

Fair addresses veterans' needs

By **Dennis P. Hohenberger**
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HOLYOKE — Local businesses, non-profits and health providers on Wednesday met with veterans who are often unaware of services available to them.

The veterans fair, held at the War Memorial Building, gave returning and older veterans a chance to meet with area providers who serve the community. To make the day special, local businesses offered free haircuts and chair massages.

Kris Lecca, the director of Veterans Services, said though the bad weather might have deterred some veterans from attending the event, the fair provided veterans and their families with information about benefits to which they are entitled.

She said the city is home to a number of widows of veteran, many of whom are worried about their medical care, especially with the new federal healthcare laws that are taking effect. Returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, said Lecca, may have questions about health benefits, but are concerned about jobs.

"They need to know about their bonuses," she said of the returning veterans, who receive a benefits package before they leave the service. She said local businesses and providers quickly signed on for the fair and credits colleague Deb Malek for organizing the event.

"The returning veterans are coming back to a country with a really bad economy," she said. "They left their families. They left everything they know so that we can continue enjoying the freedoms that we have in this country and the lifestyles we have."

She said years ago, when a veteran returned home from war, they were put in the front of the line for jobs. "That's not happening anymore," said Lecca. "That's really, really sad."

Older veterans, those who are retired, said Lecca, are concerned about healthcare. She said the veterans and their families are "confused" about the changes in healthcare and insurance laws. "When you have congressmen unable to understand the healthcare bill, you can imagine what the average layperson is," she said.

Changes in Medicaid and Medicare prescription programs, where seniors receive thick packages about changes to their coverage, lead them to seek out Lecca and other professionals in explaining what has been kept or eliminated.

When she does meet with veterans, she goes over their



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Larry White, of Holyoke VNA Hospice Life Care, shows a display he created honoring veterans. White and other organization met with area veterans at the War Building on Wednesday.

medications and the insurance coverage they may need. She said last year the city received \$5.2 million in federal funds to assist veterans and their families, as her department is inundated with applications for services. "Everything a veteran or a family member of a veteran needs, we're there for them," said Lecca.

Larry White, the veteran liaison for Holyoke VNA Hospice Life Care, said all veterans have special needs and it's up to organization like his to determine how to access services. "There's a lot of services out there, but I don't think it's always well known to the veteran in how to get to them," said White.

He said the job of area veteran services officer are to reach out to veterans. He meets regularly with veteran related groups at colleges, senior centers, veterans organizations or where ever a veteran may be. "As part of the veteran community, there aren't too many places that I go that are not connected in some way," said White.

The fair, he said, not only inform veterans, but gives him the opportunity to meet with fellow providers. He added that women service members often are unaware what is available to them.

Henry Jennings, 86, an Army and Air Force veteran, said

more veteran should attend similar fairs and forums. He said that people are not paying attention to what veterans are doing. "I feel people need to stop and think. The veterans made it free for people, but they're not listening," he said.

While veterans may be aware of services they are entitled to, said Jennings, they must take the steps in seeking and obtaining those services. "I just can't understand why people don't get out and see what's happening here," he said.

Besides the VNA, the Holyoke Soldiers' Home, the Northampton VA Medical Center, the Holyoke Medical Center, Mass. Rehabilitation Commission and other organizations met with veterans throughout the day.

DiGrigoli Salon provided free haircuts to veterans. The salon set up chairs and offered full services to veterans. Kaitlin Joslyn, 19, a stylist with the salon, said the company regularly does community outreach. "They very fun and we had some interesting guys come in," she said of the veterans.

Joslyn believes that people should recognize veterans more often and that when she sees a service member, she takes time to thank them.

"There are wars going on and it's not like there's no one fighting them. You're at home safe because of these people," she said.

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