



## The Chairman's Corner

by

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### VETERANS FOOD PANTRY

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Following a somewhat off-the-cuff beginning around last Thanksgiving, the Columbia County Veterans Service Agency has seen its veterans' food pantry blossom into a thriving operation.

The development of the food pantry roughly coincided with the creation of the state's first-ever veterans widows' program, begun by agency Director Gary Flaherty. "We started out with three widows, and now we're up to 26," he said. "They came to me back then and said, 'Why don't we start a food pantry?'"

Initially, Director Flaherty said, he wasn't sure there were many veterans who would use the services of a pantry. "Now, we have veterans coming in nearly every day needing food. It's been a real success story."

The flip side is that "veterans should never have to use a food bank," said Director Flaherty, while acknowledging the reality is, sadly, the opposite. "I wanted to make sure it would be available if they need it, though."

Director Flaherty said he also wasn't sure they would receive many donations, yet as it turns out, "we've been overwhelmed with donations. People are bringing food in daily. They bring in bread, and there's a farm that donates fresh eggs weekly. There's another farm that donates ground beef and stew meat. The only thing we don't do is milk because we don't want it to go bad."

The veterans' food pantry, run entirely by those in the widows' program, is formally open Monday-Friday, 9 a.m. to 12 noon, at 389 Fairview Avenue, Hudson. However, hours are flexible if needed. Veterans can call 518-828-3610 for further assistance.

"The food pantry is a small part of what the widows do. They're also doing outreach when someone becomes a new widow and helping them transition, just as we do with our veterans," said Director Flaherty, who was recently named chairman of the Congressional Veterans' Advisory Committee by Congressman Molinaro.

The widows program falls under the Veteran Peer Services Program, designed to address the stigma associated with mental health issues frequently associated with post-traumatic stress. When mental health treatment is needed, a peer can serve as a liaison to help connect that veteran with services.

Under the Columbia County Dwyer Program at the agency on Fairview Avenue, the Veterans/Families Day Room is stocked with a pool table, TVs, computers, a pinball machine, a reading area stocked with books, free coffee/tea, refreshments, a full refrigerator and a microwave, along with a private area equipped with free Zoom for medical, compensation, VA, and other communications.

"I don't turn anyone away," said Director Flaherty, who welcomes calls – with any issue whatsoever -- from veterans in need of help 24 hours a day at 518-610-0941. The office phone number is 518-828-3610 ext. 1, and he can be reached via email at [gary.flaherty@columbiacountyny.com](mailto:gary.flaherty@columbiacountyny.com)