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COUNTY COMMISSIONERS Association of Pennsylvania

The County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania (CCAP) is the voice of county government; a statewide nonprofit, nonpartisan association representing all 67 counties in Pennsylvania. CCAP members include county commissioners, council members, county executives, administrators, chief clerks and solicitors. CCAP strengthens the counties' abilities to govern their own affairs and improve the well-being and quality of life for every Pennsylvania resident. It advocates for favorable state and federal legislation, programs and policies on behalf of counties. CCAP is committed to service excellence through education, information, insurance, technology and other programs that support effective county government. Founded in 1886, CCAP is a partner with the National Association of Counties.

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fall
2022

PENNSYLVANIA **county news**

America's veterans have sacrificed so much to keep our country safe. In addition to showing gratitude by thanking our veterans for their service, it's also important to demonstrate appreciation by offering resources and assistance. Pennsylvania counties are committed to providing our heroes with the services they have earned and rightly deserve.

features



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LISA SCHAEFER

Executive Director
County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania

Keep showing up.

It's a mantra repeated by Desiree Linden, winner of the 2018 Boston Marathon in a freezing, driving downpour. A month before that win, she posted on social media that every day she makes the choice to show up and see what she's got, and to try to be better. In short: Keep showing up.

This simple phrase has a lot of implications. What we do tomorrow is based on the effort we make today, building little by little, knowing that even if we don't see the strength we are building right away, by a month or a year or longer down the road, we will reap the results of each investment. I use this trick myself, telling myself that I'm putting each hill I run up "in the bank" to draw against to meet my goals. (Or, my sister mantra to get me through now that colder weather is upon us, where I tell myself I don't have to like it – I just have to get it done.)

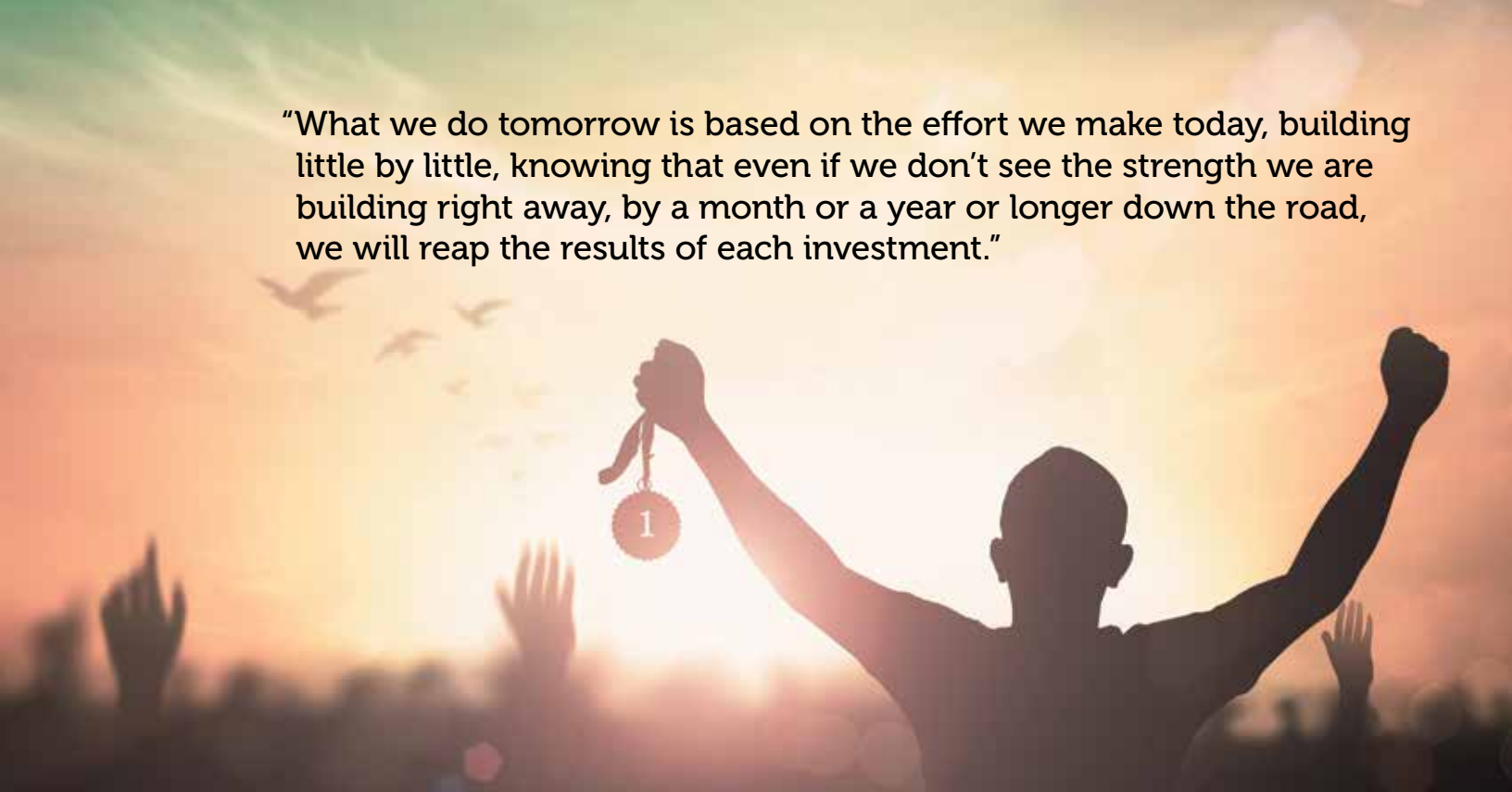
This issue of our *County News* is dedicated to our veterans – those who have devoted their lives to the idea that they would keep showing up for their country and their communities. Our military men and women have made untold contributions and sacrifices across history to ensure our nation's security, and we cannot stop supporting them once their active service has concluded. As Carbon County commissioner and NACo Veterans and Military Services Committee Chair Chris Lukasevich shared at our Annual Conference, Pennsylvania's counties have a long and proud history of serving our nation's veterans. It is our honor to know that through our county veterans services offices, we can help to make sure our veterans are able to access and understand all of the benefits they have earned and deserve so that they can also thrive as in civilian life.

The idea of "keep showing up" applies to public service more

broadly, too. Public service is about being there for those who need us the most, about being there to do the things that others don't necessarily want to do. Every day we are faced with challenges in the work that we do. More and more people need counties' help from mental health and substance abuse. Unforeseen emergencies like pandemics emerge out of nowhere. Workforce changes are leading to dozens and even hundreds of vacant positions, straining the workloads of those who remain. And misinformation threatens the work counties do to run fair, secure and accurate elections – and often county personnel themselves.

At the same time, there are often fewer and fewer resources to meet those challenges. Counties are squeezed from the state and federal levels above them, trying to figure out how to hold things together while being good stewards of taxpayer dollars and still meeting the desperate needs they

“What we do tomorrow is based on the effort we make today, building little by little, knowing that even if we don’t see the strength we are building right away, by a month or a year or longer down the road, we will reap the results of each investment.”



see among their residents. Municipalities seeing their own struggles turn to counties seeking help and relief. And then there are the rules and regulations that add exhausting time and effort and turn what should be a simple task into its own Rube Goldberg contraption.

If it's that frustrating, why do we do it? We keep showing up because we know that it matters. Because we know that what happens tomorrow depends on the efforts we are willing to make today. Because if we don't show up, no one else will be there to do this incredibly important work.

Because at the end of the day, there's a reward that no one else understands unless you're in public service. It's not the reward of a gold medal or a trophy, or even the thrill of breaking the finish line tape.

It's the satisfaction of knowing that we made the choice to show up and see what we've got, and to try to make our corner of the

world just a little bit better. Knowing that all of our little efforts build on each other to make a real difference. That maybe we won't see it tomorrow, but that one day we'll look back and know that what we did in the past helped to make a brighter future.

Thank you for showing up. 🇺🇸



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GET TO KNOW **Directors of
Veterans Affairs**

**ACROSS THE
COMMONWEALTH**





Ken Lebron

Director of Veterans Affairs, Berks County

What got you involved as a Director of Veterans Affairs?

Before I started working for the Berks County VA, I never intended or planned to be a County Veteran Service Officer (CVSO). In 2012, I started in Berks County working with veterans as a program coordinator and case manager providing strengths-based case management to veterans with substance use issues in Berks County with a non-profit called Community Prevention Partnership of Berks County (CPPBC). I then transitioned to Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) Program coordinator and case manager with the Catholic Charities the Diocese of Allentown working to prevent and end veteran homelessness. Over the course of those years, I worked closely with the Berks County VA staff and the Director at the time, Dale Derr, on numerous community outreach initiatives and partnerships. In 2016 when an opportunity came up to apply for the role of Deputy Director and CVSO for the Berks County VA, I jumped on it with much support and encouragement by many in the community who knew and worked with me.

How long have you been involved?

I have had the honor of serving veterans and their families in Berks County since 2012 (10 years), Deputy Director and CSVO since 2016 (6 years) and Director since 2019 (2 years).

What is something you wish people knew about your office?

To the benefit of veterans, their dependents and their caregivers, I wish people knew that we were here. I wish they knew what we do every day as advocates in order to help us spread the word to all veterans living in our community so that we could better serve the needs of those veterans and their families who are so deserving of the best quality care, support and advocacy when it comes to accessing their VA benefits at the Federal, State and County levels. Our offices are funded by county taxpayer dollars, so the services we render are in a sense "free" to them.

What is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?

I most enjoy seeing veterans improve their position in life. In the Marines, we called our effort to improve our strategic position constantly and consistently in the field "Position Improvement." A veteran can walk into our office one day completely at wits end and months later, return with a renewed outlook on life, a sense of purpose and hope knowing that they are not alone. We care, and the VA cares about their overall health and wellbeing.

Why should people get involved?

People should get involved because we (or the VA) cannot do it all for veterans in need. It takes a community. Thanking a veteran for their service is kind, but putting actions behind those words are paramount. Please volunteer with a local veteran service organization, or local county VA office. You can help distribute and place flags at cemeteries across your county, refer veterans in crisis to the new crisis line 9-8-8, or simply share the good word that Veterans Service Officers (VSOs) are out there, available and willing to help veterans get connected to valuable resources and benefits set aside specifically for them.

What's your favorite part about being a Director of Veterans Affairs?

I thoroughly enjoy making complex processes simple and easy to understand so that our veterans, their families and their caregivers can get linked to the benefits they have earned and are entitled. I also really enjoy creating, fostering and participating with a network of stakeholders and community partners who are also vested in helping us serve veterans across the county, state and the country.



Jesse Putnam

Director of Veterans Affairs, Lawrence County

What got you involved as a Director of Veterans Affairs?

Around 2010, I was able to participate in the G.I. Bill Work Study Program at the Lawrence County Veterans Affairs. After seeing first-hand what the office did, I knew I wanted to work with veterans and their family members. Upon graduating from college, I have worked in various jobs assisting veterans. In 2016 the Director position opened in Lawrence County, and I applied.

How long have you been involved?

I worked in the Mercer County Veterans Affairs Office from 2011-2012. After 2012, I moved on to work with veterans in a different capacity. I have been with Lawrence County since 2016.

What is something you wish people knew about your office?

The common phrase we hear in our office is "I wish I would have known your office was here years ago." Every county office tries to inform the community that our offices exist and that we can help them with an array of services, but it is still difficult to reach everyone.

What's your favorite part about being a Director of Veterans Affairs?

Helping veterans and their family members receive the benefits they are entitled to is the most rewarding.

What is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?

Our offices work with veterans that have visible and invisible wounds daily. For some, these disabilities have overwhelmed their lives and they are struggling to survive. When a veteran comes into our office, not only do we assist them with filing claims, we are also a referral source. We live and work in our counties, so we know who is going to help the individual the best. We take a holistic approach to helping veterans and their families.

The common phrase we hear in our office is "I wish I would have known your office was here years ago." Every county office tries to inform the community that our offices exist and that we can help them with an array of services, but it is still difficult to reach everyone.



Victoria Wargo

Director of Veterans Affairs, Wayne County

What got you involved as a Director of Veterans Affairs?

I was the first person in my generation to enlist in the military. There are now a total of 13 family members, from two generations, who have served after me. This is my way of going back to the journey that I started and saying, "Thank You!"

How long have you been involved?

I took over the position of Director in April 2021. This is a one-person office.

What is something you wish people knew about your office?

I wish that more people understood the high price (mentally and physically) that our veterans, active duty military, and their families are paying for their service.

What is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?

When a veteran realizes that someone representing the VA really does care about them, and is trying to help them.

Why should people get involved?

There is an old saying that "it takes an entire community to raise a child." A veteran (and his family) that is struggling, also needs the support of that same entire community to heal.

What's your favorite part about being a Director of Veterans Affairs?

Listening to the "war stories" of our veterans. That that information is sometimes vital in determining the best way to help them.

Anything else that seems important?

I hope that our residents are aware that our county has one of the highest rates of veteran suicide in the state. Our commissioners and mental health advocates are doing all they can to lower that number.

There is an old saying that "it takes an entire community to raise a child." A veteran (and his family) that is struggling, also needs the support of that same entire community to heal.



Matt Zamosky, MSgt, USAF, Ret.

Director of Veterans Affairs, Westmoreland County

What got you involved as a Director of Veterans Affairs?

I decided to return to college a year or so after retiring from the Air Force. I applied for a work-study program through the VA which ultimately placed me with the Westmoreland County Department of Veterans Affairs. As luck would have it, my predecessor submitted his retirement paperwork shortly before I graduated. I loved the work and applied for the position.

How long have you been involved?

Nearly 12 years

What is something you wish people knew about your office?

Despite the efforts of the VA, the Department of Military and Veteran Affairs, and the PA State Association of County Directors of Veterans Affairs, Pension Poaching and other predatory scams have been on the rise. I wish that more people knew that it is illegal to charge a fee to apply for veterans benefits.

What is the most rewarding aspect of what you do?

There are so many, but I'd probably have to say helping a veteran or surviving spouse receive a life changing benefit. Big or small, it is something that greatly improves their quality of life.

Why should people get involved?

Our Constitution lays the foundation for the freedoms that we all enjoy, but it's our military and veterans who have guaranteed those freedoms for nearly a quarter of a millennium. What more reason could you need?

What's your favorite part about being a Director of Veterans Affairs?

Helping people. ♥

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DMVA Initiatives, Community Partnerships

Enhance the Lives of Pennsylvania Veterans and their Families

Joseph Butera

Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs

The Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA) provides programs and services to nearly 800,000 veterans. Serving the nation's fourth largest veteran population is no easy task and the agency knows that it cannot do it alone. Depending on its community partners is paramount to successfully assuring that veterans and their families receive the benefits they earned through their service to this nation. That is why the DMVA has worked feverishly to develop, launch and now administer its flourishing new initiative – PA VETConnect.



PA VETCONNECT

PA VETConnect is an outreach program allowing DMVA to concentrate on delivering services from within the communities where our veterans live and often allows DMVA to utilize community-based providers to fill gaps in services for issues such as unemployment, homelessness, health care and substance use disorder.

“We started with a promising vision of what PA VETConnect would do for the community, veterans and their families, but this program has exceeded our expectations,” said Joel Mutschler, DMVA director, Bureau of Veterans Programs, Initiatives, Reintegration, and Outreach. “The community has embraced this program and works in unison with DMVA to better serve Pennsylvania veterans by knocking down barriers and making connections to the best possible services.”

The engine driving PA VETConnect is a team of five Regional Program Outreach Coordinators (RPOC) and five Veterans Services Specialists. With the RPOCs taking the lead, this team of 10 are field-level individuals who live and work throughout the state. They not only discover new resources to assist veterans within their communities

and across the commonwealth but serve as liaisons between veteran advocates and the DMVA.

One recent example is the Bread Basket of Northeastern Pennsylvania military food share program. Thanks to a connection made by a PA VETConnect RPOC, the Lackawanna County director of Veterans Affairs office and Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 25 are now seeing that about 35 families a week are getting food they otherwise may not be able to put on their tables.

Since PA VETConnect launched, DMVA has made more than 16,500 connections with federal, state, and local government officials, non-profit organizations, and community leaders to build relationships and enhance network capabilities.

The agency currently has about 1,870 resources in the growing database that are vetted to assure it is appropriate for servicemembers, veterans and their families.

PA VETConnect is working, and it is getting noticed.

PA VETConnect was awarded a 2022 Pillars of Excellence award by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The award evaluates state programs and establishes best practices for other state agencies to follow for greater success and efficiency.

Additionally, the Regional Outreach team received the Governor’s Award for Excellence, which recognizes exemplary accomplishments of commonwealth employees who demonstrate initiative, leadership, and commitment to service.

“PA VETConnect does not reach this level of success without the collaboration we have with community partners,” said Mutschler. “They are the ones living in our communities and interacting with veterans on a daily basis. They know exactly what veterans need and how to help. PA VETConnect is the conduit for meeting those needs.”

On the county level, Dave Eisele, Lackawanna County director of Veterans Affairs, says PA VETConnect is an invaluable resource for veteran advocates.

“Everyone gets to stay in their wheelhouse and focus on what they are good at when helping veterans,” said Eisele, who also serves as president of the Pennsylvania Association of County Directors of Veterans Affairs. “By using PA VETConnect, we can get what is needed from multiple advocates who provide specific services. No longer is it just one entity trying to do it all for a veteran. We can all get more accomplished for those who served our nation and now need our assistance.”

Veterans and veteran advocates can learn more about PA VETConnect by visiting www.dmva.pa.gov/VETConnect. Anyone with questions can email ra-mvvet-connect@pa.gov.

PENSION POACHING

While PA VETConnect is helping veterans across the commonwealth, the DMVA is finding that there is a growing and disheartening problem plaguing veterans and their families – pension poaching.



The DMVA warns Pennsylvania veterans and their advocates to be aware of an increase in scammers looking to poach their VA pensions. Pension Poaching is financial exploitation targeting veterans and beneficiaries who are potentially eligible for VA pension benefits.

According to 2021 Federal Trade Commission data, veterans and military losses more than doubled in one year to \$267 million in 2021 from \$102 million in 2020.

Veteran pension poaching occurs when scammers, unscrupulous players or dishonest financial planners charge veterans or their beneficiaries for help in applying for or submitting applications for VA pensions. The scheme often involves financial maneuvers such as advising claimants to hide their assets in trusts or annuity products sometimes resulting in lost investments and lucrative fees paid to the advisor.

“Older veterans are a prime target for scammers,” said Eisele. “We see it happen about one to two times a month in the northeastern counties. Most recently, I saw where a surviving spouse was scammed out of \$4,500 taken directly from her bank account.”

The DMVA says a big rule of thumb is that veterans or their advocate should never pay:

- For forms or to submit applications
- To restructure assets to “qualify”
- For the promise of eligibility for a pension
- To receive a lump sum payment on a pension

There are approximately 200 veteran service officers in Pennsylvania who work within organizations such as the DMVA, county veterans affairs offices and several veterans service organizations. A list of county directors and veteran service officers can be found on the DMVA web site at www.veterans.pa.gov.

Veterans and their advocates should also remember to never share their VA login information, or deposit VA benefits directly into a third-party bank account unless the person is court appointed or a VA accredited fiduciary.

“Scammers are really hurting veterans and their families,” said Eisele. “Veterans signed on the dotted line regardless of what would happen to them. They wrote the United States a blank check including their lives. For these scammers to steal from those who fought for their freedom is sickening to me.”

Eisele suggests that as soon as a veteran or family member suspects they have been scammed they should contact the Attorney General’s Office by calling 717-783-1944, or by email at PAvets@attorneygeneral.gov. A veteran can also submit a complaint online at www.attorneygeneral.gov.

SAFEGUARDING MILITARY PAPERWORK

While the DMVA is always ready to help veterans avoid adverse situations like pension poaching, the agency says that it is easiest for any advocate to assist veterans when military paperwork is in order.

The DMVA receives thousands of requests for information every year, but the one item that the agency connects veterans to the most is military paperwork. In 2021, DMVA handled nearly 1,000 records requests, with the most popular paperwork sought after by veterans being their DD-214.

The DD-214 is a Department of Defense document, issued upon a servicemember’s retirement, separation, or discharge from active duty in the U.S. Armed Forces. The DMVA can also assist with locating the DD-215, which is used to correct errors or make additions to a DD-214, helping to assure that veterans have accurate discharge documentation. For those who served in the National Guard, the equivalent paperwork is the NGB-22.

“These forms contain information needed to verify military service for benefits, retirement, employment, and membership in veterans’ organizations,” said Tiffany Cleary who manages DMVA’s Records Request Program. “Without their military paperwork, there could be a big delay when veterans seek benefits earned through their service to our nation.”

The easiest way to manage military documents is to make sure they are filed in a safe place immedi-

ately upon leaving the military. Veterans often find that filing their documents for free at the prothonotary's office in their county courthouse of record is an easy way to secure them until needed, which can often be decades into the future.

Regardless, if a veteran or family member needs help finding military paperwork, the DMVA stands ready to assist.

"Helping a veteran find their coveted military paperwork after exhausting all other avenues is extremely rewarding," said Cleary. "It is my favorite part of the work I do for DMVA and it is important for everyone to know that we provide this service free of charge."

Cleary said she once helped a family find military paperwork for a

long-passed veteran who served in World War I.

"There are no surviving veterans remaining from World War I, but often times families look for military records of their ancestors while working on a genealogy project," she explained. "The older the records, the more difficult it can be to retrieve them, but that never stops DMVA from trying."

Once the DMVA helps to retrieve a military document, the agency includes it in a repository for easy access in case a veteran loses or misplaces that document in the future.

Anyone needing assistance from the DMVA to locate their DD-214/215, or other military documentation, can call toll-free

1-800-547-2838 or e-mail RA-REQ@pa.gov. Veterans and family members can also visit their county director of Veterans Affairs office for assistance.

Finding military records is just one of many services offered by DMVA. The DMVA recommends that every one of Pennsylvania's nearly 800,000 veterans should sign up for the DMVA Veterans Registry, an extremely helpful, free tool that electronically delivers timely information about the many state benefits, programs and services available to veterans. Veterans, family members and people who work with veterans can sign up by computer or mobile device at www.register.dmva.pa.gov. 📄

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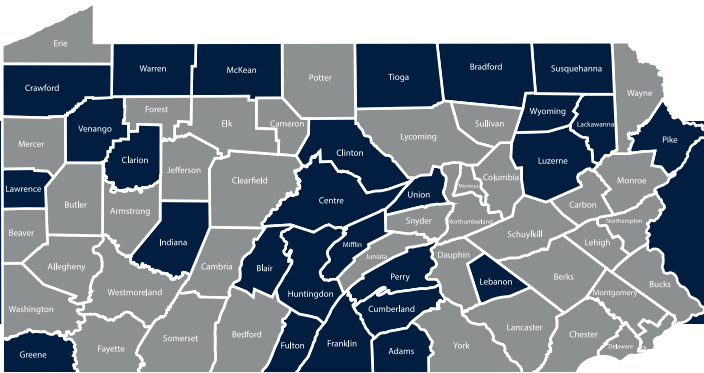


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Navigating Problems and Solutions:

The Job of the Perry County Veterans Service Officer



The Perry County (PeCo) Veterans Affairs (VA) Office is a one-person office in Perry County and is responsible for more than 3,800 veterans of the approximately 46,000 residents within the county. The workload carried by the VA Office is not only robust in volume, but vital to the lives of our veterans and their families. The county's Veterans Affairs Office is responsible for providing advocacy and assistance to veterans and their dependents. The office plays the vital role of liaison to veterans' service organizations, community organizations, as well as federal, state and local agencies to promote and protect veteran interests. It is the responsibility of our VA Office to prepare and give presentations on veterans' programs and issues while serving on councils,

committees, and/or task forces that develop special programs for veterans and their dependents. The office has a wide variety of responsibilities, such as: filing compensation claims, completing property tax exemption applications, and researching and presenting appeals before the Board of Veterans Appeals in Washington D.C. The PeCo VA position of Director is a highly skilled position that requires both State (annual) and Federal (every five years) training, testing and accreditation.

VETERANS TRANSPORTATION PROGRAM

In Perry County, the VA Office not only takes on the aforementioned responsibilities, but is also involved with every opportunity to help

enhance benefits for our veterans. The PeCo VA office has built a strong relationship with the local Chapter 49, of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV). Several years ago, the PeCo VA Office worked with DAV, Chapter 49 to establish a transportation program for Perry County veterans to transport them to medical appointments, making the program the first of its kind in the Commonwealth. This program was funded through a united effort to put on fundraising events, as well as donations, grant money and the generosity of the Perry County Commissioners. Volunteer drivers were then recruited and the service for Perry County veterans to have transportation to and from medical appointments began and continues to this day at no cost to our veterans.

MILITARY SHARE

It is because of our VA Office that Perry County was one of the first counties in Pennsylvania to participate in the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank monthly food distribution known as "Military Share." The VA Office gathered all the key components to make this monthly food distribution a success. Volunteers to hand out food were enlisted and a method to get food to families that did not have the means or transportation to get the distribution location was resolved. This collaboration between the PeCo VA Office and DAV, Chapter 49, again resulted in a benefit to veterans.

The DAV agreed to deliver the food at no cost to veterans who could not get to the distribution site. The Perry County Military Share has acted as a model across the state, bringing other interested Pennsylvania counties in to observe the program, with hopes of establishing a Military Share food distribution in their own county. Even during the COVID pandemic, Military Share never missed a month of distribution.

KEEPING COMMUNICATION OPEN

The office was invited and participated in the first ever Veterans Advisory Council for the Harrisburg Vet Center. The VA office helped plan and organize the first ever Trout Fishing Tournament for veterans in Perry County. In addition to organizing events, the VA office remains in close contact with the local State Senator and Representative's offices to ensure communication lines are open and our veterans concerns are heard. The VA office also keeps communications open with the county prison to answer questions relating to veterans and if the prison requests, the VA office will visit the inmate to explain VA benefits. The office will meet with the Department of Aging personnel to discuss VA benefits to ensure the county's senior veterans receive all available help and/or benefits.

The VA office will periodically attend the local Pennsylvania State Police roll calls to explain and discuss veterans benefits to ensure the Troopers understand, if they encounter a veteran suffering Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), or a veteran whom may be in need of other services, that the VA office may be able to get the veteran the help he/she needs rather than possible future incidents escalating into a criminal offense. As a result, troopers will hand out the VA office business cards when they encounter a veteran who may need the services of the VA office.

STAYING ACTIVE IN THE COMMUNITY

The PeCo VA office is always willing to attend any meeting where services are discussed that may benefit the veterans of Perry County. One such meeting is the Harrisburg YWCA's Outreach Committee meetings for Dauphin, Cumberland and Perry Counties. These monthly meetings help keep communications open with other social service offices in the Tri-County area. Additionally, the PeCo VA Director will visit the senior centers continuing to be active in outreach programs and making our veterans aware of any benefits that may be available to them. Over the last couple years, the PeCo VA Office has even been invited and spoke to veterans from all parts of the state at the annual "Project New Hope" program offered by the Pennsylvania Lions Club, Beacon Lodge, in Newton Hamilton, Pennsylvania. Moreover, the VA Office helps facilitate the Marine Corps Toys for Tots program. Last year's goal was to increase the number of Perry County children who participated in the program. As a result, the number of children that signed up more than doubled from years past.

An additional duty the PeCo VA Office handles are visits to the cemeteries throughout the county to ensure flag holders are serviceable. Those that are damaged or destroyed by mowers, are replaced to ensure a flag is displayed giving honor and respect to those who served. The meetings, speaking engagements, and community outreach done by the PeCo VA Office demonstrate the dedication the office has to the veterans of Perry County.

ACTING AS THE BEACON OF TRUST

The PeCo VA Office has always prided itself on helping veterans, regardless of the nature of the request. This level of service has resulted in Perry County veterans trusting the PeCo VA Office and more specifically, the Director. Some examples of this high level of trust are, helping veterans program their cell phones to providing guidance when purchasing a car. Veterans will ask the PeCo VA Office for assistance completing various types of personal paperwork and forms that are unrelated to their VA benefits, such as helping an elderly veteran facilitate a service call to setup internet service at his residence.

On another occasion, a deceased veteran's elderly spouse stopped in the office to talk, and it was learned she had \$32,000 in a brown paper bag because a telephone scam artist convinced her that he was with the FBI and she owed the money to the IRS. The VA Director explained to the individual that it was a scam and advised that she contact the local State Police and create a new account and get the money back to the bank as soon as possible. The PeCo VA Office has personally delivered needed items from food to lift chairs to veterans throughout the county. Similarly, when a veteran's health condition prohibits him or her from traveling, the office will go to the veteran's residence or nursing home to complete needed paperwork to file a claim.

FINDING SOLUTIONS

Several years ago, federal legislation gave the Federal VA three years to develop a program that would provide a method so that every veteran could obtain a VA ID Card. In the third year after the legislation had been passed, the VA finalized their plan which dictated that a veteran would have to sign into the VA website, enter the required information, and then be required to scan his/her DD 214 (discharge) and a photograph and email them to the VA. After the veteran completed these tasks, the VA would mail an ID card to the veteran.

The PeCo VA Office quickly realized that an alternative to this method of obtaining an ID card was crucial for many veterans in the county because of lack of internet access and scanning equipment, or lack of computer skills required to complete the process. The PeCo VA Office, with the cooperation of the Commissioners' Office, developed and deployed a process where a veteran's ID card could be issued to the county veterans at very minimal cost to the county and minimal effort by the veteran. Now, every veteran can access an ID card regardless of age or available resources. These types of services are important to our veterans and every effort is made to ensure that the veteran receives the services he/she has earned.

WHY WE DO IT

The Perry County Commissioners believe freedom is very fragile and does not come easy. The men and women who have served with pride and patriotism, stood firm and tall prepared to defend our Constitution, and they deserve the best that can be offered. The PeCo VA Director ensures that the well-deserved respect owed to Perry County veterans is never forgotten and they receive the utmost service at the VA Office. Let us never forget what our men and women have accomplished because if we do, we will surely forget who we are and fail as a nation. 🇺🇸

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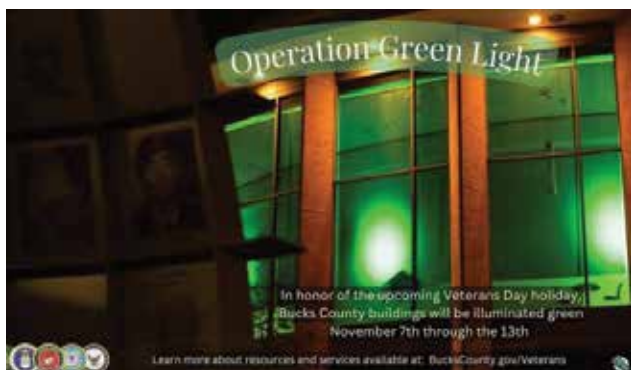
OPERATION GREEN LIGHT

Pennsylvania counties take pride in helping and serving their veterans. In advance of Veterans Day, counties across the Commonwealth participated in Operation Green Light, a new form of showing appreciation for America's veterans. County government buildings were illuminated in green from November 7-13 to raise awareness about the unique challenges veterans face, such as returning to civilian life after active duty. It also highlights the resources available to assist veterans and their families at the county, state, and federal levels.

At least 15 counties in Pennsylvania participated in Operation Green Light by illuminating their buildings, passing resolutions, sending out press releases or simply showing public support for the initiative. More information and resources for Operation Green Light can be found on the NACo website. 📌



Carbon County Commissioner Chris Lukasevich, Chair of NACo's Veterans and Military Service Committee, launched Operation Green Light with his colleagues at NACVSO and President Nicole Coleman at NACo's 2022 Annual Conference in Aurora, Colo. Carbon County has taken the national lead and became the first county to sign a resolution to participate in Operation Green Light.



Bucks County



The Dauphin County Board of Commissioners signed a resolution to honor and support the 17,000 veterans living in Dauphin County.



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New Toxic Exposure Law

**Highlights Urgency of
Securing Federal Resources for
County Veteran Service Officers**

Counties are deeply invested in veterans' health and well-being, often serving as a veteran's first point of contact in the community for accessing services.

Rachel Mackey


Legislative Director, Human Services & Education/Veterans & Military Services, National Association of Counties

In 29 states, including Pennsylvania, there is funding for County Veteran Service Officers (CVSOs) who are responsible for helping veterans obtain more than \$50 billion annually in federal health, disability, pension and compensation benefits. Given our unique local perspective, we understand the crisis currently facing the approximately 3.5 million veterans across the nation who have been exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances during the Global War on Terror (GWOT) alone. Unfortunately, for far too long VA requirements make it too difficult for these county residents to establish the direct service connection necessary to be eligible for VA benefits. With VA historically rejecting nearly 80 percent of these claims, veterans in our communities are facing serious delays in accessing critical medical care.

After extensive advocacy by the veterans and military community, during the summer of 2022, Congress and the Administration finally negotiated and enacted sweeping legislation to address the problem of toxic exposure for our current and future veterans. On August 10, President Biden signed the bipartisan Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT)

Act (PL 117-168) into law, ushering in a significant expansion of U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability and health benefits for veterans suffering from medical conditions due to toxic exposure during their military service.

The PACT Act removes many of the burdensome procedural hurdles that have long blocked access to VA medical care and disability coverage for GWOT and other toxic-exposed service members. Most significantly, the legislation adds 23 burn pit and toxic exposure-related conditions to VA's list of service presumptions and expands presumptions related to Agent Orange exposure, allowing VA to assume certain medical conditions are the result of military service during a given period in a specific location. The new law also expands VA health care eligibility for ten years to certain post-9/11 combat veterans, and it creates a framework for the establishment of future presumptions of service connection related to toxic exposure. To support implementation of these provisions, the PACT Act further invests in VA's resources and training, claims processing, workforce and health care facilities. The legislation is anticipated to cost roughly \$280 billion over ten years.



Under the PACT Act, millions of veterans will be newly eligible to file claims for critical medical care and disability benefits. VA has quickly begun work to implement the massive legislation. On September 1, VA officials announced they are now accepting claims for all presumptive illnesses included under the new law, including cases concerning burn pit smoke and carcinogenic chemicals that were not scheduled to go into effect for several more years. The plan is to begin processing all new claims on Jan. 1, 2023. Officials are quickly working to promulgate the regulations needed to handle the cases, as well as training and hiring staff to deal with the upcoming workload.

In Pennsylvania, CVSOs will be on the front lines assisting veterans with the claims process, which can be complex and administratively burdensome. Though CVSOs primarily work to help veterans access their federal benefits, they are supported almost entirely by counties and local taxpayers, creating challenges for areas with high demand and counties serving veterans in rural areas. Along with the PACT Act, recent enactment of the VA MISSION Act and Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act

and regulatory changes to add additional Agent Orange presumptive conditions have expanded opportunities for veterans to file health and disability claims with VA.

The expected rise in caseloads stemming from the PACT act and these other legislative and regulatory changes underscore the need for Congress to swiftly pass the bipartisan Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach (CVSO) Act (H.R. 4601/S.2405), which would authorize \$250 million over five years for states to expand CVSOs or similar government entities (such as state, municipal and tribal VSOs). Without federal resources to help CVSOs expand their operations to meet rising demand for services, the PACT Act may function as an unfunded mandate for county governments. NACo urges Congress to swiftly pass the CVSO Act and provide federal resources so this important county workforce can help veterans access the health and disability benefits they so urgently need.

To learn more about VA's implementation of the PACT Act, visit [VA.gov/PACT](https://va.gov/PACT) or call 1-800-698-2411. 📌

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THE GROWTH OF MilitaryShare IN FRANKLIN COUNTY

Sheena Baker

Franklin County Communications Coordinator

Franklin County has a long history of sending its sons and daughters into service of our country. In return, the county takes great pride in caring for those servicemen and women and their families, whether that be through outreach programs, advocacy, benefit coordination or other means of assistance. Today more than 12,000 veterans call Franklin County home.

Earlier this year, the Franklin County Office of Veterans Affairs extended its outreach efforts by partnering with the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank to launch Franklin County MilitaryShare. Franklin County MilitaryShare is a food assistance program that provides fresh, nutritious food once a month, free of charge, to Franklin County families with at least one member who has served, or is currently serving, in the armed forces. The program is possible thanks to a Franklin County Human Services Block Grant and through community donations.

To be eligible for Franklin County MilitaryShare, participants must provide proof of military service as well as pre-register to ensure organizers order the correct amount of food for distribution. Participation in other food assistance programs does not prohibit individuals and families from taking advantage of Franklin County MilitaryShare.

"We started this program because we saw a need within our veteran population. We have veterans and widows who are skipping meals because they aren't able to make food last or because they don't have the financial means to get enough food," said Justin Slep, director of Franklin County Veterans Affairs. "In some cases, we've been told that these individuals don't qualify for other programs, so they just go without food for days at a time. That's unacceptable in my eyes.

"This is why the Veterans Affairs office is here – to make change where change is needed," said

Slep, who is a veteran himself. "I'm thankful that I work for a board of commissioners who support us in what we do."

Franklin County MilitaryShare distribution occurs on the first Thursday of each month. While items can vary, families participating in the program can anticipate receiving fresh produce, milk, eggs, cheese and a box of pantry staples such as soup, pasta, sauce and cereal. Other items like meat, fish and poultry may also be included when available.

The program is a drive-through type of event and volunteers from local service clubs, nonprofits and businesses load boxes of food into each participant's car. Though each distribution event only lasts two hours each month, Franklin County MilitaryShare involves a tremendous amount of behind-the-scenes work, including hours, days and weeks of careful coordination and planning to ensure success for all parties involved in the process.



**Staff preparing supplies
as part of the Franklin
County MilitaryShare**



Staff and volunteers preparing supplies as part of the Franklin County MilitaryShare

“Successful event planning can be a challenge, but my team does an excellent job with it,” said Slep. “After each distribution, we immediately start planning for the next month. There are a lot of logistics that go into managing food distribution and one major factor is the size of the distribution. We have to focus on the food as well as pedestrian safety at all times.

“There are a lot of moving parts during the day and effective communication is a must,” he added. “We have a lot of great volunteers who work hard and take this responsibility very seriously.”

Franklin County launched its MilitaryShare program in May, serving 89 households out of the gate. At the September distribution just a few months later, the program served 315 households. Since its inception, Franklin County MilitaryShare has fed 650 individuals and distributed almost 55,000 lbs of food to families in need. Demand for the program continues to grow each month.

“We thought we were going to start small, like other MilitaryShare distribution sites. I thought we would start out with about 20 families and that we would possibly get to 100 by the end of our first year. We never expected to be where we are now,” said Slep. “I always try to exceed my goals to help our office improve and grow, but I never expected this at all. I’m happy to exceed my goal for this program, but it’s also bittersweet

because it shows the need in our community and how many people are struggling right now.”

While food distribution to veterans is new to Franklin County, the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank has been facilitating its MilitaryShare program since 2015. Each month the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank serves more than 152,000 residents in 27 counties through a variety of outreach efforts. Statistics show that 26% of those households have at least one member who has served or is currently serving in the military. Thanks to the MilitaryShare program, the Central Pennsylvania Food Bank distributes food to more than 45,000 veterans and their families at 28 sites in 16 counties, including Franklin County.

“All of the programs Franklin County Veterans Affairs runs and the veterans and families we serve are everything to me, but this program holds a special place in my heart,” said Slep. “We have participants from all different walks of life who participate in Franklin County MilitaryShare, which makes this program very unique. Seeing their faces as they come through the distribution line, they tell a story that you may know nothing about. Some are in tears of happiness or sadness, and some are full of smiles and laughter. Everyone gets treated the same, and we try to have a great time while giving back to the community.”

Slep added, “We make sure to tell everyone ‘Thank you’ for participating in the program. That’s one thing I love about being a veteran and the veteran community: We always take care of our own, no matter what, and we exhaust all options to find a way to help.”

Franklin County’s veterans affairs team strives to offer services that will improve the quality of life for area veterans and their families, close to home. The Franklin County MilitaryShare program has been another successful effort to hit that target.

“I am so thankful to be in the position I’m in. I truly believe this was my calling,” said Slep. “Until you are in a position to make change and positively impact others’ lives, you truly can’t understand how important it is to always go the extra mile for everyone, no matter if you know them or not. We need each other to be successful in all aspects of life.”

For more information on Franklin County MilitaryShare, visit www.franklincountypa.gov or www.centralpafoodbank.org. 🍷



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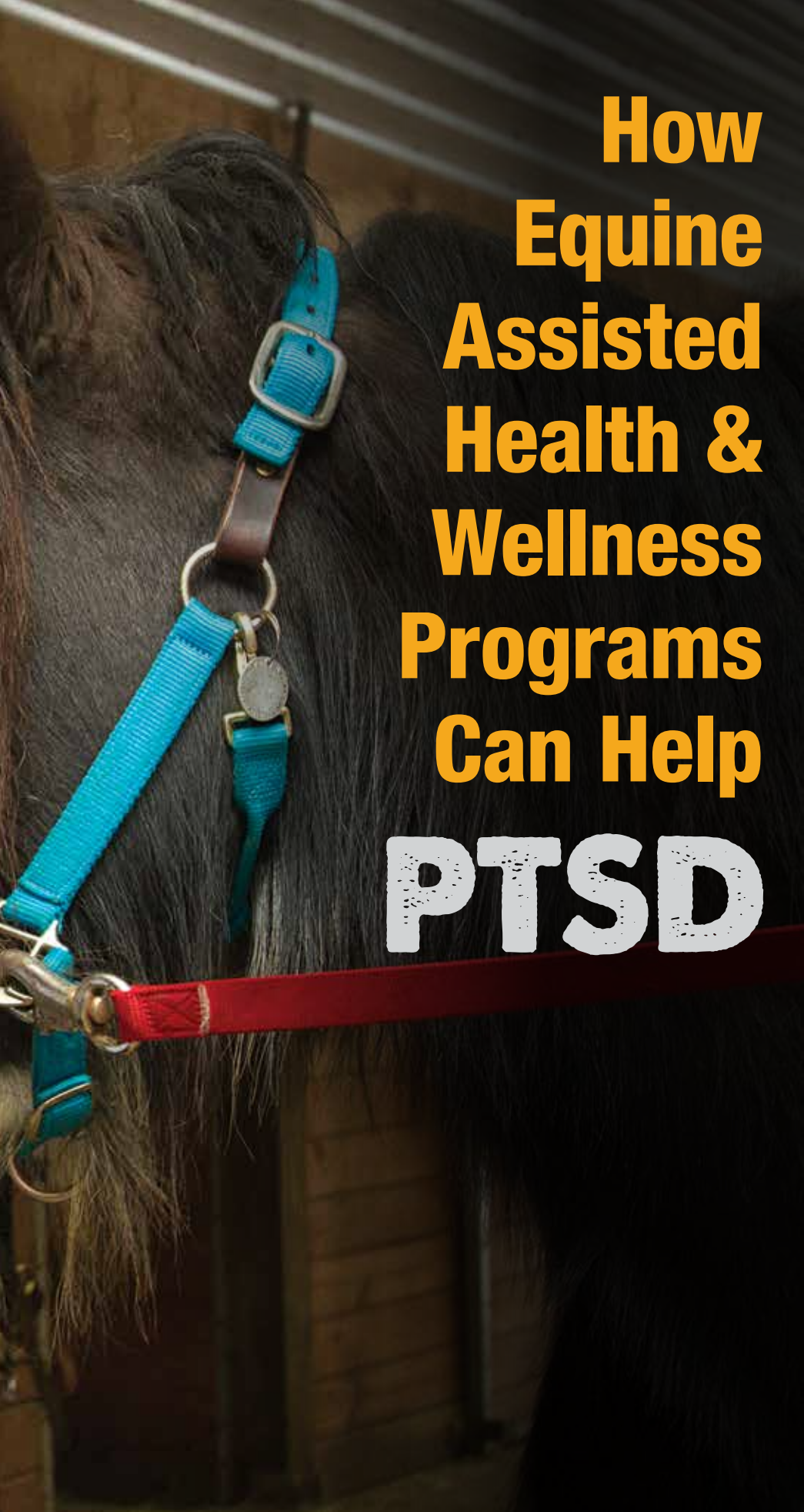
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How Equine Assisted Health & Wellness Programs Can Help PTSD

MILFORD, PA — The Pike County Commissioners, Office of Emergency Management, and Veterans Affairs Office sponsored a workshop this fall that addressed the particular needs of individuals suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), how it affects families and children, and demonstrate how equine assisted health and wellness programs can positively impact lives affected by this disorder.

The workshop is designed for inactive and active-duty veterans, law enforcement personnel, first responders and their immediate families who are living with, but not limited to PTSD and/or trauma, fatigue and burnout, and depression and/or anxiety. The workshop included a hands-on demonstration of the Equine Assisted Services available at GAIT TRC by Executive Director and Founder, Martha Dubensky, and Gait Staff.

Gait TRC is a local non-profit organization and Pennsylvania charitable organization, established in 1995, with the mission of improving the quality of life of children and adults with special needs through equine activities and therapies, resulting in a more independent life in society. Gait provides a variety of programs in Therapy, Learning and Horsemanship categories, including educational and professional development, therapeutic riding, and counselling services. All equine sessions are conducted by PATH Intl. Certified Instructors, Equine Specialists, licensed therapists, credential mental health professionals, and highly trained volunteers, with specially trained horses who have been carefully selected for

their temperament, soundness, and response to human emotions.

The Pike County Veterans Affairs Office along with the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA) state outreach, attended the workshop to provide local, state and federal Veterans Affairs information to Veterans and their dependents.

Tim Knapp, Director of the Office of Emergency Management stated, "Our hope is to get emergency responders on board as an option for those suffering from PTSD and any other mental health problems. This is a big problem in the emergency services and could be a great way for them to get the help they need."

ABOUT EQUINE ASSISTED PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Animal assisted therapy is endorsed by the American Psychological Association as a viable option and an alternate approach to therapy. Equine assisted services (EAS), endorsed by PATH Intl. and Horses & Humans Research Foundation, consists of incorporating the horse into every activity, therapy and riding experience. Working with horses has been proven to positively impact both physical and emotional aspects, including a reduction in stress, anxiety, depression, and negative behaviors, while improving emotional regulation and social interactions, as well as increasing confidence and self-esteem.

Learn more about the programs and services offered at GAIT TRC by visiting its website www.gaittrc.org. 🐾





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INSIDE Veterans Affairs

in Carbon
County

Christine LeClair

Director of Veterans Affairs, Carbon County

Carbon County, Pennsylvania, a 6th class county, nestled in the beautiful Pocono Mountains is home to more than 5,000 veterans from its population of 64,749. The men and women of Carbon have a long history of military service dating back to the Civil War when the population was credited with furnishing more men per capita than any other county in the state (Wagner, 1910).

In Pennsylvania, county level Directors of Veterans Affairs assist veterans in navigating the often-perplexing Veterans Administration benefits qualification process and linking them to earned benefits. County Directors and their staff work tirelessly to identify veterans, determine eligibility and assist them in preparing applications for local, state and federal benefits and programs. This service is provided by an accredited County Veteran Service Officer (CVSO) and is free of charge to veterans and their dependents.

STAFFING DUTIES

The Carbon County Veterans Affairs office is comprised of two full-time CVSO and one part-time CVSO. A typical day for the staff involves assisting veterans with filing

for earned federal benefits, namely disability compensation, veteran or survivor's pension and applications to the Veterans Health Administration. The office also assists with applications for state benefits including Real Estate Tax Exemption and Veterans Temporary Assistance as well as local benefits like the Military Share food distribution program or scheduling a ride to the Veterans Health Administration on the Disabled American Veteran (DAV) van.

In an effort to meet and assist more veterans in this rural county, Carbon County's CVSO travels to community anchor institutions such as hospitals, senior centers, correction facilities and local events and expos. With the recent passage of the PACT Act and the existing Caring for Camp Lejeune

Families Act of 2012, the demands on CVSOs have increased significantly and will continue to do so. Just four days after the passage of the PACT Act, Carbon County hosted Senator Bob Casey for the conduct of a Veterans Exposed to Toxics roundtable discussion to ensure our elected federal officials understood the importance of the enacted law to the more than a thousand Carbon County Veterans who are potential applicants. Importantly, H.R. 4610, The Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act, or the CVSO Act, completed mark up on 20 September in the U.S. House Committee on Veterans Affairs and was sent to the floor. If passed into law, the CVSO Act would provide desperately needed grant opportunities to support CVSO activities to meet the surge of expected claimants.



Senator Bob Casey spoke at a Veterans Exposed to Toxics roundtable discussion.

REACHING OUT TO THOSE IN NEED

While Carbon County is blessed in many ways, it unfortunately reports the highest per capita incidence of veteran suicide in the Commonwealth. In 2020, the Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veteran Affairs approached Carbon County to host the first Together with Veterans (TWV) site in PA. Created by the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, Office of Rural Health, Together with Veterans is a veteran-led, community-based suicide prevention and awareness program in rural communities. The program aims to: reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking, train community members and primary care providers on veteran suicide prevention, improve access to services, and promote lethal means safety. The initial launch of the program comes with three years of seed funding totaling \$100,000. Those funds have been used to provide outreach events, training activities for residents, community engagement meetings as well as capacity growth for the Carbon County Veteran Affairs Office.

With the establishment of Together With Veterans (TWV) of Northeastern Pennsylvania in Carbon County, and its veteran steering committee comprised of local veterans, community leaders, health care professionals as well as local, state, and federal government, there are now three TWV program sites in Pennsylvania with new sites in Cambria and Greene County.

PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES

Taking a closer look at some of the specific initiatives that have been created by this new program, in conjunction with Carbon County Veterans Affairs Office, TWV of Northeastern PA hosts a monthly coffee club called “Coffee and Camaraderie” for Vietnam Era veterans. The group meets at different locations throughout the county and has grown since its inception. A natural growth from the camaraderie of these recurring coffees has been the recognition that when one familiar face misses a month, other members will reach out to them for a buddy-check to see how they are doing and to ask if any support is needed.

“We really wanted to provide a welcoming, non-judgmental space for veterans to come together and know they are not alone. Through the coffee club, we’ve seen many new friendships formed and new faces every month, which means we’re doing something right,” says

Jennifer Spitler, Regional Program Outreach Coordinator, PA Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and TWV of Northeastern PA steering committee coordinator.

On November 10, Together with Veterans opened a new office in St. Luke’s Behavioral Health Walk-In Center at the Lehighton Campus. Dubbed the “Veterans Hub of Northeastern Pennsylvania,” the space will also serve as a Community Access Point (CAP) for the Scranton Vet Center. The CAP will offer confidential help to veterans, service members and their families at no-cost and in a non-medical setting. Their services include counseling for needs such as depression, post-traumatic stress and the psychological effects of military sexual trauma. In addition to these services, the Hub also has a CVSO on hand to help file for federal, state and local benefits. This satellite office increases accessibility for veterans, provide another opportunity to connect with their local representatives and have questions answered. ▾



Vietnam Veteran Luncheon Event



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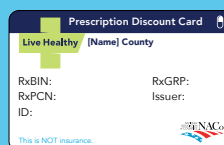
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Chris Lukasevich
Carbon County Commissioner

Emergency services personnel in Carbon County, and eventually surrounding counties, have a new multi-use training center option. After more than eight years from concept to inauguration, Carbon fittingly inaugurated its nearly \$10 million Emergency Operations Training Center (EOTC) on September 11, the twenty-first anniversary of 9/11. The diversity and scale of the facility will allow multiple first response organizations to train simultaneously and hone their joint fire-fighting and emergency response capabilities.

The training center occupies approximately six acres adjacent to the county's Emergency Management Agency and 911 Communications Center in Nesquehoning. The EOTC was constructed to offer realistic emergency responder training in the interior and on the exterior of a four story, 9,538 sq. ft. fire training tower, a 3,009 sq. ft. police training building, and four concrete pads for propane props and vehicle extraction activities. The completion of the project will ensure that even highly complex and dangerous first responder training can be conducted locally thus allowing for more training time and less travel time for volunteers and salaried emergency service personnel who currently travel out-of-county for significant portions of their required training.

The four-story burn building contains multiple burn rooms where firefighters will confront realistic training scenarios complicated by the challenges of intense heat,



The four-story fire training tower will serve as the focal point for high angle rescue and fire suppression exercises.

smoke and communications confronted in actual fires. On the exterior of the building, to include on multiple roof lines, rope and ladder skills will also be tested as high angle rescue scenarios are confronted.

The police training building was specially designed with moveable walls to modify training scenarios and has an observation and safety officer deck. Additionally, to facilitate a realistic sound environment, a state-of-the-art sound system has been incorporated along with a camera system to aid in the conduct of after-action reviews. The inclusion of a walking deck above the modular rooms is a notable safety feature that provides full visibility of law enforcement tactics and maneuvers and becomes increasingly important as officers employ non-lethal training ammunition into scenarios.

Planning ahead for the future, in addition to concrete pads for vehicle extraction and a CONEX for storage, pads are in place with propane connections for the eventual procurement of training props that may focus on responding to fires associated with vehicles, stoves, electric motors, dumpsters, etc.

On the cutting edge for the region in regard to water conservation, the site includes an innovative water capture and recycling pond with a maximum depth of 4.5 feet and covering more than a fourth of an acre surface area, for reutilization of the high-volume water typically used in training versus the water being discharged directly into the storm water management system of the site. This feature will allow training opportunities with two on-site dry hydrants and reduce the necessity to have a tanker truck present



Carbon County's Emergency Operations Training Facility fire training tower and law enforcement training buildings are the cornerstones of its multi-use facility.



Carbon County's one-and-a-half story Police Training Building, with repositionable walls allows significant flexibility in scenario development and execution.

for direct-to-engine supply or water shuttle operations.

The EOTC Planning Committee continues the laborious and critical task of adapting, adopting and at times, developing original policies and standard operating procedures to ensure the safest realistic training environment possible for Carbon County emergency services personnel and those of its neighboring counties.

To date, the project's planning and construction has been resourced with multiple Local Share Agreement (LSA) grants, a Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program (RACP) grant and funds from the county's capital project budget and the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). However, operating and maintaining the EOTC requires an enduring financial commitment, and that many citizens wish to financially contribute directly to the facility, the County has partnered with the non-profit Carbon County Community Foundation and established a Field of Interest Fund. This managed account shall support the facility operations and maintenance and may include utilities, equipment purchases, upgrades, instructor fees, etc.

The project, championed by Commissioner Wayne Nothstein and supported by multiple boards of commissioners, elected state officials, and the citizens of Carbon County, look forward to providing emergency service personnel the highest quality and realistic training environment possible in a state-of-the-art facility with the overarching objective to enhance community safety and wellbeing. ▀



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When the county hires a firm or person to perform work for the county, keep in mind there needs to be clarity about how workers' compensation insurance coverage is going to be provided. Should one of the contractors get injured while on a project for the county, whose workers' compensation insurance is going to respond? As with many answers to risk management questions, it depends.

HIRING A COMPANY

When the county hires a company to do work, Pennsylvania law requires the company to have workers' compensation insurance for its employees and provide proof of the coverage. In addition, the county is required to make sure the company actually has coverage in place – before you hire them and before someone from the company begins work for you. The firm should provide proof of coverage – your county's local insurance producer can help you with this. Get a valid Certificate of Insurance (COI) showing the company has coverage. And if the project is a long one, get another COI later in the project (especially if the firm's insurance renews during your project – make sure they renew it).

CONSEQUENCES

If the firm does NOT have insurance, and one of their employees gets hurt while working on your project, the county will be responsible for that workers' compensation claim. (Yes, you read that correctly.) The county could end up with a big workers' compensation claim for someone who is not your employee.

SOLE PROPRIETORS

If the county selects a contractor that is one person, things get a little trickier. The county could assume this is just a person being paid a flat fee or hourly rate to do a project, and the county can include wording in an agreement that this person is not an employee and is not covered by the county's workers' compensation insurance. That sounds good, but it will probably not work. To transfer the risk to them, the county needs to require them to have their own workers' compensation insurance policy. It should not cost them much, and CCAP would suggest you include that cost in the overall costs for the project, because if they don't have coverage and get hurt while working on site at the county, the state is going to try to make the county's workers' compensation insurance pay for the claim.

That's right – your county's workers' compensation coverage will end up paying for the sole contractor's claim.

If the county does not require the individual contractor to buy their own workers' compensation policy, the county could add their wages to the year-end actual payroll report to PComp or your insurance carrier, but then you are accepting the risk for any injuries the contractor sustained as part of the project.

The cost of their individual policy will be much less than the cost of any workers' compensation claim they might have, and the potential impact it could have on the county's workers' compensation coverage. ▼



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