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Civil Rights Group Appoints New Advisory Council Members

AUSTIN—Disability Rights Texas (DRTx) welcomes seven new members to its Protection and Advocacy for Individual with Mental Illness (PAIMI) Advisory Council: Maria Anna Esparza of Spring Branch (near San Antonio), Anna Gray of San Antonio, Melissa Morphis of Amarillo, Jim Navarro of McAllen, Regina (Gina) Smuts of Austin, Teresa Wood of Lewisville (near Dallas), and Terri Wolaver of Abilene.

The Council is mandated by the federal PAIMI Act which requires each state to establish and operate a protection and advocacy (P&A) system for individuals with mental illness. PAIMI Advisory Council members advise the P&A system on policies and priorities that protect and advocate for the rights of such individuals.

Maria Anna Esparza has been an educational professional for 30 years. She currently serves as President of the Texas Jail Project and is the Coordinator of the Language Proficiency Assessment Committee for the school where she serves. She is a lifelong advocate for people with disabilities, with a special focus on individuals with mental illness.

Anna H. Gray is a passionate advocate for people with mental illness, using her recovery from life issues to impact service systems and policy. She co-owns PRO International which provides training, coaching, and professional development services for peers. She is co-founder and Executive Director of Prosumers International.

Melissa Morphis works at Texas Panhandle Centers as a Family Partner. She has been a volunteer with her local PTA, the National Alliance for Mental Illness (NAMI), and Agape Walk Committee. Because she has family members with disabilities, she is passionate about working to protect and advocate on behalf of all people with disabilities.

Jim Navarro received a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Baylor University and a Master’s in Business Administration from The University of Texas-Pan American (now University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley). He works as an Employee Relations Officer for South Texas College. He has more than 12 years of experience working in the Texas House of Representatives on various congressional campaigns and has also worked as Marketing Director for The University of Texas-Pan American’s Rio South Texas Regional Procurement Center. Navarro is a certified Title IX Investigator and Adjudicator, a candidate for membership into the Texas Association of Mediators, and is a member of several professional associations.

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Gina Smuts currently works as an Executive Assistant and Department Manager for the Department of Special Education at The University of Texas at Austin. She has worked there since 1998 and held positions in Systems Administration and Program Administration for the Department of Educational Psychology. She was privileged to be a part of launching The Texas Child Study Center. Smuts has family members who have experienced mental illness and is a passionate advocate, giving guest lectures several times a year. She shares her personal experiences from a different perspective to help make a difference for others.

Teresa Wood is the mother of three children, two of whom have been diagnosed with mental illness. She worked in the health insurance field for 17 years and the medical field for 20 years. Wood has served as a volunteer in a variety of roles for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. She advocates regularly for her own children and is excited to join the PAIMI council to be a voice for children with mental health issues in Texas.

Terri Wolaver spent years advocating for her son who was diagnosed with a mental illness. Losing her son to suicide, she has given many years to helping other children and families impacted by mental illness. Her volunteer works includes membership with the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill of San Angelo and serving on the board of Abilene’s MHMR Planning and Network Advisory Committee. Wolaver worked for the Texas Department of Transportation for more than 21 years and is now retired. Because she lives in a rural community, she understands the challenges faced by the underserved population of people with mental illness in our state.

“I am honored to welcome these outstanding individuals to our PAIMI Council,” said Mary Faithfull, executive director of Disability Rights Texas. “They have strong personal records of supporting and advocating for the rights of people with mental illness. I believe each brings a unique perspective and will add tremendous value to our organization.”

Persons with mental illness, family members, and professionals are all represented on the Council. DRTx is committed to appointing members representative of Texas’ diverse ethnic and cultural communities and makes efforts to ensure the Council reflects different geographic areas of the state.

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*Disability Rights Texas (previously named Advocacy Inc.) is the federally designated legal protection and advocacy agency (P&A) for people with disabilities in Texas. Its mission is to help people with disabilities understand and exercise their rights under the law, ensuring their full and equal participation in society.*

Visit [www.DRTx.org](http://www.DRTx.org) for more information.