

Veterans Programs Designed to Serve Those Who Served

Benefit Awareness Remains Main Obstacle to Getting Available Funds into Veterans' Hands

Just as some people view patriotic songs as a call to action, the same can be said about existing programs for veterans which offer a wide range of benefits. The challenge remains how to ensure veterans are aware of these programs. Whether their needs include residential repairs to exterior lights or paying an FPL bill for interior lights, veterans' programs offering both funds and labor are, in fact, available in Indian River County.

The Veterans Council of Indian River County

Comprised of 25 veterans organizations and over 40 non-veterans groups that actively support veterans, the Veterans Council of Indian River County maintains its mission of "raising awareness of veterans' needs and of their contributions to society." One of the Council's most successful programs, Upward American Veterans (UAV), is an urgent-need program designed to keep vets from becoming homeless by supplying basic living financial support to qualified vets and their families. It began with a \$10,000 donation.

"The UAV program was started because of a *Letter to the Editor*," said Col. Marty Zickert, Development Officer for the Veterans Council of IRC. "I wrote in asking why Mitt Romney could get \$750,000 for a breakfast but I couldn't get \$70,000 to buy used buses to transport veterans to the VA medical facility in West Palm Beach."

Col. Zickert's letter set off a chain reaction of private donations, including a call from seasonal Vero Beach resident Sandy Johnson who contacted the Council and asked if she could donate to the cause. By the time she called, however, prior donations had already funded the original 30-passenger buses. But she would not be deterred. Her \$10,000 donation became the original seed money that started the UAV program, which has continued to grow as other donations have been added to it.

The original buses are nearing 150,000 miles as they continue to transport IRC veterans to the VA facility. In 2017, more than 2,300 veterans made the trip to WPB, while smaller, 16-passenger buses helped numerous local vets with shorter trips around town. Over the last four years, the UAV program has given qualified vets over \$130,000 in available funds. New buses cost \$120-150K, so the programs are in constant need of donations to purchase additional buses and ensure funds are available for disbursement to qualified veterans.

Address: P.O. Box 1354, Vero Beach, FL 32961;

Phone: 772-410-5820; Web: www.veteranscouncilirc.org



At a recent Chamber of Commerce "Business at Breakfast" meeting, where the Veterans Council was the sponsored speaker. Vets who attended the meeting are pictured left to right (back row) John Berkert, Navy League of IRC; Craig Waskow, 2nd Vice President Veterans Council of IRC; Col. Sam Kouns, President of the Veterans Council of IRC; Col Marty Zickert, Development Officer for the Veterans Council of IRC; John Michael Matthews, Past President of the Veterans Council of IRC; Catherine Caddell, Public Relations for the Veterans Council of IRC; Bruce Cady, Director of Operations for the Veterans Council of IRC; Left to Right (front row); Col Tony Young, Past President; and City Councilman John McMillan, US Air Force Veteran



The Victory Center at the Indian River Mall

Many people walk past the Victory Center in the Indian River Mall and simply view it as a place to purchase a piece of memorabilia or a lost uniform patch. But it is so much more – literally. The store is made up of almost 3,000 square feet, with a sizable amount dedicated to merchandise in front and an impressive amount of space set aside for vets to gather in back.

“The Victory Center has become a gathering place for veterans. They talk about things here with each other that they would never discuss with their families,” summarized Col. Zickert.

Visitors to the store would do well to take notice of the framed pictures on the walls, and keep in mind that the Victory Center is not a place to shop for a Halloween costume. Rather, it’s a place that calls to mind events that took place that were much scarier than Halloween for many families. The store has established itself as a respite for those seeking camaraderie and companionship, as well as those looking to share common experiences.

Address: 6200 20th St, Vero Beach, FL 32966
 Phone: 772-226-5316; Web: www.vcms-fl.com

The American Legion, Post #39, Vero Beach

Another location that is looking to open its arms even wider to veterans is the American Legion, Post #39, in Vero Beach. As part of an expansion plan for the building itself, future construction will see a better use of existing space including kitchen renovations allowing more meals to be served to veterans, as well as a designated computer area for veterans’ usage. The bar area is also currently being assessed for a more effective use of space to allow more guests on busy dinner or entertainment nights.

P. Jay Tuller, Commander at Post 39, said, “We’re really eager to get the plans started so we can open our doors to even more veterans in the community. Whether for special occasions or just an average day, we want the vets to know we’re here for them in any capacity.”

Also working hard at Post 39 is Auxiliary President Christina Hertlein, who is currently wading through red tape and applications to apply for available funds to help offset the cost of renovations. She pointed out, “We’re all doing as much as we can, as fast as we can. To get the plans underway, every dollar counts towards the bottom line and budget. Our expansion plans will help us get more veterans into our post, which in turn will help us be better able to inform them about every program available to them.”

Address: 1535 Old Dixie Highway, Vero Beach, FL 32960
 Phone: 772-562-9726



Above: The Victory Center store in the Indian River Mall.

Behind the counter, left to right: Bruce Cady, Director of Operations for the Veterans Council of IRC; Tom Orbacz, Victory Center Volunteer; LtCol Carroll Oates, Victory Center Volunteer; Col Marty Zickert, Development Officer for Veterans Council of IRC; Matt Newman, Victory Center Volunteer; Roy Siler, Victory Center Volunteer