A light in the darkness

“It’s not always just the dollar amount or whatever’s being given to you. It’s just knowing that you’re not alone in the turmoil or in the grief of a situation.”
– Tyler Main, Marine Veteran

Record-setting year for DAV’s Disaster Relief Program provides hope to veterans and their families during difficult times

Whether the result of concerns for the health and well-being of family and friends, financial difficulties in the face of a national economic downturn, or the personal and professional adjustments brought on by social distancing amid the COVID-19 pandemic, many Americans are likely ready to put the memories of 2020 in their rearview.
For some, however, the challenges posed last year were compounded by a different type of loss—that of suddenly and unexpectedly losing their personal property and possessions to the destructive power of Mother Nature. That is when the DAV Disaster Relief Program stepped in to provide assistance to veterans and their families in need.

“The most common emotion described by veterans who’ve had their property damaged to such an extent is their sense of helplessness afterward,” said Assistant National Service Director Scott Trimarchi, who oversees the Disaster Relief Program. “It doesn’t matter if it’s an earthquake, flood or fire; it’s a bitter pill to swallow all the same. But that’s exactly why our program exists—to give them some help and some hope when they need it most.”

While the Disaster Relief Program normally operates in reaction to natural disasters, COVID-19 necessitated a proactive expansion once the scale of its effects were recognized. That’s why DAV established a COVID-19 Unemployment Relief Fund last April to provide financial aid to service-connected disabled veterans who lost employment or income in the wake of the virus’s outbreak.

“The money that DAV gave me helped me put food on the table for five weeks and was instrumental in allowing me to figure out what to do,” said Air Force veteran Kristopher Miller, who lost his job and had another fall through because of COVID-19. “I now have a new job, and I can say I am very, very grateful to have the help from DAV.”

Last year, more than $2 million in COVID-19 unemployment relief was distributed nationwide to veterans in need. Add in the more than $893,000 in traditional disaster relief, and the combined total provided by DAV in 2020 alone accounts for 17% of the funds distributed through the Disaster Relief Program since it was established in 1968.
“Between the permanent Disaster Relief Program and the temporary COVID-19 relief, 2020 was a record-setting year for DAV providing relief and assistance to veterans and their families in a time of need,” said Trimarchi. “But we don’t look at it in terms of how much money we distributed—we look at it in terms of helping nearly 9,000 veterans and their families reclaim a sense of control and get something back during dark and difficult times.”

“It’s not always just the dollar amount or whatever’s being given to you. It’s just knowing that you’re not alone in the turmoil or in the grief of a situation,” said Marine veteran Tyler Main, whose apartment fire resulted in the loss of a substantial amount of possessions just days ahead of moving from Maryland to Arkansas in June. “I think that’s the biggest takeaway from this—when you go through things, there are other people there to share the burden.”

“You have no idea what a relief the help is,” Air Force veteran Nikki DeFilippi wrote in a letter to National Service Office Supervisor Amber Niemi after receiving assistance in September. “It’s been a stressful year financially, and this wildfire really added to it. However, I know that God always provides, and he sent me you, DAV. I am forever grateful.”

“DAV is an organization of veterans serving veterans, and we’ve been that way since we were established 100 years ago,” said Trimarchi. “And if our brothers- and sisters-in-arms are in a dark situation, we’re going to do everything we can to be the light at the end of the tunnel.”