

Marine veteran paying it forward

DAV claims assistance inspires Marine veteran to give back as service officer



After receiving assistance from DAV benefits specialist Dan Knabe (right), Marine Corps veteran Mike Franko was inspired to give back. Just months after receiving a corrected rating from the VA, the Afghanistan War veteran began training as a Department of Missouri service officer, a role where he can pay it forward to fellow veterans.

Mike Franko filed a claim for disability benefits following his discharge from the military in 2016, but an error resulted in the Marine Corps veteran not receiving the benefits he earned through service.

After being rated at zero percent for his battered knees and denied a rating for post-traumatic stress, the former infantryman was convinced he did not warrant support through the VA.

That all changed when he was referred to DAV.

“Initially, I was thinking there’s too many Marines, soldiers, sailors and airmen who deserve it more than me, but I was finally convinced I’m as deserving as they are,” said Franko, who served as a squad leader in Afghanistan. “[My family and friends] said, ‘Your back and legs are messed up from being blown up; you deserve support.’”

Someone suggested he speak with a veterans service organization. That is when he met National Service Officer Dan Knabe.

The DAV benefits advocate reviewed Franko’s files and immediately saw red flags.

“Mike had pain in motion, and in accordance with VA rules, that is automatically a 10 percent evaluation,” said Knabe. “That got me curious, and then I looked further and saw the denied service connection for post-traumatic stress. The decision confirmed a diagnosis but not a stressor.”

Knabe sifted through the veteran’s files and noticed he had received a Combat Action Ribbon.

“That is when I knew there was a clear and unmistakable error, because that award is a presumptive stressor for post-traumatic stress,” explained Knabe, an Army veteran. He immediately went to meet with his VA counterparts. They agreed with his discovery and quickly came back with a correct rating

that provides Franko access to the benefits and services he should have been awarded right away.

“We do not typically find that many mistakes, but cases like this show the spirit of a service officer,” said Knabe. “It puts that feeling in your heart that you’re making a difference.

“We have a great professional relationship with the VA here in St. Louis and communicate regularly on cases, give each other feedback and come to a mutual agreement in order to get the veteran what’s right based on their record.”

St. Louis VA Regional Office Director Mitzi Marsh agreed on the importance of working together.

“The regional office’s goal is to make the right decision and provide all the benefits veterans have earned. If there is a concern, we work closely with veterans service organizations to review it and, if necessary, correct the problem,” said Marsh, an Army veteran. “We see our relationship with veterans service organizations only continuing to grow in the future through initiatives like Decision Ready Claims and other programs.”

“I was retroactively awarded, and I don’t think that would have happened without Dan’s help,” said Franko. “Dan expedited the whole process, especially compared to my original claim.”

Franko had wanted to work in law enforcement but knew his injuries would inhibit him. So instead, he decided to pay forward Knabe’s assistance to other veterans.

“I thought if I can’t serve my local community, then why don’t I serve the veteran community,” said Franko. “After seeing Dan work and do what he did for me, now I can sit on his side of the desk and help fellow veterans.”

He relayed his interest to Knabe. The next day, Franko

received a call about a service officer position with the DAV Department of Missouri and was told he should apply.

Knabe, who had gone through his own rough patch after a deployment to Iraq but received help through the VA, said he'd found his way to serve veterans in a similar way.

"I was [a noncommissioned officer] so I have always had a passion to help. I was making sure soldiers were successful not only in the military but in life," Knabe said. "I was lost when I came back, trying to find meaning as a civilian, and that's when I found DAV. It's about service and the mission. DAV saved me from a dark time and restored my sense of purpose.

"DAV took care of me, and now I hope I take care of DAV. I am honored it inspires Mike to have that same passion to assist fellow service members."

DAV Department of Missouri Adjutant Michael Elmore was happy to welcome Franko on board.

"We are excited to have Mike join 16 other dedicated veterans as a DAV Department of Missouri service officer," said Elmore. "The Show-Me State is fortunate to have another talented advocate assist the nearly half a million veterans living in Missouri with DAV's life-changing benefits and services."

Franko began his training in November and looks forward to bringing his unique skill set as a recently discharged veteran to the office.

"I'm young blood with a fresh mind, bringing a new perspective that can hopefully help veterans not just through claims but also different aspects of life," said Franko.

"It is a victory anytime we can help a veteran with a claim, but to have a client be so inspired they choose to give back in their career full-time is incredibly meaningful," said

National Service Director Jim Marszalek. "DAV is veterans helping veterans, and Dan and Mike are living examples of our mission of service."