Bridging the generation gap

As WWII volunteers pass, retiring boomers needed

As our population of World War II-era volunteers continues to decline, the veterans’ community is experiencing a downward trend in volunteerism. DAV has not been immune to this change in demographics and is looking to shore up its volunteer base as needs grow.

Last October, the Department of Veterans Affairs Voluntary Service (VAVS) Central Office report showed a slump in volunteerism across nearly all veterans service organizations (VSOS) throughout the past five years. DAV and the Auxiliary—the most prolific volunteer force noted, with 11 percent of the total VAVS volunteers throughout the reported period—are nonetheless facing a dilemma common to organizations that rely on an unpaid workforce.
Nearly 15,000 VAVS volunteers and 1.5 million volunteer hours were lost between 2009 and 2014. Last year alone, 40 of the 54 VSOs listed in the report saw a decrease in both the number of volunteers and the hours they worked. The groups that saw positive increases would not significantly impact the 11.1 million hours of annually donated services volunteers provide and veterans have come to rely upon.

“There are different factors that are contributing to this decline, but the greatest trend we see is the shift in volunteer demographics,” said John Kleindienst, DAV National Director of Voluntary Services. “Those who were considered part of the ‘Greatest Generation’ were historically our most prolific volunteers. Many of those folks are passing away. Meanwhile, members of the Vietnam era are working longer.”

According to Kleindienst, the most significant volunteer contributors have historically been those who are retired. A lull between generations inevitably causes some anxiety and makes the recruitment and retention of qualified volunteers even more critical.

“We know what’s on the line here,” said Kleindienst. “A decline in DAV drivers could ultimately lead to vets losing their rides. For many, that may mean that they Won’t be getting the care they need and earned. We simply can’t let that happen.”

Kleindienst said that although he is confident that the number of DAV volunteers will trend upward over the next two to four years, he believes that the early generation of baby boomers represent the greatest hope for volunteer continuity.

“We need to encourage folks to volunteer as soon as they retire. Having that influx of volunteers will ensure DAV is able to provide the continuity of services needed for veterans across all age groups,” he said. “Whether it’s in a hospital, on the road with the Transportation Network or through the
Local Veterans Assistance Program, we need to encourage and promote volunteerism as much as possible.”

Kleindienst said he is encouraged to see Chapters, Hospital Service Coordinators and volunteers reaching out to the media for help in making the public aware of needs and opportunities. In the coming year, he hopes more will contact his office to connect with resources that can help spread the word.

“We’re blessed to have volunteers out there who understand the promises we made to veterans and are committed to improving their quality of life,” said Barry Jesinoski, National Headquarters Executive Director. “The most common thing we hear from volunteers is that they feel they get as much out of donating their time as the veterans get from their generosity. It’s a rewarding way to stay active and make a difference.”

Get Involved

Anyone interested in volunteering for VAVS on behalf of DAV can contact DAV Voluntary Services at VAVS@dav.org or by calling 859-441-7300, or toll-free at 877-426-2838.