



CARES UP SPOTLIGHT: Media Partners Help Create Buzz for Tioga County CARES UP Initiative

As director of Tioga County Veterans Services (TCVS), Michael Middaugh is dedicated to making sure that upstate New York veterans feel acknowledged, respected, and supported. To do this, he has built a strong network of community and media partners who have helped him keep the needs of veterans in the spotlight.

So when TCVS convened a press conference on April 7, 2022 to announce its new CARES UP funding, it was no surprise that nearly 100 partners attended—including the region’s three major television stations and the three largest newspapers. The resulting media coverage reached more than 100,000 people across the county and beyond, raising awareness of the mental health needs of veterans transitioning to civilian life. It also generated interest in the agency’s new program (see page 2) and provided clear information for how community members can participate.



CARES UP IN TIOGA COUNTY

Over the next two years, Tioga County Veterans Services will use CARES UP funding to bring the End of Terminal Services (ETS) Sponsorship Program to six counties in upstate New York.

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

TO LEARN MORE about the **ETS Sponsorship Program** in Tioga and surrounding counties, contact Michael Middaugh, director of Tioga County Veterans Services, at: middaughm@tiogacountyny.gov

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

Middaugh has these tips for others who are working with the media:

- › **Deliver a clear message.** Middaugh's message is compelling and consistent. "We teach our men and women to go to war and do unspeakable things in the name of our country, but we don't teach them how to come home." When people hear this message, they understand why more supports for veterans in transition are needed.
- › **Have a clear ask.** For the ETS project, the ask is for community members to become a sponsor. "Communities want to give back," says Middaugh. "This is an opportunity to do so—with a minimal investment of time and lots of support."
- › **Dedicate time to building media relationships.** Middaugh began reaching out to his media contacts as soon as he started his job, sending press releases and invitations to every event TCVS hosted. Eventually, they started coming. "They trust me, and I trust them," says Middaugh. "If they can free someone up, they'll send them over. Because they know that we're doing worthwhile things over here."
- › **Make it a win-win.** Middaugh describes his relationship with the media as a partnership. "Media outlets are always looking for news. Maybe they want a good human interest story for that night. I can provide them with that." These may include stories about upcoming events, about the veterans with whom he works, or about program successes. "I help them fill a time slot, and they help us keep veterans needs a priority."

- › **Control the narrative.** For press releases, Middaugh starts with a clear sense of his main message, then he makes sure to include sound bites that media can quote. He also pays close attention to language. For example, Middaugh prefers the term ‘those who served’ to ‘veteran’, explaining that many who didn’t serve in wartime don’t consider themselves veterans and so don’t seek support or services.
- › **Invest in advertising.** Middaugh dedicates a significant portion of his budget to paid advertising, including weekly ads in the local PennySaver and radio spots on the local radio station. This helps to keep veterans’ affairs in the public spotlight and on the news desk’s radar.
- › **Be prepared.** Despite his many years as director, Middaugh still writes down and practices what he plans to say before meeting with potential partners or a press conference. “It takes time to learn how to talk to people. What’s important is to let your passion come through.”
- › **Provide incentives.** An incentive might be food or collaborating with partners to allow their staff to take the ETS volunteer training during work hours. “By providing incentives, we show that we appreciate our supporters and their interest in the needs of our veterans.”
- › **Get out in the community.** Middaugh is a man on the go, discussing veterans’ affairs and the work TCVS is doing wherever, and whenever, possible. “I seize every opportunity I can to spread the word,” says Middaugh. “I always bring our ETS banner and have two elevator speeches at the ready—a five-minute [version] and a 15-minute version, depending on how much time I have!”



NY CARES UP

TO LEARN MORE about CARES UP, a state-funded program to support veterans and first responders through wellness and resiliency to lessen the stress inherent in their careers, go to:

preventsuicideny.org/cares-up

or email CARESUP@omh.ny.gov