



Western New York Heroes Eases the Transition for Returning Veterans

Like many Veterans, U.S. Army Veteran Chris Kreiger struggled when he returned home from active duty.

"My life was turned upside down," says Kreiger. "My family lost everything because I was spending so much time in hospitals. The banks didn't want to hear that I couldn't make the mortgage payments. The utility companies didn't want to hear about my problems, either. It was a struggle just to put food on our table."

Kreiger was also overwhelmed by how hard it was to access the Veteran benefits he'd been promised: "You have to cut through so much red tape. They're not just handed to you, like you'd think."

Determined to help other Veterans who were facing similar challenges, Kreiger co-founded Western New York (WNY) Heroes, Inc. The organization initially focused on preventing homelessness among returning Veterans. Today, however, it also provides a wide range of financial and mental health supports, including the recently launched Expiration of Term of Service (ETS) Sponsorship Program (SP), to nearly 15,500 Veterans living in Buffalo and the surrounding 14 counties.

NAVIGATING RE-ENTRY

Funded through a CARES UP grant from the New York State Office of Mental Health, ETS-SP connects Veterans who are finishing their military service with a trained sponsor who can help them access the local resources and supports they need for a successful transition to civilian life.

“Leaving the military is hard,” says WNY Heroes program director Lynn Magistrale. “You don’t have direction. You don’t know where to go for help. And you’re in a mindset where you don’t want to talk to anyone. You need someone to help you through.”

Having support during this period of transition, when Veterans are learning to re-acclimate to the civilian community, is critical, as many Veterans struggle with thoughts of suicide during their first 12 months out of service.

“When I first got out, I had to do a Facebook search to find local Veterans organizations,” says Magistrale. “If someone had taken me by the hand and pointed me in the right direction, it would have made a world of difference.” Kreiger agrees: “With ETS-SP, we can help returning Veterans navigate the entire transitioning system: housing, employment, mental health supports. They don’t have to figure it out on their own.”

To date, WNY Heroes has trained 10 sponsors to pair with transitioning Veterans. All are current volunteers; most are Veterans themselves.

“They are people who have been there, done that—who have had to walk the nightmare of getting through the red tape,” says Kreiger.



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OTHER WNY HEROES PROGRAMMING

ETS-SP is just one of many supports that WNY Heroes provides its local Veterans. Each program is informed directly by Kreiger’s own experiences returning home. All are designed to ease the financial and emotional burdens that many Veterans carry and to help them sustain their dignity. Here are some examples:

› **Heroes Bridge**, one of WNY Heroes’ first initiatives, provides financial support to Veterans who are facing housing insecurity. The program currently covers up to four months of back rent, mortgage, utilities, and food, and soon hopes to cover six months. “When you don’t have to worry about bills, you have space to focus on your own mental and physical health, and on your family. You can focus on working on yourself and getting back on your feet,” says Kreiger.

› **Operation B.O.O.T.S (Battle Buddies On Our Troops Side)** is WNY Heroes’ peer-to-peer support program, currently reaching more than 3,000 Veterans each year. Activities provide Veterans with regular opportunities to connect and build relationships in a fun, non-

clinical setting. Recent offerings include monthly breakfasts, sporting events, plays, dinners, outings to New York City, and an annual retreat for female Veterans. "People come home and they're depressed. They seclude themselves. They don't want to bother with friends and family. Operation B.O.O.T.S. helps them realize that there are many others out there who are like them," says Kreiger.

- › **Pawsitive for Heroes.** Service dogs have been shown to be effective supports for people with traumatic brain injuries, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal thoughts, nightmares, and anxiety. Since 2014, WNY Heroes has paired 145 veterans with a service dog. "My kids convinced me to get a dog, which we then trained to be a service dog," says Kreiger. "Within a few months of getting her, I knew I felt different."
- › **Little Heroes** was born from the belief that transitioning to civilian life is a journey for the entire family. Recognizing that many Veterans and their families live paycheck to paycheck, Little Heroes provides reimbursement for extracurricular activities and enrichment programs for Veterans' children. "When I first came home and was struggling, my family went through it with me. My kids didn't ask for that weight on their shoulders," says Kreiger.
- › **Food distribution.** With the help of nearly 300 volunteers, WNY Heroes feeds more than 1,000 Veterans and immediate family members every other week. "The need is there, particularly among the elderly."

NEXT STEPS FOR ETS

Kreiger and his team are continually looking for ways to grow WNY Heroes' menu of services. ETS-SP is a welcome addition, as

is the CARES UP funding that is supporting implementation.

"The need is always there. It's up to us to make sure we have the programs in place to meet that need, and to help our Veterans understand that asking for help is a sign of courage, not weakness," says Kreiger.



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