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August 28, 2018

WVDA Vets to Ag: A Promise Kept

Charleston W.Va. -- As a former state senator and the current Commissioner of Agriculture, you learn legislative bills can be divided into three categories: necessary, historic and feel good. From code clean up to mirroring federal law, some bills are not quite what you call “sexy.” Regardless, these bills are passed without much fanfare as a way to further streamline and modernize West Virginia law; they are necessary to the process. Then there is legislation deemed as historic. Policy makers believe these proposals will put West Virginia on the right path forward, changing the very direction of our state. On the other end of the spectrum, there are numerous bills that have a catchy title or establish an intent for a new program but can be categorized as “feel good” legislation. These initiatives’ impacts are usually overexaggerated or underfunded but elected officials can travel back to their districts with an accomplishment to tout. It then falls on the supervising agency to find a way to meet the original intent of the proposal, often with little support. A shining example is the West Virginia Veterans and Warriors to Agriculture program.

Founded in 2014, the Veterans and Warriors to Agriculture program’s mission is to recruit, retrain and mentor our men and women who are currently or have served our country. As tasked under West Virginia state code §19-1-12, the WVDA hosts the official Veterans and Warriors to Agriculture Program with the goal to integrate veterans into the field of agriculture and support those currently working in the field. From business planning to capital investment, the program is designed to assist our service men and women transitioning from the battlefield to field work. Until 2018, the program was unfunded and accomplished its duties through dedicated volunteers and donations. After successful advocating by the department, the West Virginia Legislature secured the first state appropriation for the program. A month after receiving that funding, the department was awarded an addition \$400,000 from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, a 160 percent increase on the state investment.

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With funding in place, the program can further its mission through three simple objectives. First, we must develop an introduction to diversified agriculture for service men and women transitioning from active duty. This would entail exposing participants to a wide array of opportunities in agriculture while developing desired pathways to obtain careers in agriculture and/or further their education. Second, we will develop partnerships to create agri-therapy opportunities, with a long-term goal of evaluating potential duplication, state and/or nationwide. Third, we hope to continue to work with our institutions of higher learning to develop online agriculture training and educational opportunities that allow participants to utilize the GI Bill. By accomplishing these goals, we believe additional market opportunities can be developed and/or expanded for our veteran farmers.

One program already providing significant avenues for market expansion is the Homegrown by Heroes initiative. A national brand, West Virginia signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Farmer Veteran Coalition in 2017. This agreement allows our West Virginia veterans to use the premier, nationally recognized branding for veteran products. To the consumer, this brand indicates a clear, simple way to support a veteran owned business. As the locavore movement continues to grow, separating from the pack will become even more vital for successful businesses. Our MOU for the utilization of the Home Grown By Heroes is just another way to assist our veterans transition into new careers, as well as scale up into new, lucrative markets.

For the West Virginia Veterans and Warriors to Agriculture program to accomplish its established goals, the WVDA will advocate for collaboration with outside partners to utilize all available resources. In these efforts, the department is ready to take a leadership role. As the program continues to grow, we hope program initiatives and objectives can be adapted for other demographics and groups. The program's purpose shouldn't be exclusive to our veterans but also to our first responders, those struggling with addiction and others who have experienced traumatic stress. We believe wholeheartedly what started out as a "feel good" initiative has the potential to become a life-saving program that spurs economic development in the process. The WVDA will do everything possible to ensure this comes to fruition.

Remember, 22 veterans take their own life every day. We owe it to them to try to make a difference. Join the effort. Let's get to work.

Kent A. Leonhardt

West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture

The West Virginia Department of Agriculture protects plant, animal and human health through a variety of scientific, regulatory and consumer protection programs. The Commissioner of Agriculture is one of six statewide elected officials who sits on the Board of Public Works.

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