

Post Collaborates with VA to Host Stand Down for Homeless Veterans

Dianne Diekman has participated in the Sioux Falls, S.D., stand down event for two years. Diekman, who is the commander at Post 628 in Sioux Falls, said the opportunity to make a difference in the lives of homeless veterans is key to what VFW means.

"That's what we do," Diekman said. "We take care of veterans."

Diekman, who served as an aeronautical maintenance duty officer with the Navy from 1972-2004, was part of the color guard for the stand down's opening ceremony.

The daylong event is a collaborative effort. The Sioux Falls VA organizes the event, but it is held at the VFW Post. VFW volunteers fix a meal, paid for by Goodwill. Various community programs and businesses provide resources and donations for the homeless veteran attendees.

In 2016, Diekman said, the Post tried to focus on helping female veterans.

With the assistance of a \$1,000 grant courtesy of VFW National Headquarters, the Post purchased gift certificates to hand out.

"The donations, socks and underwear, are often for men," Diekman said. "It's hard to find things appropriate for women, so we gave them gift cards."

According to VA representatives, the stand down event has gone on for 15 years. The Post has hosted it for the past 13 years. Approximately 200 people participated in 2016.

Veterans in attendance received coffee while they waited to check in for a free meal, haircuts, flu shots and cold-weather apparel.

"The homeless veterans in town are often under the radar, so this is the opportunity for VA and different organizations around town to get together to take care of the homeless," Diekman said.

Email: kgibson@vfw.org

Sub Zero Mission

Ohio VFW Members Offer Warmth for Homeless Veterans

Al Raddatz and Del Bethel have a mission. After reading statistics on homeless veterans, the Marine Corps veterans and life members of Post 7939 in Leroy, Ohio, dedicated their lives to keeping homeless veterans warm on freezing nights.

In 2009, Bethel and Raddatz started delivering cold-weather items to homeless veterans. In 2011, the duo formally gained 501(c)(3) status for the program Sub Zero Mission. Organizers find homeless veterans and provide them tents, sleeping bags and cold-weather clothing. While veterans are Sub Zero Mission's main focus, the nonprofit group helps anyone in need of warmth.

Sub Zero Mission hosts "Stuff the Bus" events, where community groups fill the bus—named "Gemma"—with donations. Then Sub Zero Mission volunteers deliver those goods to homeless people.

"We do this because nobody should freeze to death in America," the website, subzeromission.org, states.

Bethel, who served with Headquarters Co., 2nd Marines, during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, said the group has informational cards it hands out to veterans encountered on the street. These cards point homeless veterans in the direction of local VA services and programs providing assistance.

"It is an amazing feeling to know you are helping someone who might not feel that there is anyone out there who cares," Bethel said. "The gratefulness of most of the individuals is such a reward, and the quiet bus ride home after a mission is always a reflection of what we have accomplished."

"Knowing that you may have helped someone survive a zero degree night and tomorrow may be the day things turn around for them is one of the

best feelings you can imagine."

Raddatz recalled one encounter with a homeless veteran that reminded him how rewarding Sub Zero Mission's work can be.

"We found a veteran one night in near-zero degree temperatures," Raddatz said. "His shoes were worn through. His socks were wet and dirty. The smile that he had when the only pair of boots we had on the bus actually fit him was priceless. It makes the hard work in the off-season completely worthwhile."

By word of mouth and use of social media, Sub Zero Mission has expanded rapidly in eight years.

"We grew very fast, but once we set some guidelines around what we had already and conditions and goals around how and where we would expand, it got a little easier," Raddatz said. "Currently, we are delivering in more than 20 cities and four states. Our next expansion will be decided by where we have supporters who are looking to take our model and run with it."

As the program has grown, Sub Zero Mission has recruited board members to spread the word and make the mission more manageable.

"Spreading some of the workload and getting some new fresh ideas and perspectives is really helping step it up this year," Bethel said. "All of us work full time jobs and have families, so the bigger we grow, the more help we need to spread the load of collecting, sorting, fundraising and distributing."

Email: kgibson@vfw.org



Upper Left: A Sub Zero Mission volunteer helps a homeless veteran try on new shoes. The group, founded by VFW members Al Raddatz and Del Bethel, collect cold-weather gear and distribute the donations to homeless veterans during the winter months.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DEL BETHEL

Lower Left: Sub Zero Mission uses its bus, Gemma, to transport goods throughout the community. The group hosts "Stuff the Bus" events, where area businesses can bring donations.

Below: Employees of an Ohio business stand in front of their donations before volunteers with Sub Zero Mission distribute the clothes to homeless veterans in the community.



What Sub Zero Mission Accepts:

- Coats (adult sizes L – 4XL)
- Hats (winter)
- Gloves
- Sleeping bags
- Boots (on some occasions and only if they are clean and serviceable)
- Socks (new only)

Homeless Demographics

- 51% of individual homeless veterans have disabilities
- 50% are age 51 or older
- 45% of homeless veterans are African-American or Hispanic
- 11% of the homeless population are veterans
- 39,471 veterans are homeless on any given night

(Source: National Coalition for Homeless Veterans)

