



## The Chairman's Corner

by

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### Veterans Services Agency

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Late last spring, the Columbia County Veterans Services Agency celebrated three years of the Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Project with an open house attended by 167 veterans and their families, at which time many of the veterans wound up enrolled in programs offered by the agency.

The agency – located at 389 Fairview Ave., Suite 7, Hudson -- is headed up by an very dedicated director in Gary Flaherty, himself a Vietnam veteran – including for a time as a “tunnel rat” -- who went on to achieve the rank of Command Sergeant Major, the highest achievable rank for enlisted personnel. He ultimately served 23 years in the Army.

Recent events surrounding the American withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan has triggered a fresh round of veterans experiencing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), said Director Flaherty, noting the VA estimates that overall, 17 percent of veterans suffer from PTSD.

The county Veterans Services Agency stands by to help, with that and a multitude of issues that can arise following one's leaving the service. There are currently approximately 5,100 service veterans in Columbia County.

A new program, conceived by Director Flaherty, involves helping the widows of veterans with peer-to-peer mentoring, which kicks off this month. Widows' pensions are another issue with which the county Veterans Service Agency can assist.

In that regard, one of the most important things any service can do upon separation from service is to file their DD Form 214 with the county clerk, advises Director Flaherty. This is the form needed before any benefits can be obtained.

“I find veterans who do not want to go through the process of applying for the benefits they earn. My response is that if they do not want to apply for themselves, please do it for your family. I see to many families that come for help after a veteran dies and we have to tell that that the veteran never applied for anything and therefore, they cannot get anything,” he said.

In 2019, Columbia County became the 16<sup>th</sup> county in the state to be approved for funding by the NYS Senate for the Joseph P. Dwyer Veteran Peer Services Program.

The Veteran Peer Services Program is 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)