Why MSA Volunteers Serve Military Veterans

November is traditionally the month when Americans remember the sacrifices our military Veterans made for us over the decades. Since 1919, the primary thrust of the work of the Masonic Service Association has been to give proper attention to the needs of those Veterans through its Hospital Visitation Program. Today, MSA is seeking new volunteers to enter this program and keep it strong.

What does a volunteer receive for such service? Following are words from a number of MSA’s Hospital Visitation associates, telling of their experiences and feelings about this noble work.

John M. Burchfield, Asheville, North Carolina:

No matter the service being provided, as a volunteer I find it to be a doubly rewarding adventure - especially at the Charles George Veteran’s Medical Center in Asheville. The first reward is for the Veterans being served. The second reward is for the self-satisfaction of knowing I can once again be of service to my country and community.

Working as a hospital volunteer with the MSA, it is an advantage to be a Veteran myself. Just understanding you are talking with someone who has been through something similar is a common frame of reference.

Why do I volunteer? It is quite simple. I must be able to give something back. It is one thing to work and do a job, which is expected for a wage. It is something quite different to freely give of your time and volunteer while expecting nothing in return. Volunteering is the most rewarding service I have ever done.

Anthony T. Johnson, Omaha, Nebraska:

I spent 27 years in the United States Air Force and had the honor and privilege to serve with some of the finest men and women from the services, especially the time I spent deployed to the Middle East. I have a soft spot in my heart, and always will, for those who have sacrificed so much for their country. I try to make sure those Veterans do not feel forgotten.

Secondly, as a Mason, we are instructed that to relieve the distressed is the duty incumbent on all men, but particularly upon Masons. I started visiting Lodges to encourage them (especially Masons who are Veterans) to help and volunteer at our terrific VA Hospital. I spend the majority of my time as a hospital representative supporting projects and encouraging others. Why? Because it is a great way to show those who have given so much that someone truly cares and, I promise you, it will leave you with a warm spot in your heart knowing you have helped someone who is in need or just needs some reassurance that they are appreciated.

Jose Rivera, East Orange, New Jersey:

I too am a Veteran and feel the need to give back to the community. My fellow Brothers and I visit and bring coffee and doughnuts to the Veterans to show appreciation to them for serving our country. When I see how happy they are to get visitors, that, within itself, gives joy.

Sam Atkins, Campbell Veterans Nursing Home, South Carolina:

Being a volunteer is a rewarding experience. You never know the people you will encounter and the lifelong friends you will make. As an MSA field agent at Campbell’s, I receive a blessing each time I visit. I have been fortunate to help get supplies for our Veterans, tee-shirts with the MSA logo for all Veterans, and helped raise money to buy each veteran a television. I could not have done any of this without the support of the Masons in the state of South Carolina.

I consider it an honor to say the Pledge of Allegiance and have prayer with the veterans to start their day. I have become close friends with these Veterans, and I cherish their smiles and joy whenever they tell me how much that they appreciate a visit. I am just thankful that this opportunity came my way and that I can make a difference in these Veterans’ lives.
Chuck Riggins, Augusta, Georgia:

Since I personally had some problems getting information from our VA a few years ago, I volunteered to help others at our Augusta VA. I became active in giving directions for the vets to get to the clinic, and assisting the patients to resettle to the proper clinic for their help and claims. It was satisfying that I was able in most cases to provide assistance to them.

The “after action” reports that patients wrote about their visits were very favorable and I felt I was able to get them to the right place and take care of their concerns or problems in a timely manner.

Jesse J. Long, Tomah, Wisconsin:

I began volunteering at the Tomah VA, going one Sunday a month to push Veterans in their wheel chairs from their rooms to chapel service. They were so appreciative that I felt that I could do more. So I went through the process to become a volunteer. I was helping the Veterans check in for appointments and directing them to the right place.

I also volunteered in the Hospice Unit. The Tomah VA has a program called No Veteran Dies Alone. A volunteer sits with the Veteran who is dying when family members can’t be there for various reasons. The families are so relieved to know that their loved one was not alone.

No matter how much time you are willing or able to volunteer, it would be beneficial to you and to the Veterans.

Lyle Cate, MSA State Coordinator, Michigan:

After accepting the appointment in Michigan as State Coordinator for MSA, I became aware of one of the best-kept secrets of Freemasonry.

The MSA has one of - if not the best - hospital visitation program in existence. It is very satisfying to be able to assist our Masonic vets, as well as all Veterans.

At the rise of the Covid-19 pandemic, our program was put on hold for more than a year, and now we need to bring in new volunteers and grow again. I get a proud feeling of just being part this program.

Johnny Byrd, Overton-Brooks VA Hospital, Shreveport, Louisiana:

As a USAF retired Veteran of 27 years and a Master Mason, I am doubly honored and humbled to serve Masonry and my fellow Veterans and their families.

Representing the Grand Lodge of Louisiana in this capacity has been very rewarding and I can think of no better way to continue my service, but by helping those who sacrificed so much for the freedom we enjoy as a nation.

Steve Singleton, Tennessee:

I am currently serving as the MSA representative for the Tennessee Valley Healthcare System, with two VA Hospitals in Murfreesboro and Nashville, and a major clinic in Clarksville.

During the pandemic, visitation and organizations which served the VA Hospital were shut down and donations of much-needed healthcare items dropped dramatically. Despite very restrictive access to VA facilities, the administration granted us entry and gladly accepted the much-needed supplies we donated. Masons even provided color guards for deceased Veterans’ funerals due to the active duty personnel not being allowed. The pandemic did NOT keep the Masonic Fraternity from serving our Veterans.

Robert B. Ruff, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania:

I had been using the VA for medical benefits after a life-threatening illness, and on one of my visits, I found out that there was a Masonic organization that provided volunteer services. I met with the MSA representative and began handing out coffee and donuts. I am very grateful for that experience.

Since then, I became MSA representative at the Pittsburgh VA Healthcare System, and I now have 10 years and 4,500 hours of volunteering so far.

Please, if you want a truly rewarding experience, volunteer at your local VA. And, as always, thank a Veteran when possible. The freedom we enjoy is because of them and many others - some of whom gave the ultimate sacrifice.

Tom Fowler, Tucson, Arizona:

The Chapel Escort Service has been my main effort at the Veteran’s Hospital in Tucson, and this volunteer service is most rewarding.

Bringing our vets to Chapel from Rehab and the Blind Center is so much appreciated by the vets and the nursing staff, who reported that our work made a positive impact on morale and the vets always looked forward to Sunday mornings.

Some hospitalized vets we helped would return months or years later and look us up to renew our fellowship.

After a year and a half of lockdown, some of our Brothers are looking for a rewarding way to pay-it-forward. Could you be one of them?