Drive-a-hero

Shantel McJunkins (right), VA Voluntary Service specialist, helps Marine veteran Dennis Hammons fill out an application to become a new DAV volunteer driver.

Oklahoma sets up one-stop shop to onboard volunteers

The DAV Transportation Network depends on volunteers to transport veterans to and from their appointments at no cost, and finding and enrolling those volunteers has proven difficult in many communities across the country. But the DAV Department of Oklahoma has developed a new way to quickly recruit and onboard drivers: the Drive-a-Hero event.

DAV members in Oklahoma hosted the first Drive-a-Hero, a one-stop-shop event, at their department convention in 2019, making it easier for volunteers to complete the necessary requirements in a single day.

They coordinated with the Eastern Oklahoma VA Health Care System so potential drivers could meet with VA staff to
perform the required background checks and physical evaluations. Trained professionals were also on hand to conduct volunteer orientation and annual training for new and seasoned volunteers.

“It’s a motivator for us to go out and recruit, when we can ask people if they want to volunteer, to be able to bring them in and, in one day, get them through all the prerequisites that can normally take 90 days or more,” said Department of Oklahoma Adjutant Danny Oliver. “When a person comes in to volunteer, they’d like to roll up their sleeves and start volunteering. They don’t want to have to wait two to three months.”

The debut event was a success for the department, and Oliver said they’re planning to expand it to reach more drivers and volunteers from across the state.

By the end of the day, 34 new volunteers had signed up to help veterans in Eastern Oklahoma. According to Oliver, that many volunteers could have taken years to onboard without the collaboration and support DAV enjoys from the Department of Veterans Affairs in the state.
conducts part of the required medical screening for Army veteran Marcus Lutz, who volunteered to be a new DAV driver. (Photos courtesy of VA Public Affairs Specialist Nathan Schaeffer)

“The Eastern Oklahoma VA Health Care System is grateful for the support and ongoing partnership with our local DAV partners,” said Jonathan Plasencia, associate director for Eastern Oklahoma VA Health Care System. “The Drive-a-Hero campaign will ensure veterans who do not have transportation continue to get access to vital VA health care services. I was proud to share this successful campaign with Ralph Gigliotti, director of the VA Rocky Mountain Network, who has shared this initiative with other VA health systems in our network.”

The program is answering an urgent need and could be mirrored in other communities.

“As our nation comes out of this pandemic, we know this important effort will need to evolve in the face of our ‘new normal,’” said National Voluntary Services Director John Kleindienst. “But efforts like the Drive-a-Hero event in Oklahoma may prove to be a template that DAV leaders and volunteer coordinators can use to efficiently onboard volunteers across the country.”

Insurable, licensed drivers need only pass a physical to be considered for participation.
Learn more

To find ways to volunteer in your community, go to dav.org or volunteerforveterans.org.