

# Veterans groups adapt to provide help during pandemic

Selena Vazquez For The Press

PLEASANTVILLE — The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the need for veterans services, even as restrictions in place to halt the spread of the coronavirus have made it harder for some service organizations to meet and assist those in need of help.

“Since the COVID-19 outbreak in March, the need for veteran services and resources has tripled,” Atlantic County Sheriff Eric Scheffler said Friday. “The COVID-related stress only intensifies issues, like homelessness and addiction, that these veterans were dealing with before.”

Veterans groups have managed to adapt to the higher demands. Two recent examples include the Atlantic City Regional Stand Down-Mobile event and an Absecon VFW Post 9462 Auxiliary distribution event.

The Atlantic City Regional Stand Down-Mobile event Friday was organized by multiple regional veterans organizations at the Max Manning Complex in Pleasantville. Vans and tables were set up in a parking lot offering services and support.

A group of veterans surveyed the tables, while others waited to have their temperatures checked before entering.

Bob Looby, past state commander and chairman of N.J. Employment, Homelessness & Education for the New Jersey American Legion, said 175 veterans were expected for the event.

“We stay in contact with every at-risk and homeless veteran we’ve helped,” Looby said. “Over the past four years, we’ve helped at least 500 vets.”

Patrick Carney, a U.S. Army veteran and veteran community outreach specialist for the Wilmington VA Medical Center, said the military doesn’t provide veterans with services or resources when they leave the military. Returning veterans need those services to cope with issues such as PTSD, mental health, housing or employment.

“Me and my wife were technically homeless for three years after I got out of the military,” Carney said. “I pretty much had to figure it out by myself. Veteran service organizations helped me get back on my feet.”

Sponsors of the Pleasantville event included the American Legion Family, American Red Cross, Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Camden, the state Department of Military and Veteran Affairs, Disabled American Veterans, the state Casino Control Commission, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Services included health care, mental health resources, benefits and claims, housing, employment and clothing. The goal was to ensure all veterans have access to the services and resources they may have disconnected from during the pandemic.

Also last week, the Absecon VFW Post 9462 Auxiliary delivered a much needed early morning supply of hot coffee, doughnuts, handmade crocheted blankets and “Thinking of You” cards to the 25 veterans staying at Meadowview Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Northfield.

The ladies of the VFW auxiliary were unable to personally give their offerings to the veterans inside the nursing home due to COVID-19 guidelines, said Lyndell Harris, the recreation director of Meadowview.

During the pandemic, the Absecon VFW Auxiliary has had to adjust its ways of helping veterans in the community, said Karen Benedetto, auxiliary president. Instead of organizing large social events for veterans, such as their annual Super Bowl and Christmas parties and striper tournaments, they’ve focused on philanthropy and food drives, while keeping within health and safety guidelines.

“This is our first time coming to this center,” Benedetto said of the Stand Down. “We had actually scheduled to come here with entertainment for our first time in March, before COVID hit.”

And while the the two events weren’t directly related, Looby and Benedetto told a familiar story: Neither was going to allow the pandemic to stop them from honoring and helping veterans in need.