

“PASERVES UNDERSTANDS THAT VETERANS FACE A MULTITUDE OF ISSUES EVERY DAY AND ARE, IN A SENSE, FIGHTING A MULTI-FRONT WAR.”

Cpl. Deidra Hubay

Standing on the campus of Duquesne University where she is a student, Deidra Hubay, a former corporal in the Marines, credits PAServes with helping her find resources that have been useful in her transition to civilian life.





SERVING THOSE WHO SERVED

THE PASERVES NETWORK HAS AN IMPRESSIVE TRACK RECORD OF CONNECTING VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES TO NEEDED LOCAL RESOURCES THAT IS NOW BEING TESTED BY THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC.
BY MARK KRAMER



While stationed at Camp Pendleton in southern California, Cpl. Deidra Hubay so effectively managed \$12 million worth of equipment that the Marine Corps recognized her capable leadership with an award. But when Ms. Hubay was honorably discharged in 2018 and returned home to Pittsburgh, she struggled to translate that capable, recognized leadership and good service into her next career.

She didn't know how to write a resume. She wasn't sure how to effectively study for classes she'd begun at Duquesne University. She also found it daunting to assess the many organizations serving military veterans — more than 40,000 nationally, according to a report by the Center for a New American Security. Then, in search of information on tax deferments available to disabled vets, she spent six weeks trying to reach the right contact at the federal Department of Veterans Affairs. No one got back to her.

Mark Kramer is a Pittsburgh-based freelance writer. His last story for h ran in Issue 1, 2019, and looked at efforts to address environmental issues in Hazelwood to help the neighborhood and its residents become healthier.

Fortunately, Ms. Hubay met PAServes Program Administrator Matt Gryskewicz through an orientation for veterans that her school hosted, and he followed up with her by email to see what she might need. They met again at Suit Up for Success, a collaborative event that provides veterans with employment mentoring, benefits information and professional work attire. Together, Ms. Hubay and Mr. Gryskewicz navigated the right channels at Veterans Affairs.

PAServes and its sponsored activities also have helped Ms. Hubay secure a three-month internship, network with potential employers, and access other resources as she continues her coursework, with hopes of eventually completing a master's degree in business administration.

She appreciates the support. "PAServes understands that veterans face a multitude of issues every day and are, in a sense, fighting a multi-front war," she said. "PAServes looks at the veteran as a whole and helps define what needs are most essential to you as an individual veteran and connects you to the best resources for your specific needs."

This coordination of services is exactly what PAServes has been doing effectively since its inception in 2015 to support Western Pennsylvania military veterans, service members and their families. As a single-point-of-entry support network, it connects vets and their family members to the resources of local nonprofits, including service providers, universities and government agencies. The program has handled 16,405 requests for assistance since 2015.

The network also experienced a recent "explosion" of inquiries from beyond its usual target area of Allegheny, Westmoreland and Butler counties, according to Mr. Gryskewicz. And now it is supporting vets dealing with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic by helping to connect them to a range of services.

PAServes is the second-largest program among 17 similar networks across the United States working under the umbrella organization AmericaServes, a community-based care coordination initiative created by the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) at Syracuse University. PAServes, which is hosted at the community health and wellness provider Pittsburgh Mercy, consistently resolves more requests for help than any other IVMF network.

Since it began, PAServes has helped 5,926 veterans navigate and obtain resources. Their greatest needs have included clothing and household goods, housing, employment and assistance navigating military benefits.

In Mr. Gryskewicz's view, the uptick over the last year in service provision has been in part because he and other PAServes staff—four full-time and two part-time, all of whom are vets themselves—have learned to detect what they refer to as "co-occurrences."

Through deliberate yet casual conversations, staff listen for "flags revealing a need for additional support," he said, indicators that needs go well beyond the concern that initially brings a veteran to PAServes. For example, there are veterans who may say they need help paying utility bills. Instead of simply directing those clients to an emergency relief fund, PAServes staff talk with them about the matrix of factors and obstacles that might be causing them need to seek assistance in the first place, such as unemployment, poor health or other strains on income.

Megan Andros, a senior program officer at The Heinz Endowments, which supports PAServes, noted that during the program's early years, "We weren't totally respecting the social determinants of health."

Now, PAServes staff are helping clients make an average of 20 percent more requests for services per person, compared to last year, thereby enabling individual veterans to address more problem areas. In addition to the Endowments, other major funders of PAServes include the DSF Charitable Foundation and Hillman Family Foundations.

Ms. Andros also attributed the program's success to better messaging about how PAServes can help vets prevent crises from occurring in the first place. "We want folks to reach out early," she said. "PAServes is not a crisis network."

Navy member Jeff Shane contacted PAServes for help, even though he doesn't finish with his service duty until the end of 2020. He learned about the network while participating in a TAP class (Transition Assistance Program), provided by the military. A serviceman for 14 years, Mr. Shane began working in aviation maintenance, logistics and supply chain, and has deployed twice, but more recently he's been based in Pittsburgh where he recruits new sailors.

In preparation for what he hopes will be a comparable supply chain position—possibly in inventory or transportation—after completing his naval service at the end of this year, Mr. Shane determined that he needed to earn credentials as a Certified Supply Chain Professional. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to afford the associated fees, so he reached out to PAServes. The organization was able to connect Mr. Shane to resources that will cover a portion of those costs.

"I could not afford to be on par with my civilian counterparts without their help," Mr. Shane said. He added that he plans on reaching out to PAServes again soon as he translates his military skills and "military speak" into civilian life.

BY THE NUMBERS

85

PAServes–Greater Pittsburgh has become the most successful in the national AmericaServes network in several key metrics, such as having **85 percent** of referrals to providers resolved favorably for current and former servicemen, servicewomen, and military families seeking help. This compares with an average successful resolution rate of 74 percent among AmericaServes’ 17 member organizations across the country.

79

The volume of requests for services increased **79 percent** from 2,974 in 2018 to 5,309 in 2019.

PAServes has fielded more than **16,000** requests since its inception.

16K

116,650

PAServes–Greater Pittsburgh covers a population of nearly **116,650** veterans, as well as currently serving military members and their families, in Allegheny, Butler, and Westmoreland counties.

Mr. Gryskewicz said PAServes’ success in helping veterans find housing, jobs and other assistance is also the result of building the strong relationships and rapport necessary for helping vets explore those needs in the first place, as staff have with Ms. Hubay and Mr. Shane.

“A lot of military don’t want to ask for help because they think they can solve these problems by themselves,” Ms. Hubay pointed out. “That’s what we were taught in the military—to solve problems and to adapt.”

It helps that all PAServes staff are vets themselves who can relate to other veterans, especially as they transition to civilian life, Mr. Gryskewicz said.

Vets generally make initial contact with PAServes through events, an online form, a service provider referral or a visit to the agency’s office. In conversation with PAServes staff, these prospective clients share about their background, military service and current circumstances.

The good relationships extend to service providers as well. PAServes acts as a hub-and-spoke model, Mr. Gryskewicz said. As the hub, PAServes draws together service providers relationally as spokes. He noted that PAServes staff know key individuals at partnering providers, and they collaborate regularly.

Crystal McFadden is program manager for Corporate America Supports You (CASY), a career readiness and job placement program for veterans. PAServes staff have “taken time to intentionally get to know service providers,” she said. “They research provider services and successes in order to make the best possible referral the first time.” PAServes enables providers to coordinate with one another as well, she added.

The coronavirus pandemic has caused a significant increase in the number of vets contacting PAServes, Mr. Gryskewicz said, foremost for help with food and transportation, as well as clothing, hygiene and cleaning supplies, and financial assistance through veterans’ temporary assistance programs.

Additionally, while Mr. Gryskewicz has heard from vets who “want to volunteer any way they can,” he has also seen a much higher need for mental health services as even the most prepared veterans struggle with isolation. Further, the co-occurrence of anxiety and depression alongside insecurity in practical needs can exacerbate problems.

Still, PAServes’ referrals have focused foremost on helping vets meet material needs before making mental health referrals. “Many individuals can’t see beyond their current insecurity issue,” he said. From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to July 17, PAServes fielded 2,477 service referrals. Concerns related to the pandemic accounted for 72 percent of them.

Lisa Murray is IVMF program manager for community services and an Army veteran. In explaining the 17 AmericaServes networks' efforts to address current needs among vets, she said that each community has been affected differently by COVID-19, and, as a result, each network's response has varied in intensity.

AmericaServes networks had already been relying upon coordination center staff who work remotely, she said, so they have abided by stay-at-home orders while remaining fully operational. Some networks have seen a significant number of partnering organizations stop operations, while others are receiving additional funds for support. The AmericaServes team is "working to determine how to best prepare for client needs when communities begin to reopen and recovery starts," Ms. Murray said.

Gilly Cantor, IVMF program evaluation manager, is collecting data on the member networks' coronavirus response so that the organization can monitor trends and recovery from the pandemic impacts, including qualitative examples of how networks are responding and quantitative data within the software platform showing requests related to COVID-19.

"Together," she said, "this information will paint a picture of how needs are changing, and how communities and organizations are adapting in response."

Tracking current responses to the coronavirus highlights just how important data collection has been to PAServes and other IVMF programs, which are analyzing everything from

accuracy of referrals to time between referral and service provider response. PAServes has been able to match referrals to providers within an average of 4.23 days (including weekend days), and for some services the match has been even quicker, such as about one day for clothing and household needs.

Housing referrals have required an average of about 12 days. Meanwhile, 85 percent of all PAServes referrals are resolved favorably, the highest such mark among IVMF networks.

Ms. McFadden emphasized the value of tracking data and the accountability that it provides: "If we didn't track those things, we wouldn't know how to improve... The stronger [PAServes'] providers are, the better they can do their job, because we depend upon one another."

"Data PAServes has collected has helped providers identify the things they do really well and the things they should defer to other organizations to tackle," Ms. Andros noted.

PAServes staff record information from vets and arrange referrals through a private online system that allows service partners to exchange information and track their own actions in response to referrals and clients.

Looking forward, Mr. Gryskewicz is hoping to strengthen working relationships with the Department of Veterans Affairs in order to ensure that all vets are getting the assistance they need, whether through the VA services for which vets are eligible or through other means. Meanwhile, Ms. Cantor championed recent efforts in the Pennsylvania state legislature to improve government-sponsored coordination of care.

Ms. Andros emphasized that PAServes' hub-and-spoke model could be applied in other contexts. For example, as formerly incarcerated individuals reintegrate into society, they, too, would likely benefit from help navigating the matrix of services and organizations that address the needs of people who have been released from jail or prison that also include issues such as employment, housing and mental health.

"Navigation is not just an issue for military veterans," she said. [h](#)

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Crystal McFadden, program manager, Corporate America Supports You