

DMVA Initiates Operation Family Ties

FT INDIANTOWN GAP - The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs recently announced the start of a new initiative to keep deployed service members and their families connected called "Operation Family Ties."

The program encourages Pennsylvania State Government agencies to establish social links with PA National Guard units within the state. Each agency will 'adopt' a unit of soldiers or airmen. Each agency will have a designated point of contact that will work closely with a unit's Family Assistance Coordinator (FAC) to provide support tailored to the needs of that particular unit's members and their families.

The means of support that would be provided by the state agency is open-ended and gives the opportunity for both state offices and the military units to develop something both creative and specific. Each military unit has its own diverse population and the agency points of contact (POC's) will work closely with the unit's FAC's to plan the most appropriate sup-

port for the unit's members and families.

Currently, there are 13 Pennsylvania Departments who are participating in the program and each of these has several offices who will work together with the military units.

Although the initiative is supposed to start in January 2010, some of the departments began coordinating with the military units to plan holiday parties in December.

The POC's and FAC's will meet quarterly to exchange ideas and report progress on current projects.

While the needs of families are great during a deployment, these needs become magnified after a soldier or airman returns home. The goal of this program is to make the reintegration process as smooth as possible, both physically and mentally. The partnerships that are formed as a result of this program will be lasting ones that will bring the civilian and military communities closer together.

State Veterans Commission Begins Reviewing Veterans Benefits

FT. INDIANTOWN GAP - A subcommittee of the Pennsylvania State Veterans Commission met in October to begin the task of reviewing current programs and services for veterans. In addition, they will identify those programs that are most worthwhile to veterans and their families within the state.

The subcommittee, chaired by Leanna Dietrich, Commandant, Marine Corps League, Department of Pennsylvania, is comprised of five members. They come from veterans groups and government offices at both state and county levels.

To accomplish their objective, the group will analyze existing and proposed state veterans benefits and measure their effectiveness against the needs of Pennsylvania's veterans and their families.

The group will begin by identifying the benefits offered by other states and comparing them to what Pennsylvania offers. Some of the factors they're looking at are transitioning from military to civilian life,

receiving critical care when the veteran suffers from severe illness or injury as a result of his or her service, and maintaining or improving the quality of life of veterans and families in recognition of the veteran's sacrifices on behalf of the nation.

After all the data has been examined, the group will draft a report that makes recommendations on the existing benefits and identifies the needs for new benefits, based on current demands being made on service members.

To start, the group has begun drafting a collection plan and developing a system for evaluating the benefits they will be reviewing. This will provide a basis for storing and cataloging the data to be researched and make it easier to access later, when it is time to develop the report.

The report generated by this subcommittee will be sent to both the State Veterans Commission and the Governor's Office for future action.

PennDOT Introduces Branch of Service Veteran License Plates

HARRISBURG – Honorably discharged veterans of the United States Armed Forces have a new way to proudly display their service as PennDOT announced the availability of a new series of military license plates honoring veterans of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard.

“On any given day, members of our armed forces are serving around the globe protecting our freedom,” said PennDOT Secretary Allen D. Biehler, P.E. “PennDOT is pleased to announce this new series of military plates recognizing their sacrifices in service to our nation.”

The new plates feature the standard Pennsylvania license plate colors of blue, white and yellow along with the applicable branch of service emblem or logo on the left side of the plate. Pennsylvania is printed at the top of the plate, with the name of the applicable branch of service at the bottom.

To obtain one of these plates, honorably discharged veterans must complete and mail Form MV-150, Application for U.S. Military Veteran Registration Plate, to PennDOT

and include a certified copy of their DD-214, along with a \$20 fee.

The Form MV-150 and additional information on these license plates is available on PennDOT’s Driver and Vehicle Services Web site, www.dmv.state.pa.us. Click on the Military License Plates link under the Military Personnel/Veterans Information Center.



PennDOT recently rolled out new license plates commemorating military service in the five branches of service. Clockwise from top: U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Navy, and U.S. Army license plates.

State Veterans’ Home Residents Make Ornaments for Capitol Christmas Tree

HARRISBURG - Residents from all six of the state veterans’ homes participated in creating ornaments for this year’s Christmas tree, located in the main rotunda of the Capitol building in Harrisburg.

The effort was part of a larger annual initiative set forth by the Pennsylvania Department of Aging. This was the first time state veterans’ home residents participated.

The Secretary of Aging, John Michael Hall, invited members from all across Pennsylvania to create and donate hand-made ornaments that would showcase the talents and creativity of the commonwealth’s older adults. According to Department of Aging statistics, Pennsylvania has more than 600 senior centers, of which the six veterans’ homes are included.

The state veterans’ homes immediately got involved with the project and started working on the ornaments for the tree. Even homes located as far away as the Pennsylvania Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Home



The Christmas tree at the Harrisburg Capitol main rotunda has been featuring ornaments hand-made by senior citizens for 20 years. This is the first year state veterans’ home residents have contributed ornaments to the tree.



Southeastern Veterans' Center resident Charles S. Baker proudly displays some of the ornaments he made for the Capitol Christmas Tree.

in Erie has ornaments representing their facility.

“The one of a kind ornaments created by members of senior centers have become a holiday tradition that is appreciated by those who work and visit the Capitol,” Hall said during the announcement of this year’s effort, “These unique expressions of creativity and skill really make the tree special. Last year, hundreds of ornaments were donated and I hope we will have the same enthusiastic participation again this year.”

Gino J. Merli P.E.E.R. Group Gives Back for the Holidays

SCRANTON - By Michael Rapp

For several years the Pennsylvania Empowered Expert Residents (P.E.E.R.) group at the Gino J. Merli Veterans' Center has worked to be a catalyst for positive communication between staff and management, and a strong voice for residents' rights. They have succeeded on both fronts, and have not only improved the lives of residents at the GMVC, but also the work lives of staff. However, one aspect of the GMVC P.E.E.R. mission that sometimes goes unnoticed is community service.



The PEER Group Members at Gino J. Merli Veterans' Center in Scranton. Left to right: Lou Ross; Mary Hoffman (PEER in training); Aldona Yarznbowicz; Gertrude Gacek.

Most of the residents set aside a portion of their day to work on these, with assistance from the home staff. The ornaments range from ball-shaped to ornate cut outs.

The homes delivered a total of ornaments to the capitol for this year’s tree. The Department of Aging has been encouraging Pennsylvania’s senior citizens to make ornaments for the Capitol for twenty years.



Richard Karle, a resident of the Pennsylvania Soldiers' and Sailors' Home puts the finishing touches on an ornament to be displayed on the Capitol Christmas Tree in Harrisburg.

P.E.E.R. is a completely self-sufficient entity, according to member and spokesman Lou Ross. They do not rely on money from the Resident Welfare Fund to subsidize their projects, nor do they accept money from general funds. Raffles and 50/50 drawings supply much of their budget, and a can collection program helps to raise additional capital while keeping the planet a little cleaner. With the cash generated from these endeavors the group sponsored several community concerts over the summer, but now that the holiday season is approaching they have their sights set on helping the needy.

During October and November the P.E.E.R. group collected canned goods and other non-perishable items for donation to the St. Francis Soup Kitchen, which is located only a block away from the GMVC. Staff, families and visitors were encouraged to bring in unopened food items and drop them off in the collection area near the front entrance.

Another project the P.E.E.R. worked on in November was the Hat and Glove Drive. Like the canned goods, a box was located near the front doors of the facility where people were able to donate their gently used hats, gloves, mittens, scarves or other winter ac-

cessories. The collection will be distributed to the Women's Resource Center, where chilly people can pick them up.

December brought back the Christmas Wish Tree, a project that has been very successful over the past several years. A Christmas tree with is placed in the front lobby, decorated with cardboard ornaments each featuring the name of a needy child and their Christmas gift wish. Staff, family, visitors and even residents pick ornaments from the tree, and purchase the gift for the child. Wrapped gifts are then returned to the GMVC, where they are donated to United Neighborhood Centers of NEPA and distributed to children.

Another on-going project is the collection of tabs from soda cans. P.E.E.R.-in-training Mary Hoffman is spearheading this one, and hopes that it will defray some of the cost of dialysis for sick children.

Will all of these ventures in the works it might seem that P.E.E.R. has strayed from their intended path. P.E.E.R's main mission is to help other residents with problems and concerns that affect their quality of life. Despite the busy holiday season, this duty proceeds uninterrupted. P.E.E.R. brings welcome baskets to all new residents and greets them, informing them of whom they can turn to when they have a problem. P.E.E.R. sends get-well cards when residents are sick, and bereavement cards to the families of residents who pass away. Most importantly, P.E.E.R. meets formally once a month to discuss business, and members often confer in small groups on pressing matters that arise between meetings.

America Responds With Love...and Builds a House for a Disabled Veteran

Nestled in the wooded community of White Haven, only a few miles east of Hazelton, sits a two bedroom ranch home designed and built especially for a disabled person—specifically, a disabled veteran.

The house is the project of America Responds with Love, a non-profit organization that specializes in finding homes for victims of disasters, homelesspeo-

Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 678 "Super Stars" Collect Items to Assist Local Veterans



The Pocono Chapter 678 of the Vietnam Veterans of America recently took up a collection of food and gifts to give to two local veterans and their families in need of assistance. The gifts were placed into baskets and delivered to the Scranton VA Medical Center. From left to right: Ralph Keiper, Bill Kastler, Marty Barrett, Dave Ulkoski (Scranton Veteran Center Director) and Big Ray Russo.

The P.E.E.R. program began as an experimental project, and has grown into a fixture of the GMVC. In fact, they were the first P.E.E.R. group to form inside a state veterans' home. Their work here makes the home a happier place, and their efforts in the community improve our city.

In 2010 they will celebrate the fifth anniversary of their inception, and they have accomplished so much in such a short time. The group is anticipating doing even more during the new year.



The home at 1285 Woodhaven Drive is a fully handicapped-accessible home designed for a disabled veteran.



The kitchen features a space under the sink to accommodate a wheelchair and lower-level counter tops for accessibility.

ple, and other disadvantaged individuals. The organization has found homes for over 103,000 people since it began in 1982.

While housing the disadvantaged mostly involved temporary housing, the organization wanted to develop something more permanent, so they turned to disabled veterans.

Everything about this house speaks to the compassion of those who helped build it. The land it sits on was donated by a couple from North Carolina. The location is within ten minutes of shopping, hospitals, and other amenities. Emergency services are also close at hand, if they're needed. Service is available from the local Paratransit bus service, which will stop directly outside the door to pick up disabled passengers.

"Luzerne has the second largest senior citizen population, so it seemed like a good place to build it," said Richard McDonough, the President and Chief Executive Officer.

The outside is all landscaped with disability in mind. There are no lawns to take care of, and the entrances are all ground-level, making easy access for wheelchairs. Instead, decorative southwestern-style rock gardens—also donated—are used to decorate the front of the house. The driveway is wide enough to accommodate two cars with plenty of room to operate a wheelchair lift.

The entire community was involved in putting the house together. The permit fees were waived for the project. Components and materials used to build the house were all donated, some of the items were donated by companies located outside of Pennsylvania who still wanted to help. Even the real estate agency, Aim High Realty, offered their services to sell the house free of charge.

In addition to providing services, community

members donated money towards the project. Local newspaper rivals the Citizen's Voice and the Standard-Speaker worked together on an ad campaign to solicit donations from their readers.

Local organizations reached into their pockets to help this project. Wyoming Valley Motorcycle Club donated \$250 towards the project. Workers at the Hilton Hotels Hazelton Reservation Center collected household products for occupants of the home to use, such as toothpaste, soap, sandwich bags and, of course, towels.

Mountain Speedway donated a dollar of each entrance fee to the Frostbite II Enduro Racing event. In addition, they encouraged additional donations through the use of \$1.00, \$5.00, and \$10.00 sponsor cards.

The home's fixtures were donated, too, from the cooking range to the microwave and the counter top it sits on.

The home is being sold completely furnished, which means that one simply has to move in once they take possession of the property. Most of the furnishings were donated by various vendors. As an additional finishing touch, the home features an internet-ready computer and workstation. There's even a library of books, donated by a local publishing company.



The home also includes a shower stall that can accommodate a disabled person. This bench allows a handicapped person to shower while sitting down.

The home has gotten a lot of mention in the press, even being featured in an article from an Illinois newspaper, the Belleville News-Democrat.

Although the house is priced at \$120,000, America Responds With Love hopes to sell the home to a combat-wounded veteran from the current war who meets the appropriate eligibility requirements for as little as \$27,000.

“We believe it’s important to honor those who have served our country, but it isn’t just that issue itself,” says McDonough, “When you look at the population of those who are standing in line [for help obtaining housing] who are being overlooked, handicapped veterans are among that group,” he says. “In our view, those who served our country do step to the front of the line of those needing assistance.”

Over 1,000 Wreaths Laid at Indiantown Gap During ‘Wreaths Across America’ 2009



Tioga County Honor Guard members Edwin Calhoun (left) and Elmer Hughes (right) fold an American flag during the flag folding portion of the Wreaths Across America ceremony held at the Pennsylvania Veterans Memorial. After the flag was folded, it was laid in front of the POW/MIA marker located inside the memorial. After the ceremony, volunteers laid a total of 1,043 wreaths on graves at Indiantown Gap National Cemetery.

Over \$10,000 donated to Delaware Valley Veterans’ Home



Cliff Jeffries (center), from the Vietnam Veterans of America presents two anonymous checks totaling over \$10,000 to Peter Ojeda (left), Commandant of Delaware Valley Veterans’ Home (DVVH) and Paul Cain (right), Director, Bureau for Veterans’ Homes during a recent Veterans Home Advisory Council Meeting. Jeffries is also a member of the DVVH Advisory Council.

Hollidaysburg Residents & Staff Collect over 1,200 Items For Troops Overseas

In conjunction with Operation S .O.S. (Support Our Soldiers), the Hollidaysburg Veterans Home supported our troops by donating Family Thank you Boxes. In a week’s time, the employees and their families collected over 1,200 items plus monetary donations (for shipping) in an effort to support our troops. Also included were hand written letters from several elementary schools honoring our soldiers and thanking them for what they do. This was the second time the home has been involved in this effort.



January 2010 Community Events

If you know of an upcoming event that you'd like to see on our calendar, email cnelson@state.pa.us or call (717) 861-6979 and we'll add it to the Community Calendar section. Newsletters are published at the beginning of each month, so be sure to get the dates to us as soon as possible.

- **January 8:** Federal Resume Workshop. Attendees will learn Federal Resume writing and indentifying key words from the posted Federal Job Announcement. Workshops will seat 40 individuals. Please register online at www.cwds.state.pa.us or call Steve Potter at (717) 767-7618 ext 232. Two sessions: 9:00 AM to 12:00 PM and 1:00 PM to 4:00 PM at the York County CareerLink, 841 Vogelsong Road, York, PA
- **January 9 - 10:** Harrisburg Homeless Vets Stand Down Event. The Stand Down offers veterans an opportunity to connect with local services and meet other veterans. In addition, attendees will be provided free meals, clothing, and shelter for the event. Transportation to the event will be provided with information on pick-up times and locations to be announced. For more information, contact Dan DeFloria at (717) 234-7931 ext. 3048. 8:00 AM to 6:00 PM at the Harrisburg National Guard Armory, 17th and Calder Streets, Harrisburg, PA
- **January 9 - 10:** Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Event. Briefings and information for newly-returned service members and their families. For more information, contact Cory Bender at (717) 861-6718 or email cory.bender@us.army.mil. 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM at Kutztown University, West Main Street, Kutztown, PA
- **January 13:** Healthcare Career Fair. 10:00 AM to 3:00 PM at the Sheraton Suites Philadelphia Airport, 4101 Island Avenue, Philadelphia, PA
- **January 16:** Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Event. See January 9 - 10 for details. 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM at Fort Indiantown Gap, Building 8-80, Multipurpose Room, Annville, PA
- **January 23 - 24:** Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Event. See January 9 - 10 for details. 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM at Millersville University, 1 South George St, Millersville, PA
- **January 25 - 27:** 28th Annual Healthsports Ski Classic. Adaptive ski program for individuals with physical disabilities. Programs available for youth and adults. See application form for cost information. Deadline to submit is January 10, 2010. For more information, contact Leah Gray at hsports@city-net.com. 9:00 Am to 4:00 PM at Hidden Valley Ski Resort, 1 Craighead Drive, Hidden Valley, PA
- **January 28:** Jobs Gone Wild Career Fair. 10:00 AM to 2:30 PM at the Wachovia Center, 3601 South Broad Street, Philadelphia, PA
- **January 30 - 31:** Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Event. See January 9 - 10 for details. 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM at Eastonina, 90 Kunkle Drive, Easton, PA

Pennsylvania Office of the Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs

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