

**OFFICERS' CORNER**

More than 238,000 of the 847,000 veterans in the pending backlog for health care through the Department of Veterans Affairs have already died, according to an internal VA document provided to The Huffington Post. A large percentage of these 847,000 veterans still waiting for benefits reside in Western PA.

The veteran suicide rate is the highest in our country's history – 22 veterans take their lives every day.

Our *Welcome Home* program, launched in 2014, is intended to help veterans who are in crisis situations, and we are proud to be part of a network of service agencies dedicated to battling these critical issues in our country.

We partner with the VA Healthcare for Homeless Veterans, Veterans Leadership Program, The Veterans Place, and SoldierOn. These agencies refer veterans to us with requests for beds and welcome home kits, emergency assistance, and a host of other necessities.

Our ability to provide these services is often the difference between a veteran getting well, or going into crisis. We are making a difference in the challenge to combat homelessness in the veteran community and in the battle against veteran suicides.

*Welcome Home* is an expansion to the services we offer, and with our continued support of deployed troops to Iraq, Afghanistan, and other military locations, OTA is busier than ever! As a result, our need for additional funding is rising.

OTA has worked for 11 years to address the needs of our military overseas, and now our veterans when they come home. And we have sustained our commitment to be a service non-profit, staffed solely by volunteers.

With the public's generosity and support, we are confident that we will continue to help our very deserving troops and veterans, be it overseas or back here at home.

We thank you for your support for these past 11 years and are grateful for your continuing encouragement.

Sincerely,



Left to right: **Kristen Holloway Querriera** (Founder and CEO), **Monica Orluk** (President), **Amanda Thompson** (Vice President)

**INSIDE THIS ISSUE**

Officers' Corner	1
VLP Thanks OTA	2
Welcome Home Program	3
A Vet Writes to OTA	4
From the Frontlines and Home Front	5
Volunteers Win Award	8
Bring Christmas to the Troops	9
Out and About	10
Recovery from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder	11
OTA's Efficiency	12
How You Can Help	12
Connect with Us	12

**WE ARE  
COMMITTED  
TO OUR  
COURAGEOUS**

OTA has expanded its mission in our commitment to our military community, reflecting our dedication to past and present, active and veteran members of our Armed Forces.

OTA demonstrates its mission to build and sustain the morale and well-being of the military community by providing them with items and services that contribute to their morale, well-being, and self-sufficiency.

## VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM THANKS OTA

VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

of WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA



The following Blog Post was recently published by the Veterans Leadership Program (VLP) and we wanted to share it with you.

We truly appreciate our partnership with VLP as we work together to help our deserving veterans with special needs.

*“At Veterans Leadership Program, we often collaborate with different community partners to assist local veterans in the area.*

*Most recently, we were able to house a homeless family with children in a furnished apartment and help a Vietnam Veteran and his wife get their gas turned on. In both of these scenarios, Operation Troop Appreciation (OTA) offered their support so that VLP could assist these veterans with improving their self-sufficiency, sustainability, and quality of life.*

*In the woods in Somerset County, a Marine Corps Veteran and his two children had to resort to living in a tent for two weeks after having no other place to go. Our team immediately starting searching for safe and affordable apartments. With OTA's help, we were able to provide a fully furnished apartment, thanks to their generous donation of kitchen, bath and bedroom items including a crock pot, dish towels, silverware, glasses, pots and pans, cleaning supplies, household supplies and toiletries.*

*“I cannot put into words how grateful I am for all the wonderful things that you all have done for myself and my family. You provided shelter when we had none, made sure we had food and clothing, helped us find an apartment and made it livable with so much stuff.” – Keith, U.S. Marine Corps Veteran*

*James served 12 years in the U.S. Army, including 4 years in Vietnam. Now, he and his wife are retired and own a home in Allentown.*

*In April, James came to our free tax clinic to ask a few questions about their taxes, including their property tax rebate. VLP's Housing Specialist, Ken Haynes, talked to them a bit more and soon learned that this couple had been living without gas for three months due to a gas leak.*

*Unfortunately, James who is 66 years old, could not repair the leak himself and the couple were relying on microwavable dinners to feed themselves. They were hoping to use the rebate to cover these costs, but realized it would not be enough after getting three estimates that ranged from \$1,000-\$2,000 to repair.*

*Thanks to OTA, VLP split the repair costs with OTA so that this family could get their gas turned back on as soon as possible.*

*These are just two recent examples of ways that Operation Troop Appreciation has supported VLP's mission.*

*On a regular basis, they donate Welcome Home Kits that include bedding, pots and pans, towels, cleaning supplies and other common household items to homeless veterans who come to us with no belongings or money to purchase these items for their new homes.*

*Thank you Operation Troop Appreciation for your ongoing support!”*

## “WELCOME HOME” PROGRAM UP AND RUNNING

In early 2013, anticipating a reduced number of requests from our troops overseas as military draw downs began, OTA began to find ways we could assist the veteran community. In early 2014, OTA launched *Welcome Home*.



Intended to combat homelessness in our veteran community, *Welcome Home* provides essential household items, beds, appliances, and emergency financial assistance to veterans who have either come out of a homeless situation, or to prevent them from becoming homeless.

The program is also committed to the health and well-being of our veterans, and we also partner with Veteran's Taxi to provide transportation to doctor appointments, counseling sessions, physical therapy, and job interviews.

Since its inception, the *Welcome Home* program has helped over 1,500 individuals, representing 700 families in Western Pennsylvania. We are making an impact on many lives, such as these:

**Situation:** A disabled Desert Storm veteran became the sole guardian of his children and a grandchild. Working full-time, he needed temporary help as he secured a safe place for them to live.

**Supplied:** OTA provided food, gift cards, clothing and other items to help the family as they transitioned to their new living situation.

**Success!** The family is doing well and are happy in their new home!

**Situation:** An Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) Veteran and his family suffered financial setbacks and became homeless.

**Supplied:** Once housing was secured, OTA provided beds and a full Welcome Home Kit with essential kitchen, laundry, cleaning and household supplies.

**Success!** The veteran is now enrolled in school and is working a full-time job.

**Situation:** A Vietnam veteran recently had shoulder surgery for an injury he received while in service. It was critical that he get to doctor appointments and physical therapy, but he didn't have reliable transportation.

**Supplied:** OTA provided a taxi service to him to ensure he could make his appointments regularly.

**Success!** We are happy to report that he is now fully recovered!

**Situation:** An Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran sustained a traumatic brain injury in combat.

**Supplied:** We helped the veteran by ensuring he received all his VA benefits, had transportation to doctor appointments, and provided the family with clothing, diaper service, food and beds.

**Success!** The veteran is now recovering from his injuries, is enrolled in college full-time, and is a straight A student! He and his family are doing very well.

## A GRATEFUL VETERAN WRITES TO OTA

*To Operation Troop Appreciation:*

*I am writing to express my gratitude for the act of kindness that was granted to me by your organization.*

*Despite falling on hard times, and unfortunate life circumstances, I was miraculously given the opportunity to maintain the possession and use of my vehicle. What this means to my career is immeasurable.*

*Being mobile allows me the flexibility to pursue job opportunities that would otherwise not be an option. Just recently, I made it through three interviews at a very promising job opportunity, which I would have had to walk an hour to, due to the fact that public transportation was not available to the area. Although the end result is still pending, I would have had to decline the first interview request if OTA was not there for me. I will continue to pursue career opportunities, as well as my graduate studies aspirations with confidence, knowing that I will not face the barrier of transportation.*

*In addition to the obvious reasons I stated above, having your help has meant something more to me.*

*My car represented something that was still mine that I could say that I was able to maintain, through all of my trials and tribulations as a homeless veteran. It represents some level of success to me, and, starting this process with nothing, it gives me hope and confidence.*

*Acts of kindness and charity like what you have done for me are what make me proud to be an American citizen and what continues to make me proud to have served this great country.*

*I never anticipated needing the help of a charity organization, but it's a reassurance to me that organizations like yours are out there to help veterans like myself.*

*Thank you,  
(name withheld to maintain privacy)*



**FROM THE FRONT  
LINES & THE  
HOME FRONT**

Dear O.T.A; 1-31-15

Even though it hurts to write I have to let you know how much your help means to my wife & myself. It is hard for me to ask for help because I try to handle things myself, but for the last 5 months or so, our Medical co-pay's for my wife and perscription have been very high and many we both are on SSDI so there is not much money left after we pay our bills. The money we have left over is what we live on, because of the co-pay increase there has been little to none money left over for food and gas for the truck, or misc household items, and dog food for our 13 year old dog. Last week I called [redacted] at VA Hud-VASH and asked for help. Yesterday Tom showed up with 2 bags of food and a Walmart gift card that he got from O.T.A. when I saw the gift card I almost cried because it not just this month but next month also. So thank you very much. I can not tell you how much it meant to me

Thank You



Good morning ma'am,

I just want to let you know that we have received the boxes that your organization has sent us!! From the bottom of our hearts we would like to thank you guys for the shirts!! There were so many of them, so I had to give a lot of them away to other guys on base!! Now I see a different person wearing one all the time LOL. The boxes full of toiletries were vast and plentiful, enough for everyone. One box had an MC Hammer greatest hits album in it, one dude went crazy over it!! Thank you, thank you, thank you!!! I wish I could send pictures of the impact you guys have made, but sadly OPSEC says otherwise. Just know that your support has boosted morale and we will be able to build our munitions more efficiently!! Especially if MC Hammer is playing ;).

v/r,  
Staff Sergeant S. Johnson, Air Force



Ma'am,

We received the final two boxes from OTA today. I must say... even I was flabbergasted at how much you sent to us. I think you've outdone yourself in the kindness department. It was like opening presents on Christmas Day, and it is a feeling I haven't felt since I was a young man. Our Soldiers looked like little children digging into Santa's presents and showing them off to everyone, including myself. And, with future rotations ahead, everything will be well used and more than appreciated.

I don't even know how to express the appreciation, all I can say is "Thank You" from all of us here. And, we can't wait to open the "Christmas" envelope. It's a building excitement already to find out what is inside!

Thank you, again, so very much.

God Bless,  
V/R  
Corporal A. Schaffer, US Marines

Dear Wonderful People,  
Thank you so much  
for the exceedingly generous  
gifts that I received  
from you via [REDACTED]  
of the Veterans Administration.

I can tell you that I  
needed shoes very badly &  
that your Wal-Mart gift  
certificate will be used to  
purchase shoes.

Also, thank you for  
the shopping bag full of  
snacks, personal care items,  
and other thoughtful items.





I can't thank you enough for all that you have done for my family. I honestly don't know what we would have done with out you. God has given me the greatest blessing bringing you into our lives.

I went to the grocery store tonight to get some stuff to get us by for the weekend and pulled the gift card out to pay. The cashier went to throw it away and I asked her if I could keep it. I just wanted to hold onto it so that every time I see it it reminds me that we have someone that cares enough about us to do what you have done. I know it's stupid to some but keeping that card honestly helps me know that we are not on our own in this struggle and when it's all over and we are on our feet to always give back to those that find themselves in a struggle for their lives.

I can and will go without food and whatever else so that my husband and son don't have to suffer anymore than they already have. You have brought hope to my family. You stood by our side when you didn't have to. I cannot thank God enough for you every day because of you we had food in our fridge, a car to get where we need to go, and a reason to wake up and fight another day.



# OTA VOLUNTEERS WIN COVETED 2015 JEFFERSON AWARDS

OTA is very proud to have had two volunteers receive the Jefferson Award for volunteerism.

The Jefferson Awards, given by the Jefferson Foundation, is the country's longest standing and most prestigious organization dedicated to celebrating public service

Amanda Thompson (Vice President) and Darlene Scalese (OTA Volunteer) brought home two of the coveted awards, and Darlene was a Top 10 finalist for the overall Jefferson Award.

We are extremely proud of both of them for their hard work and dedication to the troops and veterans we serve.

We'd like to share a portion of this feature article on Darlene, as it appeared in the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, May 1, 2015 (by Rosa Colucci):



*As a military mother, Darlene Scalese counts her blessings that her son Casey returned home from Iraq and Afghanistan healthy and whole. "He has no issues, he is 100 percent, blessed, safe and going to college." Mrs. Scalese, 55, of West Mifflin, took those blessings and started giving them away through her work with Operation Troop Appreciation. Because of her efforts, she has been selected as one of the seven finalists for Outstanding Volunteer of the Year for the 2015 Jefferson Awards for Public Service.*

*She was introduced to the all-volunteer organization when her son was returning from Afghanistan in October 2013. She met Amanda Thompson (another Jefferson Award winner) at West Mifflin's Community Day and was bowled over by the good things happening there. "I said, 'I'm sold.'"*

*In April 2014, [OTA] launched a program that provides a "Welcome Home" kit. It includes a bed from The Original Mattress Factory for all family members — as many families are divided through homelessness — bedclothes, dishes, pots, cleaning supplies and more.*

*Every Saturday, Mrs. Scalese [works with] a group of volunteers who pack up the kits for delivery. The items are packed in reusable red Operation Troop Appreciation bags and presented as welcome home gifts.*

*"There [are] a lot of happy tears," Mrs. Scalese said. "It makes you appreciate what you have, and opens your eyes to help people who are less fortunate." she said. "You should never pass up an opportunity to help someone."*



JEFFERSON  
AWARDS



OTA's Jefferson Award winner Darlene Scalese (above) and OTA VP Amanda Thompson (below) won the 2015 Jefferson Awards



Amanda has served as OTA Vice President for five years, and has won numerous prestigious awards for her volunteer work.

She also runs OTA's "Wish List" program that provides essential items to deployed troops worldwide.



# BRING CHRISTMAS CHEER TO THE TROOPS!

The volunteer staff of OTA would like to say THANK YOU! Your commitment to our troops has been overwhelming, and we are grateful for your generosity and support of our brave military men and women. Even more important, our troops and veterans are grateful for your support!

Because of YOU, OTA has provided “wish list” items to over 150,000 deployed troops since July 2004, and “Welcome Home” kits to more than 700 at-risk returning warriors. You’ve let them know that you remember and appreciate their service and sacrifice.

## **With the holidays approaching, won’t you show special support to our troops and veterans this Christmas?**

### SPONSOR A UNIT

Make an individual *monetary contribution* or work with your church, school, civic group, friends or family to donate funds in support of a deployed unit with specific needs.

For unit sponsorships, we provide an information sheet that includes:

- ★ Unit photo with mission description
- ★ Background information on the unit
- ★ Requested “wish list” items
- ★ Suggested target donation to complete “wish list”



### “WISH LIST” PROGRAM

Help keep our troops more comfortable in their difficult environments and donate items they have requested in their “wish lists,” like:

- ★ Personal care items
- ★ Hygiene supplies
- ★ Snacks
- ★ Recreational items
- ★ Other care and comfort goodies



To make an even bigger impact, coordinate a collection drive of “wish list” items within your church, school, neighborhood or circle of friends.

### “WELCOME HOME”

Provide a “hand up” to returning warriors who need assistance. You can sponsor a veteran and their family with a monetary donation that enables OTA to provide a “welcome home” kit that includes:

- ★ Beds and mattresses
- ★ Kitchen and bathroom supplies
- ★ Laundry and cleaning items
- ★ Bedding and other home goods



Contact OTA Vice President Amanda Thompson for more information about these programs, or to make arrangements to deliver your items at our donation drop-off location at Century III Mall in W. Mifflin, PA (Pittsburgh South Hills).

Please email her at [Amanda@OperationTroopAppreciation.org](mailto:Amanda@OperationTroopAppreciation.org)

# OUT AND ABOUT WITH OTA

OTA relies on generous donations from those in the Pittsburgh community and across the country to ensure every "wish list" is fulfilled, and every effort is made to make life better for our returning veterans. Here are some examples of the community coming together to help our military and veterans.

## 171<sup>ST</sup> Family Day

On July 12<sup>th</sup>, OTA volunteers John and Donna Dunbar spread the word to Pittsburgh's 171<sup>st</sup> Refueling Wing family members about what OTA does for our deployed troops.

There were approximately 1,400 attendees at this annual Family Day event. Many did not know of our organization, but some had been recipients of our "wish list" packages while they were deployed.

The family members were very appreciative of what OTA does for their deployed loved ones. The troops often mentioned in their letters home, telling their families: "There is this group from home, that is sending us boxes of all the things we asked for, and need. It makes us feel like 'Wow,' these people *really* care, and then we don't feel so far from home."

During the Open House, a KC-135 landed carrying a unit that had been deployed to Latvia, where they were helping to rebuild a mission. The emotions that were felt as loved ones were reunited spread like a tidal wave across the hangar.



Four generations happily reunited at the 171<sup>st</sup> Airwing.

## Comfort Convoy Rolls Through Pittsburgh

For the third year in a row, Pittsburgh-area Walgreens hosted two wildly successful Comfort Convoys in 2015.

We were astounded in the sheer quantity of items Walgreens collected for OTA at these events. There were more than 130 cartons of supplies in total, full of necessities our troops and local at-risk veterans needed.



Davin Brown (center) and Jason Belczyk (right) from Walgreens hand over 45 boxes of critical supplies collected during the April Comfort Convoy to OTA VP Amanda Thompson.

During Walgreens' September Comfort Convoy, they handed over 86 boxes!

These Comfort Convoys represent our largest item-donation projects of our 11 years of operations.

We are grateful to Y108, Walgreens, Columbia Gas of PA, OTA volunteers who were on hand, and all the Walgreens customers who helped to make the Comfort Convoys a massive success for our deployed troops and local veterans.



## Two Successful Motorcycle Runs for OTA!

Despite all the rain this summer, we were blessed with two beautiful, blue-sky days for motorcycle rides!

On Saturday, May 9, the Red Knights PA Chapter 8 Allegheny County Firefighters Motorcycle Club held their 2015 Benefit ride at the Homeville Fire Company in Pittsburgh.

The 80-mile police-escorted ride was followed by a pig roast dinner, auctions, and raffles. At the end of the day, the Red Knights presented a check to OTA for \$4,741!



On Sunday, July 26<sup>th</sup> Gianna Via Restaurant & Bar in conjunction with the Mon Valley H.O.G. Chapter 1773 hosted a Motorcycle Ride for OTA. After a beautiful ride through southwestern PA, Gianna Via hosted a catered meal, a 50/50 raffle and Chinese Auctions, raising \$1,339 for OTA!



Attendees at the Gianna Via Motorcycle Run signed cards to be sent to overseas troops.

thank you!



## OTA IS EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT

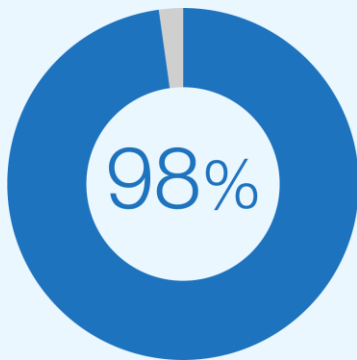
For over 11 years, OTA has provided for more than **150,000 deployed troops**, and more than **700 veterans in crisis situations**.

In addition to the number of veterans and their families we have helped, we will always remain committed to our "wish list" program to help our troops overseas.

As a **100% volunteer organization**, we have kept our overhead costs to a minimum, ensuring financial contributions are spent in the spirit in which they are given: **To provide meaningful support to our military members, NOT to cover extraneous costs.**

We are grateful for our relationships with local Pittsburgh companies and individuals who provide many of our critical services pro-bono. No one at OTA, including our officers, volunteers or board members, receives a salary or wages. As a result, OTA is able to channel **98% or more of our spending directly to our troop and veteran programs.**

To put it more simply: **For every \$1 a donor gives, OTA spends 98¢ or more providing the critical items and services** our military members and veterans need.



For fuller financial and strategic information on OTA, or any U.S. charity, please visit the world's largest independent source of information on nonprofit organizations at [GuideStar.org](http://GuideStar.org).



Please remember, there are troops deployed all over the world. Operation Troop Appreciation is always in need of donated items and monetary contributions to fulfill our troops' "wish list" requests.

### Easy Donations or Organized Collection Drives

Troop draw downs mean that PXs (military post exchanges) are closing as bases are being dismantled in Afghanistan. This means our troops are unable to purchase these items on their own and must rely on packages from supporters at home.

Please consider donating any of the following items to OTA to help our troops stay stocked on critical needs.

#### HYGIENE:

- Toothbrushes
- Body wash
- Men's deodorant
- Baby wipes
- Men's triple blade razors

#### FOOD:

- Crackers
- Chips and pretzels
- Dried fruit
- Granola bars
- Easy Mac
- Powdered drink mixes (Gatorade, Propel)

### Letter Writing:

Our troops love to get cards and letters from supporters (especially school children) back home! It's a great boost to troop morale and facilitates pen-pal correspondence. This is a particularly popular project for schools, church youth groups, day cares and senior centers.

### Yellow Ribbon Campaign:

A simple and easy way to help raise money for the troops! OTA will provide you with a "Support the Troops" Yellow Ribbon template, you print them and distribute for a donation (typically \$2-\$5). Donors write their names on the ribbons which are then posted in your church, school, or store. Proceeds are given to OTA to purchase "wish list" items for the troops.

### Cents for Soldiers:

OTA's Cents for Soldiers campaign is a great option to raise funds simply by collecting loose change! Groups place a Cents for Soldiers Donation Jar in a central location, and ask family, friends and coworkers to toss their spare change in! It's also a popular activity for schools to teach students math and counting skills, as well as community awareness.

### Sponsor a Unit:

A great and interactive way for individuals, companies, churches, schools and other civic groups to support our deployed troops.

OTA provides you with specific information about your unit; you or your group raises the funds and sends them to OTA for the purchase of military-approved items. We also encourage you to write cards and letters to your sponsored troops!

For more information on these ideas, please contact OTA Vice President Amanda Thompson at [Amanda@OperationTroopAppreciation.org](mailto:Amanda@OperationTroopAppreciation.org)

### CONNECT WITH US

Operation Troop Appreciation is an official cause on Facebook and Twitter.

Follow us for announcements of upcoming events, notice of volunteer opportunities, pictures and postings from the troops we help.

