Can’t stop caring

Volunteers continue the mission despite pandemic challenges

As a second wave of the coronavirus ravaged communities across America, hospitals—including Veterans Affairs medical centers—were hit hard. With active COVID-19 cases among VA patients up 70% in November alone, VA health facilities and services were stretched thin as they headed into the winter months.

For DAV volunteers, the dedication to serve veterans remains strong despite the ongoing public health crisis, especially for those who volunteer with DAV’s Transportation Network. Though the process looks and feels a little different now in locations that are allowing the network to operate, volunteers from the Department of Minnesota and many other states have proven it’s possible to carry on through challenging times.

“With COVID, our numbers are starting to go up on positive tests,” said veteran and volunteer driver Alan Skramstad, who also happens to be mayor of Mora, Minnesota.

With these numbers rising in Skramstad’s community, receiving regular scheduled medical care is a growing necessity for veterans. However, as cases rise, the reality of the pandemic weighs heavily on the Mora community. Nevertheless, Skramstad and his local chapter are committed to helping and honoring their fellow veterans.
“We have lost nine members of our community to the pandemic,” said Skramstad. “Three that I know of and have done honors for have been veterans. Our honor guard has said we will do that no matter what; we take every precaution.”

Mora is 74 miles from the St. Cloud VA Medical Center, and it can take an entire day just driving one or two veterans to and from a medical appointment. Skramstad and other DAV volunteer drivers make the trek to and from the hospital to ensure the veterans in his community and surrounding area still have access to their care—usually a 270-mile round trip, from pickup to drop-off.

Helen Loslebon retired from her 9-to-5 job a few years ago and was looking to give back to her community when she received a postcard from her local VA searching for volunteer drivers. Since then, she has spent one day a week driving veterans to and from their local VA and says it has given her something to look forward to.

“I just know that driving makes my week a lot more interesting,” said Loslebon. “[The veterans] have really given a lot back to me too.”
With COVID-19 cases on the rise, though, drivers like Loslebon have begun to feel the pressure of a growing workload.

“I have just been back about six weeks now,” said Loslebon, who lives in the suburbs of Minneapolis. “I think that they still have a shortage of drivers because I can see that some days I’m the only driver in the afternoon.”

Vietnam veteran and volunteer driver Jeff Jarret, from Hibbing, Minnesota, typically makes a 450-mile round-trip journey to bring his passengers to the nearest VA in Minneapolis. He said that, while the miles may add up, the journey is far too important not to make it.

“It’s a long, long drive, but being a veteran myself, volunteer driving feels more like I’m paying it back to the people that need it,” said Jarret. “I don’t think anybody really knows what it’s like to be in a war unless you’re there and the trauma that they’ve had.”

While the pandemic has brought its share of challenges, the program—and many other groups across the nation—face a growing shortage of available volunteers.

“The fact of the matter is, we need an entire new corps of volunteer drivers to step up and help the generation of aging volunteers who are carrying the majority of the load now,” said National Voluntary Services Director John Kleindienst. “With this pandemic, the risk for many of our drivers is often too high for them to volunteer their time, and soon they themselves will need help getting to and from their appointments. That’s why we encourage everyone, not just our veterans or their family members, to volunteer. Ask your neighbors, friends and community to repay the time and sacrifice that our nation’s veterans have made for us.

“All we need is one day a month from our volunteers, and you will have changed the lives of so many,” said Kleindienst.
To become a driver or learn about other volunteer opportunities, visit dav.org/volunteer.