

Veterans, groups connect at picnic

Pulaski County resource fair returns

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Veterans connected with community organizations and received information during a picnic and resource fair hosted by Pulaski County Community Services in Little Rock on Saturday morning.



At the first veterans' picnic since the start of the pandemic, 18 organizations set up tables inside the Pulaski County Regional Building to answer questions and help veterans understand the benefits available to them during and after their service. Outside, the county Public Works Department cooked hamburgers and hot dogs for the community. Albert "Al" Harkins, the Pulaski County Veteran Service officer, said he expected a large gathering at the picnic Saturday after covid-19 prevented the event from happening over the past few years.

As the Veteran Service officer, Harkins works for the Community Services department and connects with about 1,000 veterans every year. He said the event provides a place where they can receive immediate assistance from supportive organizations and have any question answered.

"Our duty is to provide veterans with information and assistance regarding their needs for disability compensation due to them as a result of disabilities that occurred during their time in service," Harkins said. "The fair is to assist veterans in knowing what is available to them for these needs and where to find that assistance."

He said many of today's veterans experience hearing loss from working around loud airplane engines and high-caliber artillery gun noise. Some face various forms of cancer from exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam, contaminated water at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina and dangerous burn pit fumes in Southwest Asia, Harkins said. Others may also need assistance with mental disabilities after being involved in certain battlefield situations and combat. Every call to the Veteran Service officer is a "call for help," Harkins said.

Harkins also said that oftentimes, the person reaching out for information is a friend, family member or spouse of a veteran in need. These advocates also attended Saturday's event to gather information about resources and benefits available to their loved ones.

"They're often the ones that lead the pack," Harkins said. "They're welcome here, too."

Frances Frazier attended the fair with her brother, who served in the Navy from 1964 to 1968. She told the Democrat-Gazette that navigating and accessing available resources can be confusing to veterans and their families.

After hearing about the event on the news, Frazier and her brother decided to attend, and at the fair, she collected phone numbers to call for her brother's hearing, counseling and legal needs.

"He'd been going through the system for like 30 years and nothing is going on. Nothing is happening here. Things are getting lost," Frazier said. "So I decided to see if he wanted to come down, and get us some contact information, so we could set up some appointments. I think once we set the appointments, and both of us go, then he could hear something, and I can hear something, and we can get him started in the system."

While he's been going to appointments at the Veterans Affairs Healthcare System for years, she said, he'd never been connected with resources outside of traditional medical care. She said they wouldn't treat him for post-traumatic stress disorder, hearing and mobility related needs.

Frazier said for veterans to get the help they need, there needs to be events like the picnic held “all the time.” She added that she’d also like to see transportation provided for veterans because many of them have disabilities and are unable to drive.

Aleisha Campbell Gilbert came to the picnic to hear about services available to her husband. After moving to Little Rock from Detroit, Gilbert said navigating Veterans Affairs has been new and difficult.

Gilbert said that she’s not been satisfied with the VA so far, but the fair provided some “beneficial” information she hopes will help both herself and her husband moving forward.

“I hope it will help,” she said. “I hope it will go further, because I can get a lot of information on the front end, and then no one backs it up.”

At the fair, the Pulaski County treasurer’s office informed veterans about the tax credits they receive for their military service. Tables representing the Central Arkansas Veterans Affairs Healthcare System showed veterans the options available for services like acupuncture, meditation training and massage therapy, in addition to standard medical care.

Representatives from St. Francis House told attendees about its Supportive Services for Veteran Families, a housing program assisting veteran families at risk of homelessness and rapidly re-housing those who are currently experiencing homelessness in Arkansas.

Jerika Fagen, associate director for the University of Arkansas at Little Rock Military Student Success Center, told the Democrat-Gazette many students at the university are either veterans or dependents of veterans.

The center processes veterans’ education benefits and tuition assistance and provides mentorship as veterans transition to civilian life, Fagen said.

“We want to let them know that you can go back to school, it’s never too late,” she said. “And you can use the [Veterans Affairs] education benefits that are available to you because you have served, and these benefits are entitled to you.”

CapTel, a service providing captioned telephones to all people experiencing hearing loss, has been at the event for several years, according to Outreach Educator Nancy Foster.

She said she attends veterans’ events throughout the state to promote CapTel.

“Hearing loss claims are the No. 1 claim for veterans,” she said. “A lot of veterans that have hearing loss can benefit from having a CapTel captioning telephone.”

Funding for the phones comes from the Americans with Disabilities Act, Foster said, so the phones are available free of charge to those who need them. She said she’d been “very productive” at the event and spent her time helping veterans and others fill out applications to receive their phones, which will be later installed in their homes.

Veterans Michael Nicholson and Clarence Avery said they heard about the event through word of mouth by other veterans and on television. They said they stopped by all the tables at the fair — and Avery added he “didn’t want to miss none.”

“They need to do more [advertising],” Avery said. “A lot of vets don’t know about this here, and aren’t aware of what’s going on. They lose a lot of their benefits, or they don’t apply for their benefits, because of a lack of knowledge.”

According to the Harkins, Pulaski County is home to almost 30,000 veterans.

Steve Brummett, the county’s public works director, grilled hot dogs and hamburgers for 150 people during the event. He said he expected a large turnout because the pandemic had called off the event since 2019.

While his department is separate from the Community Services Department, Brummett said the county is about teamwork. He said he’s helped with the event for a few years now and brought friends with him to help with the food.

“There’s a lot of things that the veterans are entitled to that they might not realize they have access to,” he told the Democrat-Gazette. “This is good public outreach, as far as they can come in, and speak to different representatives like [Veterans Affairs] and whoever else, and then just by filling out a little bit of paperwork, they might be entitled to health care. ... Every bit helps during inflation like this.”