

Hunger Among Veterans is a Growing Concern

Being hungry, having no access to fresh food and living in fear of when the next meal will be is known as food insecurity. VFW aims to help put an end to this problem.

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Rich Synek remembers the day he encountered a hungry World War II vet. Synek was postmaster in Vernon Center, N.Y., in 2008 when he asked the Battle of Okinawa vet why he purchased stamps one at a time rather than buying a book of stamps.

Mr. B., as Synek refers to the vet, told him he couldn't afford it and for that matter, he and his wife could only afford to eat two weeks out of every month because their money didn't last.

The idea of the elderly vet going hungry was too much for Synek. He and his wife, Michele, went out that night and purchased a box of food to take to Mr. B.

"There was nothing in the refrigerator other than condiments," said Synek, a VFW Department of New York member. "Nothing in the freezer, no cans of beans in the cupboard. It was sickening to me that our veterans can't afford such a basic necessity as food."

Out of this one act was born Feed Our Vets, a nonprofit founded by the Syneks in 2008 in New York. In addition to operating three food pantries (two in New York and one in Arkansas), Feed Our Vets helped provide food for veterans in 38 states in 2017 alone. (See the August *VFW* magazine for more on this endeavor.)

'We have a Hunger Problem'

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At the national level, VFW also is alarmed at the number of veterans suffering from what is being called “food insecurity.” A study by the University of Minnesota School of Public Health found that 27 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan war vets struggle to put food on the table.

According to Lisa Ousley, executive director for After the Harvest in Kansas City, Mo., food insecurity means that a person doesn’t always know when or where he or she will get their next meal or how they will feed their family.

“With food insecurity, food is not a certainty of life,” Ousley said. “It causes great anxiety in individuals. It should not be another problem for veterans to face after they are discharged.”

Food insecurity also means not having access to fresh, healthier options such as fruits and vegetables, Ousley said.

“People in poverty most often do not have access to quality food,” she said. “Buying cheap, unhealthy, processed food to stretch the dollars is a problem. We have a hunger problem in our country, but because of the proliferation of cheap food, people don’t view it the same.”

After the Harvest endeavors to provide fresh produce to food banks, pantries, shelters and community kitchens in Missouri and Kansas. Volunteers “glean” produce from area farmers, orchards, community gardens and, sometimes, backyards.

To glean produce, Ousley explained, volunteers hand pick edible crops that remain after the harvest. More specifically, this is usually the fruits and vegetables that aren’t cosmetically appealing for selling in supermarkets.

Most importantly, though, Ousley works with commercial growers to get truckloads of produce brought to Kansas City-based The Harvesters Community Food Network.

VFW plans to offer members a chance to go on a gleaning outing during the organization’s convention in Kansas City in July. Be sure to read the June/July 2018 issue of *VFW* magazine for more details on how you can get involved in bringing fresh produce to those who need it most.

“We are just so excited for this opportunity to work with VFW to help end food insecurity,” Ousley said.

In addition to After the Harvest, VFW is teaming up with Humana to raise awareness of food insecurity. Several events are planned throughout the next several months, but especially during VFW’s national convention. Members will find all the details in the June/July *VFW* magazine.

“Over the past year, Humana and VFW have identified a number of areas where we can strengthen our partnership,” VFW Foundation Director Richard Potter said. “The issue of food insecurity among veterans quickly rose to the top of the list. By working together, we believe we can implement solutions that will make a positive difference in the lives of veterans and military families across the country.”

This article is featured in the April 2018 issue of [VFW magazine](#) and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor, VFW magazine.