

The Fed Page

Megan Moloney: Using digital media to inform and assist veterans

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By Partnership for Public Service

Veterans who visit the Twitter account of the Department of Veterans Affairs often find quick answers to questions about benefits and services, and sometimes can get help directly from organizations that monitor the site.

Megan Moloney heads the VA's digital media team, composed mostly of veterans, which answers these questions and directs people to experts for additional assistance. The 10-person team also posts news, videos and other items of interest on numerous other social media platforms—for example, information on where veterans can find jobs or how they can use their benefits for retraining.

“We’re having a conversation across our digital channels,” said Moloney, director of Digital Media Engagement in VA’s Office of Public Affairs, referring to Facebook, Instagram, Google+ and other VA social media platforms.

The conversation is growing. As of early April, more than 815,000 people had “liked” VA’s Facebook page. The number of unique visitors who have liked, commented on, shared or clicked on VA posts has risen nearly 600 percent since August 2013, Moloney said.

Veterans are invited to post questions on VA’s Twitter account using the hashtag “#VetQ.” Moloney and her team read and respond to the tweets, but so do people from nine veteran’s service organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Student Veterans of America and Women Veterans Connect.

Recently, for example, an Air Force veteran asked for information about the processing time for a certificate of eligibility for benefits and how he would be notified. Another frustrated questioner was offered help filing a claim for benefits assistance by someone from the Paralyzed Veterans of America’s Twitter account.

“It’s a collaborative campaign we launched to try to get answers for people,” said Moloney, who has been at VA since May 2013, and in the federal government since 1995, starting at the Department of Transportation.

“We may not always agree with one another, but we’re certainly unified around the idea of getting information and answers to people when they have questions,” she said.

Moloney said the staff can't answer questions tied to a particular case or ask people to send their personal details on social media, but "can point them in the direction of someone who can help them."

Since August 2014, VetQ has reached more than three million people, according to Tim Hudak, a public affairs specialist on the team, who Moloney credits with coming up with the idea for VetQ.

"He saw questions being asked and going unanswered," said Moloney.

The VA's digital team has experience in multiple branches of military service, both on active duty and in the Reserves. Sometimes knowledge of a place or a battle in Iraq, Afghanistan or elsewhere enables them to connect in a personal way to a Facebook or Twitter user, Moloney said.

Moloney, whose husband, father and both grandfathers were active-duty military, keeps the team current and focused on its audience, using outside events to inform social media posts.

"She has a content calendar that is the thread that goes through everything," said Reynaldo Leal, public affairs specialist.

Sometimes posts and tweets might cover testimony that the VA secretary gives before Congress. Other times it might mark an event in history, such as the 50th anniversary this past March of the start of U.S. participation in the Vietnam War.

"What we're doing is fun and seems so cutting edge," Leal said. "A lot has to do with [Moloney] and how she built the team and moved it forward."

A feature added under Moloney's watch is "veteran of the day," which includes a photo and short history. Recently featured was Mark Wise of the U.S. Army, who was injured in Afghanistan in 2009 and whose Facebook story said he would be competing this month in five and a half marathons over 10 days in the Sahara Desert.

The most popular post to date occurred on February 27, the day Leonard Nimoy died and was featured as a veteran of the day—Nimoy enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserves in the early 1950s.

The team also uses video to tell stories. Recently, they shot video of veterans of the Battle of the Bulge talking about their experiences during the surprise attack by the Germans during WWII, which led to a large number of U.S. casualties. The conversation was cut into a four-part web series presented over a month.

"We find it's those kinds of stories that really connect with our audience," Moloney said. "Veterans like listening to other veterans. The more we can help share their stories, it shows we're providing information and services that are valuable."

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