aims to train health professionals with different academic backgrounds in clinical and applied basic research. Equipping the next generation of VA leaders to be sensitive to military exposures and other deployment related health concerns remains essential. Past trainees continue to excel in their fields and a few even continue on as WRIISC staff members.**

## NJ WRIISC

### Lauren Greenberg PhD, Post-Doctoral Fellowship, 2015-2017



Currently, Dr. Lauren Greenberg is Director of Whole Health at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System, supervisory psychologist, and Whole Health Network-Wide Education Coordinator for VISN 21, where she leads implementation of Whole Health by overseeing its strategic planning, development, and operations.

"The WRIISC fellowship provided diverse professional opportunities that allowed me to develop leadership skills and a deeper understanding of patient-centered care."

### Jennifer Presnall-Shvorin, PhD, Post-Doctoral Fellowship, 2016-2018

Dr. Jennifer Presnall-Shvorin is currently the Primary Care-Mental Health Integration program manager and a supervisory psychologist at Bay Pines VA Healthcare System. She currently serves as Chair of both the local Disruptive Behavior Committee and the local Psychology Training Committee's Multicultural Diversity Subcommittee. She also serves as Secretary of the Association of VA Psychologist Leaders. "Time with the WRIISC was a crucial element in establishing leadership goals, understanding the dynamics of interdisciplinary teams, and envisioning the creative and innovative potential of the VA."

### Edward Shadiack III DO, MPH, Clinical Fellowship, 2014-2015



Dr. Edward Shadiack is the NJ WRIISC Clinical Consult Lead of Physicians where he reviews all referrals to the program and provides both medical and environmental exposure evaluations. "The WRIISC fellowship offered me time to attend to the concerns of Veterans and the opportunity to deeply explore their symptoms and exposure concerns. Our integrated interdisciplinary approach in addressing

post-deployment complex medical conditions, and just how grateful our Veterans are for our clinical services, left me with the strong impression that this is the better way to practice medicine, and that is why I enjoy working at the WRIISC."

### Nicole Sullivan, PhD, Post-Doctoral Fellowship, 2017-2019

Dr. Nicole Sullivan is a WRIISC clinical psychologist. She develops and implements behavioral treatments for Veterans with chronic, post-deployment health concerns, as well as training psychology trainees and medical residents within the WRIISC and broader VA. She is also a member of the NJ Psychiatric

Association's Pain Management Task Force and Society of Behavioral Medicine's Pain Policy and Advocacy Subcommittee. "A fellowship at the WRIISC was crucial in providing me with the knowledge, skills and competencies to pursue my career goals and enhance the lives of Veterans through evidence-based clinical research."

### Samantha Varon, PsyD, Post-Doctoral Fellowship, 2018-2020



Dr. Varon was hired on at the WRIISC in 2021 as a full-time neuropsychologist where she has continued in both clinical (conducting psychological and neuropsychological evaluations for WRIISC Veterans) and research (projects aimed to address the unmet needs of Veterans living with complex symptoms) initiatives. "The WRIISC fellowship gave me the opportunity to work on an interdisciplinary team of providers dedicated to addressing multiple healthcare concerns and solidified my

desire to continue serving Veterans."

### Michael Falvo, PhD, Advanced Fellowship Post-Deployment Health, 2010-2012

Dr. Falvo is the Co-Director of the VA's Airborne Hazards and Burn Pits Center of Excellence. He is an also an Associate Professor at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School and an American College of Sports Medicine Clinical Exercise Physiologist. "Pursuing a fellowship at a study center provided me opportunities to generate research questions, as well as preliminary data, that were derived from our clinical experience and interactions with Veterans. This experience well-positioned me to be competitive as an independent scientist."

### Jake Lindheimer, PhD, Post-Doctoral Fellowship, 2015-2018



Dr. Jake Lindheimer helped his WRIISC mentors, Dr. Dane Cook and Dr. Michael Falvo, launch a VA funded multisite study which was designed to uncover pathophysiological mechanisms of Gulf War illness (GWI). Currently, he is employed at the William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital (Madison, WI) where he dedicates most of his time to

working on a VA Career Development Award aimed to develop evidence-based exercise prescriptions for Veterans with GWI. Additionally, part of his time is spent serving as the Deputy Chief of Research which involves overseeing and growing his facility's clinical research program. "I am grateful to the WRIISC faculty and staff for introducing me to Veterans health care and helping me gain the skills and experiences needed to be successful at the next stage of my career in the VA Healthcare system."

## DC WRIISC

### Chmaika Mills, PhD, Neuropsychology Fellowship, 2017-2019

Working with Veteran patients prepared Dr. Chmaika Mills well for her current position as a Clinical Neuropsychologist for the MedStar National Rehabilitation Network. Dr. Mills appreciated the opportunity to work with Veterans because her father is a 23-year Veteran of the Army and she could really identify with the struggles Veterans face. "The opportunity to be part of a multidisciplinary team helping Veterans was the best part of my experience. I learned a great deal with such value to my career."

Dr. Kyle Jaquess, PhD, Research Fellowship, 2019-2020



Dr. Kyle Jaquess is currently as Assistant Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience at Junita College in Pennsylvania. Two of his biggest take

aways while working at the WRIISC is how to multitask and his exposure to clinicians working directly with Veterans.

"Learning about Veteran's health struggles and their everlasting courage was most heartening."

-Dr. Kyle Jaquess

CA WRIISC

Timothy Avery, PsyD, Post-Doctoral Fellowship, 2017-2019



Dr. Timothy Avery is a Readjustment Counselor at the Peninsula Vet Center where he provides counseling for challenges faced in the transition from military service. Dr. Avery is a U.S. Naval Academy

graduate and served in the U.S. Navy, enlisted and officer, active and reserve, where he worked in multiple specialties and deployed to Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). "The WRIISC connected me with great mentors and colleagues and improved my understanding of clinical research. I chose to leverage my cultural knowledge of the military to advance mental health care."

Michael LaRocca, Ph.D, Post-Doctoral Fellowship, 2017-2019



Dr. Michael LaRocca is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and an Army Veteran. He is

an assistant professor in the psychology department at Virginia Military Institute (VMI) in Lexington, Virginia. He teaches a course on leadership to cadets, many of whom will soon become officers in the U.S. Military. He is a licensed clinical psychologist.

"I am thankful for my WRIISC experience which created valuable relationships while preparing me for my future career." -Dr. Michael LaRocca

## Research Matters

WRIISC continues to conduct research that relates to Veterans' health. Below is a study published by the DC WRIISC research team.

**PUBLICATION TITLE:** Compounding Effects of Traumatic Brain Injury, Military Status, and Other Factors on Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index: A Meta-analysis.

**QUESTION:** How is poor sleep quality resulting from traumatic brain injury (TBI) (concussion) further impacted when military status and other demographics including age and sex are accounted for?

**FINDINGS:** We observed that military cohorts without TBI had poorer sleep quality than civilians with TBI, possibly reflecting unique stressors associated with prior military stressors and other physical and/or psychological traumas. TBI in military cohort leads to further decline in sleep quality.

**MEANING:** TBI in military cohorts takes a bigger toll on sleep quality than in civilians. Since increasing age was also associated with poorer sleep quality, Veterans with TBI due to their military service combined with older age may be more susceptible to poorer sleep quality.

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:** This research appears in Military Medicine (Sept 2021). Contributors from DC WRIISC: Babu Henry Samuel, I, Breneman, C. B., Chun, T., Hamedi, A., & Barrett, J. P.

## HIGHLIGHTING WRIISC'S COLLABORATING PARTNERS

**Partnering with individuals and teams across VA, Department of Defense (DoD), and other federal agencies, as well as universities and research foundations continues to be critical to advancement in the field of Veterans health.**

Dr. Webb Smith is an expert in the evaluation of physical function and fitness among children with complex medical history, cardiometabolic, and chronic disease from under-served populations. Dr. Smith has spent over 15 years' measuring physical function, prescribing exercise, and monitoring physical fitness. He has special experience in developing comprehensive individualized treatment plans that combine exercise, nutrition, and behavior change to improve health.

It is experts, like Dr. Smith, that are helping begin to answer on one of the more common questions we receive from Veterans, "Will my exposures during my military service impact my kids?" In collaboration with investigators at VA and the

Airborne Hazards and Burn Pits Center of Excellence (AHBPCE) located at the NJ WRIISC, Dr. Smith and his team have launched the project, "Understanding Military Families and the Veteran's Role as a parent: Evaluating parental concerns about their children's health and wellbeing." Through this project, investigators are better understanding Veterans' concerns as well as generating fundamental knowledge about their child's development and health conditions. Dr. Smith's long-term goal is to evaluate the effects on offspring of Veteran parental exposure to airborne hazards and burn pits while deployed, and potential associations with developmental and chronic health conditions in children.



Dr. Webb Smith  
Assistant Professor  
The University of Tennessee  
Health Science Center  
Pediatric Obesity Program,  
Department of Pediatrics,  
College of Medicine

We express our gratitude to Dr. Smith for this collaboration and for working towards enhancing health outcomes for military families.

# Around the WRIISC News

## DC WRIISC

### Understanding Health Coaching

**WHAT IS HEALTH** coaching and more importantly what's in it for you? Health coaching encourages behavior change and lifestyle modification to curb the impact of symptoms related to chronic diseases including chronic multisymptom illness (CMI).

Coaches work with Veterans to develop reachable goals in exercise programs, improve sleep quality, improve diet, help with personal development and personal

relationships, spirit and soul, improve personal surroundings and work on ways to change mindsets that can aid in healing and coping.

Health coaches are keenly aware that all successful behavior change must come from within each individual. If you recognize that changes need to be made in your life to improve your overall health, then health coaching might be just what you need! If being coached interests you, inquire at

your local VA about the availability of health coaches.

Since the COVID pandemic, health coaches at the DC WRIISC schedule all appointments virtually. They assist Veterans to set behavior change goals and provide accountability until new habits are formed. Researchers at the DC WRIISC are currently studying if the combination of a provider's clinical recommendation and health coaching can reduce symptom severity for those Veterans with CMI. Early results of this study are encouraging and support that health coaching can make a difference in the lives of these Veterans.

## Exposure Education for Veterans

The WRIISC education class series for Veterans that addresses exposure concerns continues to be overwhelmingly successful, reaching those seeking information all around the country. WRIISC's last class, focused on exposure to Agent Orange and offered electronically, had over 700 attendees!

To join in and find out about the upcoming schedule of classes visit:  
<https://www.warrelatedillness.va.gov/>

## NJ WRIISC

### Airborne Hazards and Burn Pits Center of Excellence (AHBPCE) Strives for Best Veteran Care

**THE AIRBORNE HAZARDS** and Burn Pits Center of Excellence (AHBPCE) is working towards setting standards of care for Veterans with health concerns/conditions related to airborne hazard exposure and understanding their experiences within the VA health care system.



The AHBPCE formed a panel of experts that are working to develop consistent terminology for how to evaluate and describe constrictive bronchiolitis. This will subsequently lead to the diagnosis and management

of it in military personnel. The goals of this expert panel include providing guidelines and toolkits for physicians who can in turn offer Veterans first-rate care.

Understanding and listening to Veterans is also core to the AHBPCE. With this in mind, the AHBPCE held a series of virtual Veteran Listening Sessions across the country to facilitate two-way communication between the AHBPCE and Veterans who were interested in ongoing efforts surrounding the study of airborne hazards and burn pits. The goal was to better understand Veterans' experiences and learn about the respiratory health concerns which were most important to them.

Based on Veteran feedback, several recommendations were developed in moving forward. These included more education efforts geared toward Veterans and providers as well as the development of more directed materials on airborne hazards and burn pits among others. Addressing Veterans' most pressing needs with research and clinical care that leads to the most effective outcomes is vital. Stay tuned for updates about important work done at the AHBPCE!

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Efforts by Dr. Susan Santos at the NJ WRIISC allowed for WRIISC training for providers on how to assess Veterans' deployment-related environmental exposure concerns to be featured on the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Learning Connection Website, <https://www.cdc.gov/training/learning/index.html>, giving the training national recognition.

Way to go, Dr. Santos!



## CA WRIISC

### 3 Takeaways of Health Coaching

**VETERANS EVALUATED AT** the CA WRIISC have the opportunity to participate in health coaching sessions to better take control of their overall health. The following takeaways from these sessions are applicable to all Veterans.

#### 1 –Setting SMART goals increases successes and growth.

Setting Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, & Timely or SMART goals involves planning out the details of the goals and giving them clear direction. A person wouldn't get in the car and expect to get to where is needed without having any plan of how to get there. Similarly, success to meet this goal without important planning aspects would be nearly impossible.

Visit the side box on this page to learn specifics about how to set a SMART goal.

Turning a vague goal in to a SMART goal: if the goal is to eat more vegetables, simply saying one will eat more vegetables is likely to not be enough. Making this a SMART goal may look like "I am going to add one cup of vegetables to my dinner meal on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays for three weeks." This is specific (amounts, days, and meals), measurable (also amount), achievable and realistic (not a drastic amount to add to meals), and timely (can re-evaluate in three weeks to see what is/is not working).

#### 2 – Self-care is important to being one's best self.

The analogy on flights is always "put your mask on before you help anyone else," and the same can be applied to life: taking care of oneself is the first and most important step to be the best one can be for both themselves and others around them.

#### 3 – Start somewhere, anywhere, but just START.

The old, short saying "one foot in front of the other" really does go a long way. Whether it's starting a new exercise routine, hobby or career, driving through thick fog, or aiming for long-term goals, often the most difficult yet most important step is getting started. Once you do, the biggest hurdle is behind you.

(Reference: The role of coaching in health care: Getting better at what we do - Ariadne Labs)

***While Veterans are encouraged to follow individualized guidance from any assigned health coach, standing by these principles will help ALL Veterans take better control of their own health.***

# WRIISC Advantage

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