



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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FAYETTE COUNTY HONORS VETERANS AMID PANDEMIC

Uniontown, PA – Despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Fayette County officials remain steadfast in their dedication to supporting and honoring veterans.

May is National Military Appreciation Month - a celebratory time leading up to the annual Memorial Day observances May 25. In order to ensure those who made the ultimate sacrifice are honored appropriately, the Fayette County Veterans Affairs Office is asking for citizens' help.

Each year, the office organizes the placing of grave markers and flags throughout Fayette County's 192 cemeteries containing veterans' graves.

Veterans Affairs Director Brian Bensen said the pandemic forced many of the nation's regular flag distribution warehouses to shut down several months ago.

"A lot of counties were left high and dry, but I scrambled and found a warehouse in Georgia and got them here," Bensen said. "I was able to get the markers in Pennsylvania before the virus shut us down, too."

Those grave decorations were distributed this week to Fayette's 32 veterans organizations, which typically divide and conquer the actual placements through members and volunteers.

This year, however, some organizations - like Uniontown's Rolling Thunder - won't have as many volunteers due to the pandemic. Still, 30,240 flags and 1,825 markers must be placed on veterans' graves this week.

"They usually have help from local boy scouts, JROTC members and other local kids," Bensen said. "They cannot use them at this time."

All Fayette County citizens are welcome to volunteer. Please contact Rolling Thunder representative Bernie Caffery at 724-366-3546 if interested.

Bensen said this year's efforts would not be possible without Veteran Service Officer Glen Siple, who has "stuck by (his) side in the office throughout the pandemic."

"We haven't missed a day of work and, even though our doors were closed to the public, our phones were on and we were still giving people hope and help," he said. "His 10 years of experience in our office was instrumental in pulling off the flags and markers this year. I could not do any of this without him."

This year's flags are especially important, because they "gave my family and I all the freedoms we have today," Bensen added.

“All of these men and women that have been laid to rest gave me the opportunity to serve. The very least we can do is see to it that their legacy is honored,” he said. “They have surviving families that deserve that, too. They all need to know how much we appreciate their service.”

In addition to the flags, Veterans Affairs hosted a drive-through event this month, for all combat veterans in need of support during this pandemic. Over 40 cars full of veterans moved between stations that included a visit with counselors from Pittsburgh, assistance from the Uniontown VA Clinic medical staff and more.

“Their last stop was me. We identified any veterans that were in trouble in any way due to the pandemic and helped them immediately,” Bensen said. “Everyone wore masks and it was a completely socially-distanced event. It was awesome.”

For more information about the Fayette County Veterans Affairs Office, visit www.FayetteCountyPA.org.

For more information on COVID-19, including symptoms, treatments and outbreak updates, please visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov. For regular updates, visit www.facebook.com/fcema911 or www.health.pa.gov/topics/disease/Pages/Coronavirus.aspx.

To learn more about Fayette County, visit www.FayetteCountyPA.org.

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