



## Tioga County Veterans Service Agency 2022 Annual Report

What an exciting year 2022 was for the Veterans Service Agency! The year started off with exciting news that our advocacy efforts paid off with Governor Hochul and the 2022-2023 State budget year; the Governor hearing our call from the NYS County Veterans Service Officers Association for more funding to localities for the vital work we do to aid veterans, military and their families in our local communities and the expansion of the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program from a legislative give to hard funding in the State budget for all counties across NY State!

What did this mean to us here in Tioga County? It meant \$15,000 more per year in direct state-aid to localities for our Agency; it also meant that we would be receiving an additional \$100,000 in state-aid to expand our outreach efforts to veterans, military, and their families who suffer, many times in isolation resulting from mental health challenges, substance use disorders and a myriad of other barriers that leave them disconnected from services and opportunities to reconnect with each other and their communities.

What have we done with this money? We went from an office of one full-time Director and one part-time Veteran Service Officer (VSO), to adding on a full-time VSO and a full-time Veterans Services Assistant/VSO – we are now a staff of 3 full-time and one part-time people! We have added new programs and training for our staff to better equip us to be peer-to-peer mentors and engage our veteran community in outreach and opportunities like never before! We were able to begin a peer-to-peer group that gives our veterans a safe place to engage in conversations about the issues effecting their quality of life, as well as their families. We have held outings and events geared towards having fun but reconnecting as well, which includes that peer connection focusing on camaraderie we had when we served and realizing that when one served, we all served and that someone was there to help them reacclimate to civilian life and to be their “battle buddy” to walk the journey with them! Here is a look at some of the activities and events we offered throughout the year: monthly breakfasts for veterans, military, and families for casual talk and information that included our community partners and information to help them;

“Project Hope” – a partnership with the PGA and local golf courses to provide golf lessons and rounds and food to allow for mentoring and conversation;

Outdoor RX Coalition – a partnership with NYS Parks, DEC and the Sierra Club that provided outdoor recreational activities in our community; recognition luncheons – to honor and appreciate the service of our men and women and the families who care for them; 200 all access passes to the Tioga County Fair, and 300 all access passes to the NYS State Fair with parking so families could spend time together; Tioga County Veterans Night at Binghamton Rumble Ponies Game – 100 free tickets; food insecurity programs to address hunger issues with our families who are struggling; gas card program to enable them to get to much needed medical and mental health appointments; kayak nature and adventure outings; bowling nights; worked with Cornell Cooperative extension to begin a Veteran Incubator Program that offers hands-on learning to veterans wanting to get into agricultural opportunities as a way of life, to make a living and most of all heal; addressing homeless veteran needs with shelter or long-term housing; a Ruck March to raise awareness of veteran suicide that included area bands providing entertainment and a pig roast to feed all those who attended and participated; this is just a few of our outreach efforts this past year and look for even more greater opportunities in 2023!

We spent some money on training. Our director became certified as a trainer and educator for USA Mental Health First Aid for Veterans, Military and their Families. This has enabled us to educate anyone wanting to be informed and help those who have served and are serving by understanding the mental health and substance use challenges they face by offering a free course to obtain a 3-year accreditation as a Mental Health First Aider that can enable them to make referrals and connections for the challenges our men and women face and provide that “ear” they need more than anything to listen, hear and acknowledge their struggles and offer that “hand-up” they need most.

We partnered with our area law enforcement agencies to address calls for service that were not criminal in nature, but needed our help to provide immediate services, information and referral to resources to veterans and their families that were experiencing life crisis's.

And that was just the start for 2022! Next, we had been looking at a program called Onward Ops, ETS Sponsorship Program to help our men and women transition out of the military and reacclimate to the civilian world and come home to NY to live and work. We were made aware of a 2-year grant that was available through The CARES UP initiative which is part of NYS Suicide Prevention Coalition. We agreed to take the lead and partnered with 7 other county veteran service agencies in the Southern Tier Finger Lakes region and were able to secure the grant! This a private public partnership between the Department of Defense, Veterans Administration and Onward Ops a 501(c)(4) organization founded by two retired Army generals who realized we weren't doing enough to help our service members come home.

Through this grant we provide a cadre of “sponsors” who receive training and accreditation from the VA to act as a mentor, coach, or guide in assisting service members by providing them with resources, opportunities, and supports to make their transition successful, based on what the service member and their family need and want. We have had great success with the program and are at Ft. Drum monthly talking to transitioning service members about what the program can do for them, helping them with filing their VA benefits claims and enrolling them in VA health care prior to discharge, find out what they want to do and helping connect them with the opportunities to make it happen and their transition smooth. The TSM’s “drive the bus”, it’s about what they want or need, and we provide the opportunities to make it happen! To date we have over 35 sponsors across the 7-county region and have enrolled 175 service members in the program and enable them to get a leg up on that journey from soldier to civilian!

In 2022, our director was selected to represent NY as it's Delegate on the Executive Board of the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers (NACVSO) and elected to serve as the Legislative Chairman of the NYS County Veterans Service Officer Association (NYS CVSOA). He attended the NACVSO Leadership Summit in Washington DC where he and other delegates advocated with members of Congress and meetings with top levels of government to push for the PACT Act which was successfully passed this year, Other legislation was stalled at end of the 117<sup>th</sup> Congress but we will be pushing hard for its passage in 2023! In August of 2022, our director was asked to take over the reins as President of NYS CVSOA and has been working hard with other veteran service leaders across the State to raise awareness in Albany to the issues and needs facing our veterans, military and their families. He has testified before the NYS Assembly Veterans Affairs Committee and is currently working to address other issues with the help of our partners at the New York State Association of Counties.

2022 was a huge year and one that we believe has pushed us forward in a way that will help us provide better and more services to those who served for us and their families. We set record numbers in our office both in services and in outreach: we served 1,471 veterans and 580 family members of veterans in benefits with claims filings and other related issues, of those 1,471 veterans – 344 were new to our office. We also provide over 4,465 instances of assistance and services to those same folks. Our outreach numbers went through the roof, thanks to our new Dwyer Peer Support Program – we conducted 142 outreach events that were attended and helped 6,547 veterans and their families.

I personally want to acknowledge my dedicated hardworking staff who are passionate about the work they do every day, two are combat veterans themselves and one is the mother of a servicemember. We all at Tioga County Veterans Service Agency want to thank our veterans, our military and their families for allowing us the privilege to work for them! We want to thank our County Legislators for supporting the important work we do! We want to thank

our community partners both in County Agencies and in the private sector for helping us "Serve those who served for us!". This is a team effort, and we are proud, excited and humbled to come to work every day in a job that allows us to give back a small portion for what all of you have given in service to your Country!

Respectfully submitted by:

Michael F. Middaugh  
Director  
Tioga County Veterans Service Agency