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Veterans & Military Council launches “Helping Our Heroes” initiative for military veterans and first-responders

Lehigh Valley, Pa. (May 13, 2020): The COVID-19 pandemic has presented some unique challenges for veterans and first-responders in our area. In an effort to connect them with the variety of resources and services available to them, the Veterans & Military Council, a council of the Greater Lehigh Valley Chamber of Commerce, is launching a new webinar initiative called “Helping Our Heroes” to help our military veterans and first-responders. The intent is to familiarize and encourage military veterans, first-responders, their family members and friends to access the support they may need and provide awareness on the services and resources available for their emotional, mental, and physical well-being, as well as employment resources.

“We are fortunate to have many excellent resources in our region to assist our veterans and first-responders in maintaining a strong emotional, mental, and physical well-being”, says Ron Jerdon, President of Jerdon Construction and Chair of The Chamber’s Veterans & Military Council and a retired US Army Command Sergeant Major. “Recently, the council was contacted by a number of non-profits who serve our veteran and first-responder community with a genuine concern relating to the mental stressors of isolation as a result of mandated lockdowns due to COVID-19”, Jerdon adds. “They were looking to our council to provide awareness and education on what’s available to those that have proven their unwavering dedication and commitment serving our country and our communities,” Jerdon concludes.

The Helping Our Heroes webinar series will launch on Tuesday, May 19th at 10 AM and will be held the two following Tuesdays: Tuesday, May 26th and Tuesday, June 2nd at 10 AM. The lineup for the first webinar on Tuesday, May 19th includes:

- Matt Guedes, Executive Director of Camp Freedom PA
- Alex Alexander, Director of LVHN’s Veteran Health Program
- Jenny Pacanowski, Founder of Women Veterans Empowered & Thriving
- Adalberto Morales Sr., MSW, LCSW, Suicide Prevention Coordinator, Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center
- AND an update from Workforce Board Lehigh Valley and PA CareerLink on veteran employment resources

Matt Guedes, Executive Director of Camp Freedom PA for veterans and first-responders and their family members, shares, “The current scenario that we are living in has placed additional stressors upon our veterans and first responders. For those who suffer with mental health issues as a result of their service, the forced isolation has taken many of them into mental distress that shows itself in many negative ways. At Camp Freedom, we work daily to help heal our heroes with outdoor adventures one person or family at a time.” Guedes was one of the nonprofits who initially reached out to the council for help with awareness. Camp Freedom provides outdoor adventures to help our heroes and their families to find relief in these difficult times.

Jenny Pacanowski, Founder & Director of Women Veterans Empowered & Thriving, a reintegration program for women veterans that utilizes writing and performance to empower them to thrive in their daily life, adds “Isolation is a killer! We need to stay connected through community, camaraderie, and

workshops. The team at Women Veterans Empowered & Thriving utilizes writing and performance to empower challenging experiences and facilitate skills in daily life for men and women veterans, and first responders. We are grateful to be a part of this initiative as it aligns with our mission to help each other to become the best version of ourselves.”

Lehigh Valley health care providers are fully supportive as they see the need to continue with outreach and provide the connections to programs. Alex Alexander, Lt Col, USAF, MSC (Ret) and Director of Lehigh Valley Health Network’s Veteran Health Program shares, “First responders perform a vital role that all citizens of our community depend upon daily. These men and women need and require access to services for their well-being. Many military Veterans serving as First Responders may not be connected or may believe they are not eligible for services from the VA. The Veteran Health Program at Lehigh Valley Health Network may be able to assist these men and women and I encourage them to contact us to make an appointment for a full assessment of their situation and participate with this initiative to learn about additional resources to help them”.

This initiative is also receiving the backing from the offices of Veterans Affairs with Lehigh and Northampton Counties. Tom Applebach, Director of Lehigh County Office of Veterans Affairs, offers, “The bottom line is we need to ensure that our Veterans and first-responders, many of whom are also Vets, are taken care of. No one signs up to be a hero. Our military and first-responders do what they do for us because that’s just who they are. It is incumbent upon all of us who benefit from their service to play our part. We need to always support them, care for them, and make sure they know that we are all in this together”. Freddie Ramirez, Director of Northampton County Office of Veterans Affairs, adds “We need to help our services members today, tomorrow, and for the foreseeable future.”

To register or to learn more, visit: www.lehighvalleychamber.org/helpingourheroes

Sponsors and supporters: Workforce Board Lehigh Valley and PA CareerLink; Lehigh Valley Health Network; Capital BlueCross; Lehigh Valley Health Network (LVHN), Jerdon Construction; Keystone Canna Remedies Medical Marijuana Dispensary; and Westside Hammer Electric.

About the Veterans & Military Council:

The Chamber is committed to honor and empower the men and women who serve or have served our country in the United States military by building a strong network of the regions’ veterans, active military in business and veteran business owners to promote the contributions and competitive advantage that military members bring to any business.

Mission:

To support veterans and military members in business as they serve our nation and our communities.

Objectives:

- To help veterans and those who serve develop and grow professionally
- Create networking and network building opportunities for veterans and military personnel who either own their own businesses or are key influencers in the businesses at which they work
- Promote the leadership attributes of veterans and military service personnel and the skill sets they bring to the Lehigh Valley business community.
- Dependability
- Integrity
- Decision-Making
- Looking Out for Others
- Initiative
- Tenacity
- Professional Presence
- Adaptability