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DEPARTMENT HIGHLIGHT

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WELD COUNTY VETERANS SERVICES CONTINUES TO INCREASE VISIBILITY, OUTREACH

WELD COUNTY, CO – When Deon Harris took over as the Veterans Service Officer last August, he realized his work was cut out for him in terms of community outreach. Although his office staff is small in number with one full time and one part-time employee, they make a big impression in Weld County.

Acting as a liaison between veterans in Weld County and the Veterans Affairs (VA) offices in Cheyenne and Denver, Harris said one of the most difficult aspects of his job thus far is spreading the word about all the benefits available to veterans and educating people about the best ways to access those benefits through his office. To help raise awareness, Harris began doing community outreach.

Last spring, Harris spoke about benefits to residents of Birchwood Manor in Greeley, where he met a widow who lost her veteran husband in 1980.

“She wasn’t aware of the benefits available to her until I went and spoke at Birchwood. She had no idea,” said Harris. “All these years she didn’t remarry. She is living in an assisted living center paying expenses out of pocket, and she had no idea she was entitled to those benefits. It’s just heartbreaking.”

After working with the woman to access her widow’s benefits, she now receives \$1,100 and \$2,000 per month to help cover expenses.

“We got her the widow’s benefit, and she’s started living life the way she should have been all those years ago,” Harris said.

Harris has been increasing the office’s visibility by visiting places such as the University of Northern Colorado and Aims Community College where he speaks to vets. He’ll also be a part of the whistle stop tour that visits the VA hospitals in Cheyenne, a clinic in Greeley and the two VA hospitals in Denver this summer.

“I’ve been getting out in the community and am trying to meet everybody,” Harris said.

Right around the time Harris took over his position, the office changed locations. Harris said he’s seen an increase in visits of 40-60 veterans per month since the office moved from its location on O Street to downtown Greeley last summer. He said the new location at 1008 9th St. in Greeley is much more accessible to veterans. Now, Harris helps between 220 and



Deon Harris (above) is the Weld County Veterans Service Officer.

275 veterans each month and is responsible for no less than 1,400 veterans, total.

Coming from a long line of military men, Harris is a vet himself, having served four years in the Army.

“I like that I’m a vet myself. I can lend a compassionate ear, because I waited more than a year for my disability claim. I know the process,” said Harris. “When these guys are telling me their stories, I can identify with what they’re going through. When people come in angry, I say, ‘I know why you’re mad. I’ve been there. Let me try to help you with this.’”

Not only does Harris understand where vets are coming from, he understands the process well. He worked his way up to his current position by starting as a work study for the Weld County Veterans Services office. A work study is basically an intern who is paid for their work by the Office of Veterans’ Affairs. After he completed his work study, Harris became the assistant to the former Veterans Services Officer in Weld County, before taking over himself last fall.

The office helps veterans access their medical benefits, education benefits, burial benefits, as well as assists in filing disability claims. Once Harris helps the veteran complete the application process for services, he sends the paperwork to the Cheyenne or Denver office where it is evaluated, processed and sent back to the vet. From start to finish, a disability claim can take about a year and a half, Harris said. He added the VA has nearly a couple hundred thousand veteran claims sitting in limbo because so many young men are completing their service and older servicemen are just finding out about benefits available to them.

Harris said his office also offers bus passes, gift cards for food and help replacing lost or misplaced documents. Following the flood last September, the office was busy helping veterans who lost their discharge papers in the flood.



The Weld County Veterans Services office at the new location, 1008 9th St. in Greeley.

“That was the biggest thing we had to do after the flood because you need those to get a job, get a loan, get school benefits and prove you’re a vet. It’s a pretty important document,” he said.

The office also helps administer state benefits, some of which are very popular with local vets, Harris said.

“Depending on the veteran’s disability rating, they may be eligible for a free hunting and fishing license, disabled veteran license plate and admission to all the state parks,” Harris said. “We get a lot of vets who come in wanting their hunting and fishing licenses right away.”

The office also coordinates with the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) office in Greeley to help get veterans to medical appointments in Denver and Cheyenne.

Carol Davis with the DAV said two hospital vans shuttle veterans to Cheyenne and Denver for appointments Monday through Friday. The first van arrives at 7:00 a.m., Monday through Friday at the DAV, 1830 8th Ave. in Greeley, to pick up passengers. Davis said the wheels start rolling at 7:15 a.m. to take vets to the VA hospital in Cheyenne. There are about seven rendezvous points along Hwy 85 heading up to the state line where the van picks up other veterans needing to get to appointments in Cheyenne. The second van arrives at 8:15 a.m. at the DAV, Monday through Friday, to pick up veterans headed to the VA hospital in Denver. The vans also make stops at Greeley Manor, Greeley Place and the Guadalupe Center to pick up passengers. Veterans looking to ride the van down to Denver are required to reserve a seat. For more information, call the DAV at (970) 352-6188.

“I enjoy helping veterans get the benefits they earn and seeing the look on their faces when they find out what’s available to them,” Harris said.

To learn more about available benefits and services, contact Deon Harris at (970) 304-6595, ext. 3444 or visit the Veterans Services department page at www.weldgov.com.

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