

Crushing community hunger



Canned goods and other food stockpiles set aside at Chapter 39's food pantry in Bristol, Tennessee, are ready for distribution. Local veterans can access the food pantry at any time.

DAV chapter's food pantry fights veteran food insecurity in northeastern Tennessee

As COVID-19 has swept through communities across the nation, the uncertain economic landscape has put millions of Americans out of work, causing them to make difficult decisions when choosing whether to pay a bill or buy groceries.

But one DAV chapter has stepped up to feed the veteran population through a fruitful and popular food pantry.

The pantry of Chapter 39 in Bristol, Tennessee, has been battling hunger and food insecurity in the area since 2019. And the demand for healthy, nutritious food has only increased over the past year.

"The need in the area is great, especially during the pandemic," said Michael Harman, commander of both Chapter 39

and the DAV Department of Tennessee. "People who weren't food insecure before the pandemic have a harder time making a living now."

Veterans are free to access the food bank at any time.

Harman's wife, Amber, is active with the pantry and has witnessed firsthand the region's hunger skyrocket since the pandemic began.

"We were averaging feeding 20 households up until March or April, then it went up to 40 households," said Amber, who is the senior vice commander of Auxiliary Unit 39. "Currently, the food bank serves about 70 households twice a month."

Lacking access to enough food to maintain good health and overall well-being impacts 1 in 9 Americans, according to a 2019 report by the Department of Agriculture. Veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are almost twice as likely to be food insecure as the general population, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Humana, a health insurance company and DAV partner, has helped raise crucial funding for food pantries at VA medical centers across the country by collaborating with national and community leaders and organizations fighting food insecurity.

Access to nutritious, healthy foods is a critical social determinant of health, said Dee Hughes, Humana's southeast region veterans executive.

"Whenever you're food insecure, it certainly hinders our ability to function," said Hughes, an Army spouse and Gold Star mother. "Anxiety sets in about where you're going to get your next meal; depression certainly comes into play, even for children."

For many veterans, food insecurity also leads to an unhealthy diet that worsens chronic health conditions, such as diabetes,

hypertension and osteoporosis. It can also intensify other stressors linked to poor health, such as loneliness and isolation, particularly when social distancing, said Hughes.

To cut hunger, the Humana Foundation—the health insurance company’s philanthropic arm—announced last year they would invest \$7.6 million across eight communities in the southeastern United States.

Humana is the national Medicare Advantage, Prescription Drug Plan and Medicare Supplement sponsor for DAV and was a 2020 DAV 5K presenting sponsor.