

## Creating conversation

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Members serving food at Lyons VAMC - Pix credit to member Lenny Jackson, Chapter Historian

### **New Jersey chapter assists veterans, builds camaraderie through volunteerism**

Volunteering is the successful foundation to an active and engaged membership for a DAV chapter in New Jersey.

For more than a decade, members of Chapter 16 in Somerville have volunteered thousands of hours and raised thousands of dollars to support veterans in the community.

Members purchase and stuff backpacks with warm clothes, toiletries and cold weather gear for homeless veterans. Each bag has a chapter business card with information on how veterans can get help from a DAV service officer.

In addition to volunteering their time to help veterans access VA benefits, chapter members spend hours assisting veterans at local VA facilities. Their biggest event is a rock 'n' roll themed dinner at the VA Medical Center in Lyons.

They prepare and serve home style meals for nearly 125 residents and patients. After dinner, volunteer musicians and DJs play tunes from the 1960s to present day, giving the veterans a chance to dance and sing to the songs they grew up with. The evening also features a raffle for door prizes and gift bags donated by the chapter. The event and the members' fundraising drives have been so successful that Chapter 16 is able to host the popular dinner biannually.

The chapter also makes a point of supporting women veterans. Volunteers take residents recovering at the VA medical center shopping for necessities. They are also treated to a New Year's Eve lunch.



**Chapter Commander & Daughter at Forget-Me-Not Fund Drive in Warren, NJ - Pix credit to member Lenny Jackson, Chapter Historian**

To fuel the effort, each year in June, the chapter holds several Forget-Me-Not fundraising drives around Father's Day. Volunteers and chapter members gather at local businesses, thanking donors for their support and providing outreach about benefits and other services.

Over a six to eight-day period, the community donates between \$8,000 and \$12,000 annually. As members raise funds, they put the money back to work for veterans in their area.

"Every dollar raised goes toward a veteran," said Gerard Walsh, chapter commander.

According to Walsh, the chapter's Local Veterans Assistance Program and volunteer work is critical to their success.

"Our volunteering creates conversation," said Walsh. "People donate, volunteer and many become chapter members. One of the chapter member is a 102-year-old World War II veteran who still volunteers and attends meetings."

Walsh said he expects his officers to lead by example. The teamwork required for volunteering builds knowledge, trust and camaraderie among chapter members and the veteran community.

"Our chapter keeps growing but we need Desert Storm, Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans," said Walsh. "We have set the example and we need leaders to take over to continue the mission to serve our fellow veterans."

According to Voluntary Services Director John Kleindienst, the chapter is in good shape to recruit more recent war members and volunteers because they make providing direct services to veterans their constant priority.

"When people see the impact of DAV's mission in action, they want to get involved," said Kleindienst. "The more they do to create opportunities for veterans and their families to give back, the more they will achieve in other areas. It starts with momentum and they stand out because of the hard work chapter leaders and team members perform consistently."

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