Giving back, one purchase at a time

A veteran orders food at the Lake Nona Patriot Cafe inside the Orlando VA Medical Center. The Patriot Cafe—part of the VCS system—serves hot and cold entrees, snacks and beverages.

Veterans Canteen Service offers food and merchandise for the convenience of disabled veterans while supporting veteran programs.

When you’re at a Department of Veterans Affairs medical facility and a cup of coffee is calling your name, you’re likely going to find what you’re looking for—and then some—at one of the more than 200 Veterans Canteen Service (VCS) stores located across the country. For 74 years, VCS has provided retail and food services to veterans enrolled in the VA health care system, as well as their caregivers and visitors. Similar to the post exchange on most military bases, all purchases are tax-free. There are no user fees associated with these benefits.

Although a part of the VA, VCS is self-sustaining, meaning it
receives no annual appropriations. This allows them to operate their Give Back program, which uses money from each purchase to sponsor veterans programs such as homelessness initiatives, voluntary services and rehabilitation events. In the past, these events included those co-presented by DAV and the VA, such as the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic and the National Disabled Veterans TEE (Training, Exposure, Experience) Tournament.

“When veterans shop with VCS, they can take pride in knowing they, too, will have contributed to enhancing the quality of life for their fellow veterans and those who provide for their care,” said VCS Director Ray Tober.

At the 2018 TEE Tournament, VCS donated accessible golf carts that provided hand controls and swivel seats to accommodate golfers with disabilities.

VCS Director Ray Tober (center) helped deliver adaptive golf carts to participants at the National Disabled Veterans TEE Tournament in Iowa. VCS was able to purchase the equipment with help from its Give Back program.

According to Tober, the relationship between veterans service organizations and VCS is an integral one.
“These relationships serve to enhance an understanding of VCS’ mission and the role [veterans service organizations] can play in helping to give back to our veterans and support VA programs,” he said. “We’d like to facilitate greater interaction and engagement with DAV-affiliated veterans, ensuring they take advantage of the benefits provided by VCS. Enhancing our communication and interaction, with local affiliates especially, can be a win-win for us all.”

“We know that our members and our volunteers spend a lot of their time at the VA, and most of us probably pop into a Veterans Canteen Service shop for a quick snack or to peruse the merchandise,” said National Voluntary Services Director John Kleindienst. “But what we want them to realize is every purchase made goes right back to veteran service programs. We are thankful for the support Veterans Canteen Service has shown at adaptive sporting events and through voluntary services.”