

Wisconsin Veterans Museum: Plans to collaborate with Smithsonian and International Coalition of Sites of Conscience on year-long community engagement initiative

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MADISON — This Smithsonian Institution has selected the Wisconsin Veterans Museum to participate in the *Fostering Critical Conversations with Our Communities* program. The museum is one of nine organizations selected as part of a cohort to join in a year-long, Smithsonian Institution community engagement initiative in collaboration with the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. The 2022 pilot program is a hands-on opportunity for two staff members from the Wisconsin Veterans Museum to develop skills that will deepen relationships in the community and implement projects to foster important, sometimes difficult or ignored, conversations in, with, and for the local community.

“Encouraging and supporting these kinds of essential conversations that bridge and connect communities and strengthen connections between people is key to our strategic goals,” said Myriam Springuel, Director of SITES and Smithsonian Affiliations. “We are grateful for the collaboration with the Coalition which allows us to provide one-on-one coaching and cohort meetups with their guidance for our Affiliate participants over the next six months of training sessions.”

Two Wisconsin Veterans Museum staff members will work closely with cohort members to develop an implementation plan to open conversations with Wisconsin’s Indigenous nations and amplify the stories of Indigenous veterans in United States military service. The resulting project will help the Wisconsin Veterans

Museum partner with Indigenous communities in sharing their stories with the Wisconsin audience. It will also assist the Wisconsin Veterans Museum to deliver on being a place where “Every veteran is a story.” This groundwork with Wisconsin’s Indigenous communities also will aid the Wisconsin Veterans Museum in reaching and amplifying the voices of Black, Latinx, Asian, LGBTQ+, and the women’s veterans community throughout the state of Wisconsin.

“We know there are more stories to tell of our Indigenous nations in the state, and we need to do better to understand the people, recognize their service, and preserve their stories. With that understanding, two years ago the staff added as a strategic priority outreach and relationship development with underrepresented populations in our community. We are honored and excited to begin this project to tell the full spectrum of stories of Wisconsin’s veterans,” said Museum Director Chris Kolakowski.

The learning methodology for the program is provided by the Coalition with coaching from its staff members, Smithsonian leaders, and members of the cohort. Monthly trainings will address topics such as understanding community; learning about trauma, healing and memorialization; building reciprocal relationships; understanding organizational impacts; and maintaining community relationships. Project resources will be shared on the Smithsonian Affiliations website at the conclusion of the program.

“Having difficult conversations is not always easy, but it is necessary to build more just societies,” says Braden Paynter, Director of Methodology and Practice at the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience. “These trainings aim to help cultural organizations facilitate meaningful conversations that address the past with honesty and forge trust and compassion in their communities today. Through such dialogue we can begin to heal historic divisions and foster a new peace.”

Smithsonian Affiliations is a national outreach program that develops long-term, collaborative partnerships with museums, educational, and cultural organizations to share Smithsonian collections, build collaborative networks and engage learners of all ages with Smithsonian resources. More information is available at affiliations.si.edu

The International Coalition of Sites of Conscience is the only global network dedicated to transforming places that preserve the past into spaces that promote civic action. With more than 300 museums, historic sites, memorials, and memory

initiatives in 66 countries, the Coalition has collaborated with sites around the world on dialogue-based initiatives, exhibition design, community-based memorialization, and interpretive and strategic planning. They have trained over 15,000 museum and historic site professionals at their member sites and other public and private entities in dialogue, audience engagement, equity, and inclusion. More information is available at <https://www.sitesofconscience.org/en/home/>