

Winter/Spring 2024

The Veteran Advocate

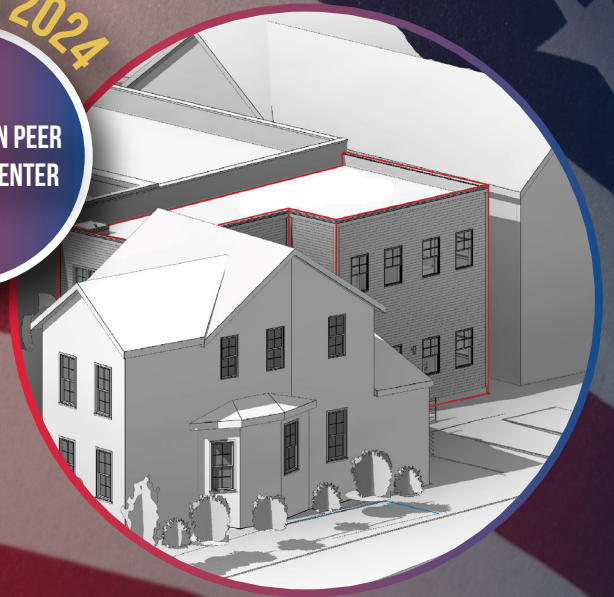
News and information from the nation's oldest community-based nonprofit organization serving veterans

IN THIS ISSUE:

- ★ A Message From the Executive Director
- ★ Breaking Ground on the Veteran Mental Health Crisis
- ★ Vital Patron of Veterans Outreach Center Passes Away
- ★ Unbroken: A U.S. Navy Veteran Finds Her Voice and Community at VOC
- ★ Celebrating 50 Years of Service: A Night of Gratitude and Giving
- ★ Join the Legacy Brigade Today!
- ★ Ride for Hope: Veteran Wins Dream Bike, Community Rallies for Veteran Support
- ★ Stars & Stripes Flag Store Reopens, Raising the Bar for Veteran Support
- ★ Back to Nature... Back to "Being"

COMING IN 2024

STEVE PRESTON PEER
CONNECTION CENTER



VETERANS
OUTREACH CENTER Inc.

★ Serving Those Who Serve U.S. ★®



Dear Supporters and Friends,

2023 wasn't just any year at Veterans Outreach Center – it was a golden milestone. As we celebrated 50 years of empowering veterans, hope echoed in every action and accomplishment. More than 559 veterans walked through our doors for the first time seeking a path forward. More than 1,400 continued their journeys toward self-sufficiency, and our online outreach resonated with 352 veterans nationwide. Our dedicated staff made over 9,446 personal connections.

We provided haircuts that had our veterans looking and feeling their best. Cooking classes brought shared meals and laughter. Fitness sessions fueled bodies and spirits. And support groups provided a safe space for healing and connection. We sheltered 59 veterans while expanding our facilities to reach even more. Hundreds found meaningful jobs, received critical legal aid, and accessed essential resources.

But hope isn't just a word; it's a ripple effect, fueled by acts of kindness and compassion. By creating a supportive environment, we empower veterans to thrive. And we couldn't have done it alone. We had countless supporters who fueled this hope with their time, talent, and resources.

Now, as we embark on our next 50 years, hope remains our guiding light. But alongside it shines a new commitment: 2024 is VOC's "Year to Dig Deeper," a time to go the extra mile, to give our veterans and partners more than they expect, and to reflect on solving the depth of a problem — not just the symptoms that are presented.

It's a multi-faceted promise, but, most importantly, it means unwavering dedication to our veterans. We commit to listening intently to their needs, responding thoroughly to their concerns, and refusing to settle for surface-level solutions. It requires critical thinking, compassion, energy, determination, and persistence. Digging deeper is a mindset that we will cultivate amongst our staff and reward every month throughout the next year.

By embracing the concept of digging deeper, we not only honor the legacy of our first 50 years, but also pave the brighter path for the next. With your continued support, we will ensure that every veteran finds not just hope at VOC, but a community built on trust, tenacity, and enduring dedication. Join us on this crucial journey — visit our website to learn more about volunteering and contributing to a future where our team empowers hope, and every hero finds the support they deserve.

Sincerely,

Laura Heltz
Executive Director
Veterans Outreach Center
U.S. Army Veteran

BREAKING GROUND ON THE VETERAN MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS



Mental health crises, isolation, and feelings of loneliness don't stop at 5 o'clock. With Veterans Outreach Center's new **Steve Preston Peer Connection Center**, the organization continues to be on the front lines of the veteran suicide epidemic — and will soon offer a place of hope and healing for those who have served.

The new space is an extension of an existing building. It will be staffed by four professionals: a peer support manager, support coordinator, and two part-time mentors. All personnel will have experience in suicide/self-harm prevention, military/veteran culture and challenges, homeless support, and mental health first aid. The center will also include a place for recreation, a bathroom, shower, lockers, and workstations.

The groundbreaking took place at VOC on January 18th complete with local leaders, key donors and companies.



VOC Executive Director and U.S. Army Veteran Laura Heltz said she expects 50 to 100 veterans to utilize the facility during the first

year of operation alone. Heltz said the need for this grew from a demand to help those beyond the normal workday, saying, "A mental health emergency has no time limit. We're going to be here when someone is in crisis and they need us the most."

VOC is working with Rozzi Architects for the design of the center and Lechase Construction, LLC is currently building the structure on the back side of the main VOC building.

In-kind donations were given to help contain costs, including B&L Wholesale, Messner Flooring, and others. The total cost of the project is estimated to be \$800,000.

The space is named after the late Steve Preston. He and his wife, Carol, are long-time veteran advocates and donors to VOC. The new facility is due to open in May of 2024.

For donations, questions, or more information, please contact Joan Brandenburg at Joan.Brandenburg@vocroc.org or 585.295.7821.



VITAL PATRON OF VETERANS OUTREACH CENTER PASSES AWAY

Dedicated veteran advocate and long-time first responder, Steve “Snapper” Preston, passed away on December 26, 2023.

VOC Executive Director Laura Heltz said Preston was a man devoted to helping veterans in need. “He regularly visited the Richards House homeless shelter to tell the men there how much he appreciated them, and to ask them if there was anything they needed. He was deeply involved with the renovation of our residential facilities.”

Heltz added that Preston and his wife, Carol, have supported dozens of other veteran programs and services. “Steve directly improved the lives of thousands of veterans. He was a man who lived humbly for himself and gave what he had to others. He will be deeply missed,” she said.

A celebration of life was held for Preston on January 27th, 2024 at the Penfield Fire Department.



UNBROKEN: U.S. NAVY VETERAN FINDS HER VOICE AND COMMUNITY AT VOC



Nyeshia Bradford, U.S. Navy veteran, carried strength and resilience from her service into civilian life. However, years later, an abusive relationship proved too much to bear alone. Embarrassed to ask for help, Nyeshia hid her struggles, relying on the military-forged habit of driving on despite pain or challenges.

But Nyeshia’s path eventually led her to Veterans Outreach Center. VOC’s support, from finding housing to providing therapeutic outlets like the art program, became a lifeline. Nyeshia found solace in expressing her

emotions through paint. A powerful piece of Nyeshia’s artwork is still displayed at VOC.

Through programs like the cooking class and the Women’s Group, she built a network of understanding and belonging.

“A burst of confidence happened from being in the Women’s Group,” Nyeshia said. “Being a part of that group helped, and my friends are all there. It’s awesome. We’re all veterans, and each of us has a different story to tell.”

Nyeshia’s success is a testament to the transformative power of support and the unwavering bond between fellow servicemembers, proving that sometimes the path to healing begins with a single step and a community ready to walk alongside you.



CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF SERVICE: A NIGHT OF GRATITUDE AND GIVING

It was a night to remember on November 3, 2023 as the Rochester Riverside Convention Center was transformed into a space filled with the sounds of laughter, camaraderie, and heartfelt tributes to our veterans. The 18th annual Stars and Stripes Celebration marked a momentous milestone: 50 years of unwavering dedication to Serving Those Who Serve U.S.

The evening unfolded as a tapestry of emotions, weaving together moments of deep reflection and joyful celebration. Over 650 guests, including veterans, their families, and supporters of VOC, reminisced about past experiences and forged new connections. A solemn ceremony honored the sacrifices of fallen servicemembers, reminding everyone of the true meaning of freedom and the debt we owe to those who bravely defended our nation.

But the night wasn't just about commemorating the past. It was also a powerful testament to the transformative work that VOC has accomplished over five decades. Moving testimonials from veterans who found success from VOC's programs resonated throughout the room,



showcasing the tangible impact of the organization's unwavering support.

As the evening progressed, generous donations from attendees brought in vital funds that will directly support VOC's mission, ensuring that no one who served our country is left behind.

"We have attended several Stars and Stripes Celebrations and each year, we are grateful to be part of a tribute to the men and women who paid the ultimate sacrifice in service to their country." States Tom McCoy, U.S. Army veteran. "The night takes you on an emotional roller coaster ride from somber reflection to a celebration of all the men and women who have chosen to fight for the freedoms we enjoy every day. Thank you Veterans Outreach Center for never leaving a veteran behind."

JOIN THE LEGACY BRIGADE TODAY!

VOC's Legacy Brigade honors and recognizes the generosity and vision of those who have chosen to leave a legacy in support of our local veterans. These legacy gifts identify VOC as a beneficiary in a will, trust, annuity, or other type of planned giving arrangement.

If you have included a gift to VOC in your estate plans, please let us know so we may invite you to join the Brigade. If you are considering an estate gift and would

like more information, please contact Joan Brandenburg, Director of Advancement, at 585.295.7821 or Joan.Brandenburg@vocroc.org. Together, we can ensure the continuation of critically needed services to the men and women who protect our freedoms well into the future.

YOUR LEGACY. THEIR LIFELINE.





RIDE FOR HOPE: VETERAN WINS DREAM BIKE, COMMUNITY RALLIES FOR VETERAN SUPPORT



Congratulations to Tim Barbeto of Ogden, NY, who won a 1993 Harley Davidson as part of Veterans Outreach Center's 50th Anniversary motorcycle raffle. Drawn live on VOC's Facebook page on Veteran's Day, Tim's name was chosen from a pool of hopeful participants, marking the end of a successful fundraiser.

Tim stumbled upon the raffle while browsing VOC's Stars and Stripes Flag Store, instantly recognizing the potential for adventure and freedom. A retired electrician from Wegmans and active member of the Sons of the American Legion and Spencerport Post 330, Tim's connection to veterans runs deep. His father, a Vietnam combat veteran, even joined him on Honor Flight Mission #76 earlier in 2023.

But beyond the excitement of the win lies a story of generosity and community support. Kathy Shaw, whose husband, Douglas, proudly served in the U.S. Navy, donated the beloved Harley to VOC in his memory, ensuring its legacy would continue to inspire and empower. Through the enthusiastic participation of everyone who bought a raffle ticket, VOC raised funds that will directly benefit

local veterans, providing them with critical resources and services as they navigate their journeys.

This heartwarming story serves as a testament to the transformative power of the community. By joining hands, we can not only offer veterans a chance at a brighter future, but also preserve the spirit of adventure and sacrifice that they so bravely embody.

As Tim embarks on his next chapter with his new motorcycle, let us remember the collective generosity that made it possible and remain dedicated to supporting those who have served our nation.



STARS & STRIPES FLAG STORE REOPENS

After operating as an e-commerce store since the pandemic, Veterans Outreach Center's Stars and Stripes/The Flag Store has proudly opened at a new physical location, 783 South Avenue. The store is situated in the front portion of the Gary B. Beikirch Residential Campus at VOC. To mark the official opening of the store's new chapter, VOC hosted a vibrant community ribbon-cutting ceremony in September of 2023.

This re-opening of the physical store isn't just about selling flags and patriotic merchandise; it's about empowering veterans and reigniting their spirits. All proceeds from the store directly benefit VOC's vital programs, providing veterans with critical support services. But, the impact goes beyond financial support.

VOC's Executive Director and U.S. Army Veteran Laura Heltz unveiled an exciting initiative at the ceremony: a workforce development program embedded within the Flag Store. This innovative program will see veterans



staffing the store, gaining invaluable vocational skills and experience in retail operations. From inventory management to customer service, this paves the way for veterans to confidently re-enter the workforce and thrive in their civilian careers.

So, the next time you need a flag, visit the Stars & Stripes Flag Store. Remember, you're not just making a purchase; you're investing in the future of a veteran.

For Flag Store hours or to shop online 24/7, please visit eflagstore.com or call Lynne Phipps at 585.546.3524.

BACK TO NATURE... BACK TO 'BEING'



When it comes to rehabilitating a veteran's life and getting them on the right track, the therapeutic call of the outdoors might be just the answer. That is where Veterans Outreach Center's home and outdoor skills case manager — Cuyler Hoke — comes in.

"We take our veterans outside; into the woods, onto the lake and where-ever they want to go for a quiet place for reflection," said Hoke. "The transformation is amazing; you can almost see the stress melt away minute by minute."

So far, veterans have enjoyed a fishing charter, local tours of military history, an archery range experience, and a trip to Bristol Mountain to experience an aerial adventures ropes course. A fishing tournament is scheduled for the spring.



"Because a lot of the veterans we serve are dealing with substance abuse disorder, it is important that we take the time to decompress," said Hoke. "Getting outside and supporting each other through a shared experience can often be a first step toward recovery and wellness."

Hoke said this program is a key factor to "keeping a clear head," as veterans journey toward wellness. Hoke is open to hearing ideas from all of you on outdoor recreational activities. All activities are offered at no cost to veterans. Please contact Cuyler Hoke at 585.546.1081 or cuyler.hoke@vocroc.org to learn more about participating in one of these programs.



VETERANS
OUTREACH CENTER Inc.

★ Serving Those Who Serve U.S. ★[®]

SAVE THE DATE

FLAG DAY



THURSDAY, JUNE 13TH -
SUNDAY, JUNE 16TH

THROUGHOUT THE
ROCHESTER AREA!

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!

GOLF FORE VETS

MONDAY, JULY 22ND



MIDVALE COUNTRY CLUB

POUND THE GROUND 5K RUN/WALK

THURSDAY, AUGUST 22ND



MENDON PONDS PARK

A STARS & STRIPES CELEBRATION



FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 1ST

ROCHESTER RIVERSIDE
CONVENTION CENTER

HOPE FOR HEROES TELETHON



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 11TH

WROC TV-8 OR
ROCHESTERFIRST.COM

ROC THE DAY



TUESDAY, DECEMBER 3RD

LEARN MORE ABOUT VOC'S SIGNATURE EVENTS AND SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES
AT VOCROC.ORG OR CONTACT MICHELE.MARTELL@VOCROC.ORG OR 585.295.7824

447 SOUTH AVE., ROCHESTER, NY 14620

585.546.1081 | VOCROC.ORG

