

Stand Up For Those Who Stand For Us

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All in a Day

Unemployed, on the verge of homelessness and estranged from the military for more than 25 years, Carla McCullough arrived at the fourth annual Glendale (Ariz.) Stand Up for Veterans with little hope and nothing to lose.

McCullough, 52, an Army veteran, was looking for resources to return to school to expand her skills as a surgical technician. Much to her surprise, McCullough found much more than that. She discovered a path toward emotional, physical and financial well-being at the event at Glendale Community College.

“I went just to see what was going on,” she said. “I met all these people there so willing to help and guide and assist whatever your needs are. I can’t believe that I shut myself off from all that wonderfulness for all this time. I didn’t have to be alone. I didn’t have to be like that.”

At Stand Up for Veterans, McCullough was put in touch with an American Legion claims officer who guided her through the claims process with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Soon afterward, McCullough, a victim of military sexual trauma nearly 30 years ago, received the treatment she needed to overcome her past trauma, as well as housing and employment assistance to rebuild her life.

“From September 2016 to today, my life is completely different,” said McCullough, who now works for the VA as a caregiver for the elderly and part-time as a surgical technician at a Phoenix hospital. “Mind you, there are still ups and downs, but I am 98 percent better than I was then. I still have a long way to go, but I’m working. The repo man isn’t chasing down my car; I have a nice little condo, and I’m not in a horrible relationship.”

After leaving military service in 1990, McCullough says, she avoided having anything to do with the military or veterans organizations. Having spent so much time away from other service members, McCullough was surprised to find a “conglomeration of camaraderie and resources” at Stand Up.

McCullough is grateful not only for the initial assistance she received at the Glendale event, but also for the ongoing support from the people she was introduced to there.

“You develop friendships and they guide you,” McCullough said. “They help you and move you forward and they put you in contact with people that you need. Everyone’s situation is different, but there is always a resource they can guide you to that can help you.”

Glendale Mayor Jerry Weiers founded Stand Up for Veterans in 2013. A former chairman of the Military Affairs Committee in the Arizona House of Representatives, Weiers says Stand Up partially is a response to the annual “Stand Down” events for veterans that take place in Phoenix and other cities nationwide. While each Stand Down aims to end veteran homelessness, Weiers’ goal is to provide assistance that keeps veterans from ever landing on the streets.

“Why don’t we stand up for our veterans?” asked Weiers, who leads the community of more than 226,000 residents, including Arizona’s secondlargest veteran population. “Let’s take care of the small problems before they become big problems. Try to identify any and everything possible we can do to allow veterans to keep their lives together.”

Stand Up brings together volunteers and representatives from nearly 100 veteran service organizations, employers, social service agencies and nonprofit groups in the Glendale and greater western Maricopa County area to offer veterans legal and social services assistance, résumé advice and job opportunities. Sandy Coor Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1433 in Glendale serves as the nonprofit administrator of the event, working in partnership with the organizing committee.

In 2016, 324 registered veterans and 236 families attended the one-day event, with 13 former service members ringing the “you’re hired” bell at the center of the room. Weiers brings the bell to Stand Up each year to generate excitement each time a veteran receives a job offer and an opportunity to turn their lives around.

“It literally makes chills go down your back and the hair stand up on back of your neck,” Weiers said of his reaction each time the bell is rung. “This veteran gets to go home and say, ‘I got a job today.’ There are not many things you can say that make a stronger statement than, ‘I now have the ability to take care of my family.’”

Stand Up separates itself from other veteran job and benefits fairs by also having representatives from nearly two dozen court systems in attendance, enabling veterans to address legal issues that often created roadblocks to their employment and education. In many instances, veterans with lingering legal issues walk out with warrants quashed, community service work projects completed or their driver’s licenses reinstated.

While Stand Up has produced numerous success stories, Weiers said one of the most

memorable moments occurred last year when a judge enabled a veteran to complete community service that day and have his driver's license immediately reinstated, ending what the veteran said was 20 years of frustration.

"He literally came out the door jumping and celebrating," Weiers recalled. "It was incredible. He now had the missing tool that was keeping him from getting a job and being able to support himself."

Air Force veteran Chris Spicer, cocoordinator for the Glendale Stand Up for Veterans, praises the program for giving veterans a "place of safety to come and deal with their situations." Though dozens of organizations and agencies offer assistance to veterans, Spicer said accessing help often can be difficult and frustrating. Stand Up solves that problem by bringing a wide assortment of organizations together in one place.

"With Stand Up, you come there with an issue you want to get handled and by god it gets handled that day," he said. "It does not take 14 [web pages] before frustration settles in. You know where you are going right when you get there."

McCullough credits the Glendale Stand Up for turning her life around.

"I am so grateful I had the opportunity to be there," she said. "I am moving toward that next goal. Now I have a purpose and a drive and a vision. I've come a long way. I would like for everybody to have that same opportunity, because there is hope and people do care. We are not alone."

While the unemployment rate for veterans has been on a downward trajectory, Spicer said Stand Up for Veterans will continue to have an important role to play, including helping reduce the veteran suicide rate.

"There is always going to be a need for support," Spicer said. "That's what Stand Up does most here in Glendale and across the valley. It gives a focal point for veterans to find somewhere where somebody gives a darn about what's going on in their life." —ADP



A veteran visits the Vietnam Veterans Memorial of San Antonio. Photo provided by the Alamo Area Council of Governments.

Community Collaborations Serve San Antonio's Heroes

Michael Holloway, retired from the U.S. Navy, was looking for a weatherization service to modify his home when he learned about a special program for veterans in the San Antonio region.

He called the Alamo Area Council of Governments (AACOG). During his consultation, a representative mentioned that in addition to the insulation improvements, he might also qualify for home repairs under the AACOG Homes for Texas Heroes program.

The program offered exactly what he needed and more than he could have ever anticipated.

"They put a whole roof on the house," he said. "I kept waiting for a bill. I was very surprised and am still surprised." No bill ever came.

Holloway had been saving for a new roof, but because of his limited budget he was unsure if he could afford the repairs at all.

"I was actually thinking over the last couple of years about whether I was going to stay here or sell it and get something really small, but that's a 30-year roof so there's no reason to leave now," Holloway said after the repairs.

AACOG was established in 1967 as a voluntary association of local governments and organizations that covers 13 counties in the San Antonio region. The organization supports Joint Base San Antonio which includes Fort Sam Houston, Camp Bullis, Lackland AFB, Lackland Training Annex and Randolph AFB.

San Antonio has been termed “Military City USA” due to the population of the military-affiliated community in the area. U.S. Census data identify Texas as one of the states with a high veteran population and also lists Texas among the states with the highest percentage of veterans with a service-connected disability. That’s why veterans services like the AACOG Homes for Texas Heroes program make a huge difference.

The program, which was funded by a grant from the Texas Veterans Commission, leveraged community partnerships with the goal of assisting veterans like Holloway, dependents and surviving spouses with accessibility home modifications, rehabilitation and repairs.

“We found that there were a lot of veterans who were living on pensions and military retirement, and there weren’t a lot of additional funds to go toward major modifications as individuals age, such as bathroom modifications and walk-in showers,” said AACOG Regional Services Director Gloria Vasquez. “For a lot of the veterans in our program that we were able to serve, that was a high priority.”

The program performed emergency repairs and also made modifications such as creating better accessibility for clients using wheelchairs.

“In one case, the person did not have a ramp, and they had no concrete landing or anything. It was just dirt and grass, and the veteran was having a difficult time getting in and out of the home,” Vasquez said. They were able to build a ramp and add a short sidewalk to make accessibility easier for the client.

“We are an aging nation with the Baby Boomers coming of age and there’s just a huge need,” Vasquez said. “When we came across this project, and finding out that we would be able to specifically tailor the program to assist veterans and their families, it was just a tremendous opportunity. We exceeded our deliverables by huge numbers.”

While the grant funding has now expired, the program exceeded its 2016 goals of providing home modifications and accessibility by 216 percent, serving 82 veteran clients.

For Mary Alvarez, the program provided a full set of modifications for her bathroom, including a walk-in shower and modified toilet. AACOG took over when her husband of 48 years passed away before completing the project.

“It was a lot of help,” she said. “My husband was a Marine. He’s not here, but he’s still helping through the program.”

To show her gratitude for something she said “really picked up my spirit,” she cooked for the workers, making her favorite brisket and shrimp alfredo recipes.

“I had a lot of good people come out and work with us. They helped us a lot. We’re all happy about it,” Alvarez said.

A new AACOG program will launch in late June with the goal of streamlining services for veterans and military-affiliated individuals and families. The successful national program AmericaServes will launch its 10th center in the country with TXServes. Administered by the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University through a \$5 million Walmart Foundation donation, TXServes will help fill holes in services for veterans in the San Antonio region.

AACOG will act as the control center for TXServes and provide coordination between providers.

“TXServes enables us to connect referral sources so that there is no wrong door for a veteran or family member,” said Annie Erickson, director of TXServes-San Antonio at AACOG. “They are able to enter at any point with any service. It’s a lot more customer-friendly for our veterans and a lot more efficient for the referral sources.”

The program will launch first in Bexar County with more than 40 providers, and the network will continue to build from there.

“It’s leveraging the resources that many wonderful programs have in the San Antonio area,” Erickson said.

In year two, the program will extend to seven surrounding counties. After two years, the program will cover all 13 local counties. This is a two-year grant, so TXServes is working to be sustainable after the grant ends.

The providers vary in size. Some traditionally have supported veterans, and others have not. All have been vetted to ensure that they can serve the needs of the military community. Service providers will include organizations such as Family Endeavors, Haven for Hope, the VA hospital system, Goodwill and LiftFund. The goal is to eliminate barriers to services.

“This is very transparent and holds everyone accountable in providing the services. [For the referral source], you can actually see what is happening to the veteran you referred,” Erickson said. “Anyone that refers a veteran can then have access to see what services that veteran was able to obtain.”

At the coordination center, AACOG also will be able to see which agencies have available funding, which ebbs and flows. This also will cut down on clients being bounced around in the system or being sent from agency to agency around the area without obtaining services.

Making the military-affiliated community feel welcome is part of San Antonio's brand. The region's leaders want to ensure that veterans who choose to transition into the community have access to everything they need to be successful.

"The community, in collaboration with the military, looks to be a viable source to give those who have served their country honorably and the families who have sacrificed a place where they can reside and partake of what's being offered," said retired Maj. Gen. Alfred Valenzuela, president and chairman of the board for the Military & Veteran Community Collaborative. The collaborative will serve as an advisory arm to AACOG on the initiative.

"TXServes and the Institute of Military Veterans and Families in Syracuse University have looked to find examples of places that epitomize the working relationship between the community and the military," Valenzuela said. "San Antonio offers that, and it's a perfect spot to be able to set up a network that focuses on the veteran-serving organizations that help people transition from military life to civilian community life." —WS
