



CARES UP SPOTLIGHT: Helping Rensselaer Veterans Navigate Civilian Life

At age 30, U.S. Marine Corps Veteran Daniel Wargo understands firsthand the challenges that young Veterans face when transitioning to civilian life and the mental health risks that accompany these challenges.

“Leaving the military is pretty abrupt, so it’s important for Veterans who are first getting out to have a plan and to have someone to help them transition,” says Wargo.

Now an assistant director of the Veterans Resource and Outreach Center (VET-ROC) at Hudson Valley Community College and a representative for the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program for Rensselaer County, Wargo is in a position to make a difference for other Veterans.

With funding from CARES UP, Wargo and his small but mighty VET-ROC team provides Veterans across Rensselaer County with the

services and supports they need to navigate civilian life—both physically and emotionally.

“We don’t close our doors to anyone. But we understand that the needs of young Veterans are different from older Vets. So, we’ve made them our priority,” says Wargo.

REACHING YOUNG VETERANS

According to Wargo, VFW and American Legion posts—the traditional meeting spots for U.S. Veterans—don’t hold the same attraction for younger Vets as they do for the older generation. Some young Veterans

bristle at the hierarchy of these clubs, which tend to mirror the military structure and don't always feel welcoming. Others are looking for activities more in line with their interests. Many are seeking more support than these social groups are able to provide.



CARES UP in Rensselaer County

Over the next two years, the Veterans Resource and Outreach Center at Hudson Valley Community College will use CARES UP funding to bring the End of Terminal Services (ETS) Sponsorship Program to Veterans in Rensselaer County and the surrounding Capital District.

ETS connects Veterans who are finishing their military service with sponsors who are trained, VA-certified, and dedicated to helping the Veterans and their family members access the local resources and supports they need for a successful transition to civilian life.

"We need more than spaghetti dinners on a Friday night," says Wargo. "We want camaraderie, but we also need help moving our lives forward."

By combining the social with the informative, VET-ROC activities meet both of these objectives. During weekly coffee hours at a local, Veteran-owned coffee shop or monthly dinners in an upstairs, private room at a local restaurant, Veterans have regular opportunities to grab some food, build connections, and learn about local services. Recent events included presentations by Team RWB (Red, White, and Blue), a national organization dedicated to helping Veterans maintain healthy lifestyles; IBI Semper Training, Inc., a local non-profit that connects Veterans with service dogs; and the New York State Division of Veteran Affairs/Albany Vet Center.

"We're about finding doors, opening them, and seeing if anyone wants to go through," says Wargo.

Many VET-ROC events also address mental health issues head-on. For example, last September the organization hosted a golf outing to raise awareness for Suicide Prevention Month. Chip Away@22-a-Day highlighted the mental health risks that Veterans face after returning from combat and the support resources available if they are struggling with thoughts of suicide.

"Many of the Veterans we see suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] or traumatic brain injury, and helping them cope with these issues is [also] a big part of what we do," says Wargo.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

VET-ROC partners with organizations across the county to support broad programming that appeals to the many diverse interests of the

Veterans they serve. One of these is STRIDE Adaptive Sports, a local nonprofit dedicated to engaging individuals with disabilities in sport and recreation programs. VET-ROC routinely connects Veterans who are disabled with STRIDE's Wounded Warrior program.

Another critical partner is HicksStrong, Inc., which links Veterans and active duty service members with confidential mental health services free of charge.

"In the military, there's a lot of stigma around accessing mental health services. Admitting to having a mental health problem is a sign of weakness, and can even affect your career. HicksStrong makes it easy for Veterans to get the help they need," says Wargo.

VET-ROC also partners with two equine therapy programs that have shown promise in bringing Veterans relief from their PTSD symptoms.

"I've gone through the program, and I notice a difference," says Wargo. "I can be at the farm for four hours, and it feels like 20 minutes. You have to think about the horse instead of your own issues. And that can provide a sense of relief."

NEXT STEPS

Wargo looks forward to incorporating the End of Terminal Services (ETS) Sponsorship Program into VET-ROC's current menu of services.

"It's easy to feel lost when you first get out of the military. There's a lot to juggle. Through ETS and our other services, we can help Veterans access their G.I. benefits, find an apartment, or get enrolled in school, if that's what they want. We can help them find jobs

that are military-friendly. Taking care of these things can have an enormous impact on their mental health," says Wargo.

He's also excited to see the program expanding, describing VET-ROC services as a big crockpot full of Veteran's services stew: "We throw everything we stumble across into the pot. Then we stir it all around and make sure that every Veteran gets a plate."



NY CARES UP

TO LEARN MORE about CARES UP, a state-funded program to support Veterans, first responders, and uniformed personnel through wellness and resiliency to lessen the stress inherent in their careers, go to: preventsuicideny.org/cares-up or email CARESUP@omh.ny.gov