

How struggling veterans groups are managing through the pandemic

By DEKE FARROW | The Modesto Bee | Published: November 11, 2020

Stars and Stripes

MODESTO, Calif. (Tribune News Service) — As veterans groups appeal to the state to loosen restrictions on posts and halls during the COVID-19 pandemic, some local chapters have been leaning heavily on takeout and limited-seating meals to stay afloat.

Weekly breakfasts and dinners long have been a steady source of income for posts to maintain facilities and offer programs and services, but the loss of canteen revenue and facility rentals because of the outbreak has made them more crucial.

Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 5059 in Turlock has a fairly full calendar of meals for November, including taco nights every Monday and burger dinners every Friday. It also has Wednesday lunches that have included chicken plates or chicken sandwiches and chili and cornbread. A special Veterans Day dinner this week has steak and oysters on the menu.

The Monday and Friday dinners are the "die-hard ones that we always keep going," post Commander Lyle Ducheneaux said in a phone interview Monday. The Wednesday meals have been thanks to community donations of food and volunteer labor.

Loss of facility rentals has cost the post somewhere in the neighborhood of \$25,000 — "a major hit," he said. And the loss of the only fundraiser the VFW does (as opposed to fundraising by its auxiliary), which is working as servers at the county fair, was another \$10,000 blow when the event was canceled last summer, Ducheneaux said.

"And of course when we were shut down altogether (during lockdown and when Stanislaus was in the purple tier), wow, I wouldn't even want to guess," he said. "Since this happened, it's easy to say it cost our post easily in excess of \$100,000."

At a time when bills and other costs keep coming even as revenue dwindles, the extra meals have been a big help, he said. "We're trying our damndest to keep things going and stay afloat," Ducheneaux said, saying the post had one air-conditioning unit go belly up and another cost a lot to repair, had to replace a beer cooler, needs major roof repair and has to bring a restroom up to Americans with Disabilities Act requirements.

Those expenses are on top of ongoing costs like property taxes and catering and Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control licenses. "We can't let any of that lapse," he said. "You would think that nonprofits for veterans would be cut a break on requirements, but no."

Posts 'at back of line' for reopening

In fact, ABC licensing to serve alcohol may have worked against posts during the pandemic. A news release issued Monday by the California State Commanders Veterans Council says it believes posts have been mistakenly categorized as bars under the state's reopening guidelines because many of them "hold a restrictive, membership-only veterans' liquor license. This classification puts veterans' posts at the back of the line for reopening, and puts access to services further out of reach for many veterans."

And in a letter to the editor received by The Modesto Bee, VFW state Commander John G. Lowe said the state is being asked to reclassify posts. He says posts' work is being curtailed on top of the pandemic by unnecessary government regulations.

"VFW posts are community hubs providing many essential programs and services. We offer free professional help with VA disability claims. We assist veterans who are homeless or distraught."

Thankfully at Post 5059, programs and services like helping vets pay for gas, rent and groceries are supported by a different account funded through contributions, Ducheneaux said. So the loss of revenue from COVID-19 restrictions "has not attacked our general fund yet because of our gracious community," he said. "It is dwindling but it still there."

American Legion Post 88 in Turlock also has upped its meal-service game, adding Monday dinners, and finds itself "in good shape" to weather the pandemic financially, Commander Carl Lasiter said by phone.

Though his post, too, lost its biggest fundraiser of the year — a beer booth at the county fair — "we're very fortunate that we have enough in reserves to pull us through this crisis. Our people in the past have kind of given us that margin or edge that we have."

Still, meals bring in needed revenue, and just as important, keep the post in the public's mind, the commander said. Post 88 offers tri-tip sandwich meals on Monday nights and meals of either spaghetti, ribs or steak on Friday nights. The cook, John Haggstrom, posts on his Facebook page what the meals will be and takes reservations so he knows now much to prepare, Lasiter said.

"We've been very successful, selling out almost every Monday night and Friday," the commander said. "So far, we've been doing all drive-through but we offer outside seating. But now that it's gotten cold, people probably won't be wanting to eat outdoors."

A struggle for Modesto's VFW

At VFW Post 3199 of Modesto, loss of facility rentals for weddings, quinceaneras, work and retirement parties and more has cut deeply into everything from facilities upkeep to services offered to a scholarship fund, said Arlene Martinez, president of the post auxiliary.

Like its fellow Turlock post, the Hatch Road facility needs air conditioning and roof repairs, she said, and also has insurance, utilities and other ongoing costs.

Only in the few weeks that Stanislaus County has been in the red tier has the post been able to open at 25% capacity, she said, so revenue still is tight, there still are no rental bookings for limited use of the hall or the post's park area.

"We haven't had small-group gatherings here," Martinez said, and turnout for meals has been light. At a breakfast, "you might get a family of four or five at a table over here, and you may get one or two at a table over there. And then there are some that go outside there with the sun shining and pretty nice weather."

So the meal sales — Friday dinners, Saturday barbecued chicken sandwiches, Sunday breakfasts and a recent drive-through fried chicken dinner — "haven't made much of a dent, but it's a little bit coming in," she said.

What veterans groups really need, Martinez said, is an exemption to restrictions "so we can carry on to do what we always have done." Veterans, who have done so much for their country, deserve that, said the 73-year-old widow of veteran Daniel Martinez.

Her husband served more than 23 years in the military, from the Marines to the Army National Guard, she said. At age 56, he was deployed to Iraq.

He died two years ago, Martinez said, beginning to cry. Of him and his brothers and sisters in arms, she said, "I have this in my heart, because without them, where would we be?"