



AVAG News

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VAHP UPDATE

“It (VAHP) was a life saver...”

James Lewis, Air Force veteran

During the Christmas season James and Janet Lewis were busy preparing for the holidays when they were forced to move out of their condo, into another condo in Walnut, CA.

However, right before Christmas, the landlord told James, an Air Force veteran who served his country for 12 years, that he and Janet would have to move out ASAP.

“It was Christmas time and they told us to get out,” said James. “We were just miserable. And, during that period of time who is looking for renters? We were devastated.”

Fortunately, right across the street from the condo that James and Janet were being evicted from, they saw a “big, red sign” at the Diamond Bar Estates, 21217 Washington Street in Walnut, veterans welcome.

“It was a life saver for my wife and I,” Lewis told *The AVAG News* during an interview on February 15.

The “life saver” was the three-year-old Veterans Affordable Housing Program that is now run under the aegis of the American Veterans Assistance Program (AVAG) private non-profit 501(c)(3) formed to help veterans in the forty Affordable Community Living and Santiago Communities in the five western states.

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Navy Veteran Mike Goens, sitting in the lift/recliner chair, and Air Force Veteran Jeff Scism are all smiles while taking a break in between moving the heavy recliner from one veteran's home into the home of another veteran who needed a specifically designed lift/recliner chair, under the AVAG Free Furniture For Veterans program.

Free Furniture For Veterans Update

The successful “Free Furniture For Veterans” program is beginning its second year of providing free furniture to veterans who are members of the American Veterans Assistance Group (AVAG) as well as any veteran who lives in the forty Affordable Community Living and Santiago Communities Inc. across the west.

And, on February 12, another helpful item for veterans was added to the list of free giveaways in this program, 16-piece home painting kits which contain rollers, paint brushes, scrapers, a drop cloth and other items needed to paint a house, said AVAG Executive Director Lee Martin.

The first 16-piece painting kits were given to veterans and their family members

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WWII Vet celebrates 100th Birthday

Veteran Lou Rossi celebrates his 100th birthday with family and friends at Casitas La Verne Estates.

VAHP UPDATE continued

James and Janet went to the Diamond Bar Estates management office, explained their fate of facing the horrifying prospect of becoming homeless during the Christmas holidays.

As they went through the process of purchasing a manufactured home in Diamond Bar Estates, “we learned that the previous owner was a lazy man who allowed his dog to mess in the home.

“Fortunately for us, when the (Diamond Bar Estates) staff learned about our fate, they worked really hard to fix it up, including painting the walls white so it would be in order for us when we were ready to move in,” Lewis said.

When Janet Lewis, an interior designer saw the white walls, “she was very happy. She went to work making it feel like home.”

Today, instead of being homeless, or renting another condo, James and Janet Lewis are the proud owners of a manufactured home in Diamond Bar Estates.

Adding to their happiness was the recent “Free Furniture For Veterans” giveaway event that was held in Diamond Bar Estates on February 5, where James and Janet selected several pieces of free furniture.

“Needless to say, we were very pleased to receive the furniture,” said James.


James is the latest of 143 veterans who have joined the ranks of more than 600 veterans who live in one of the forty Affordable Community Living and Santiago Communities Inc. in the five western states.

Through the VAHP almost \$300,000 of private funds have been distributed to the 143 veterans assisted in this program, said Program Director Scott McReynolds.

“One of the most critical aspects of the VAHP is the \$2,500 down payment assistance that is offered to any veteran who qualifies for it under the three-year-old program,” he added. “It’s a program we’re proud of.”

Lee Martin, executive director of the American Veterans Assistance Group said, “The compelling story of James and Janet is a classic example of how we can help veterans, in this case to help them own a manufactured home in lieu of being homeless...”

“This is just the latest in a string of heart-warming stories where we’ve been able to help veterans live in affordable housing, and it’s all on private money without any government strings attached to it.”

If a veteran is looking for affordable housing, he or she can go to the VAHP website, www.VeteransAffordableHousing.org or call: 888-923-VETS (8387). 

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Finneran Follow-up

Air Force Veterans John J. Finneran Jr. and his wife Elenanor, are all smiles after AVAG volunteers and AVAG Executive Director Lee Martin recently returned to their manufactured home in the Sequoia Plaza Mobile Home Park to exchange an unique lift/recliner chair that was delivered to them late last year through the AVAG Free Furniture For Veterans program.

The chair delivered last year literally didn't fit John Finneran's needs, so Lee Martin went to work, found another lift/recliner chair and delivered it in January.

The photo here was taken moments after John sat in the chair, said thanks for the new chair, and was quickly joined by his beautiful wife Elenanor when she sat in his lap to celebrate the good fit.

Since the new chair was delivered, John and Elenanor have gone outside to enjoy the fresh air and, on one occasion, simply stood in the rain, enjoying the feeling of rain falling upon their faces.

Elenanor told Lee Martin: "John and I can't thank you enough. It's so improved our lives. John can get up easier now...you've made us very happy." 🦋



AVAG

Communities

as of February 15, 2015

Editor's note: These are the first communities among the forty Affordable Community Living and Santiago Communities where the AVAG program has been established. Veterans and their spouses from other sites are always welcome to attend AVAG meetings.

1) Santiago Creek Estates (Orange)

692 N. Adele Lane
Orange, CA 92867

2) Santiago Creekside Estates

1925 E. La Veta Ave.
Orange, CA 92866

**3) Casitas La Verne Mobile
Home Estates**

3945 Bradford Street
La Verne, CA 91750

4) Diamond Bar Estates

21217 Washington St.
Walnut, CA 91789

5) Sequoia Plaza Mobile Home Park

2505 W. Foothill Blvd.
San Bernardino, CA 92410

For further information about times and meetings call Lee Martin: 562-787-9437, or e-mail him at: leemartin112@aol.com

Free Furniture for Veterans Update continued

Thursday February 12 during a regularly scheduled "Free Furniture For Veterans" distribution night and monthly AVAG meeting at the Sequoia Plaza Mobile Home Park on West Foothill Boulevard in San Bernardino.

"Over the last year, we've had some bumps in the road, but the Free Furniture For Veterans program has been a success," said Martin. "And tonight (February 12) the news of the painting kits was a big hit with the veterans we serve through the AVAG program and any veteran who lives in one of Santiago or Affordable Community Living communities."

Program Director Scott McReynolds said that during the first year of this operation more than ninety pallets of furniture have been assembled by Martin and a growing cadre of veteran volunteers and distributed to veterans.


Korean War Veteran James Brown picked out some furniture he wanted and took home a painting kit February 12 "because I could sure use some fresh paint in a few rooms in my home....at first, I kept waiting to hear the other shoe drop, to hear that there was a hook to this program."

"But, there is no hook. This is something being done for veterans. To tell you the truth, after not being respected sometimes, it's real nice to have a program like this for veterans. Real Nice."

Air Force Veteran Jeff Scism added, "I thanked Lee tonight for the painting kit. I like the (AVAG) program and what Lee is trying to do here for veterans...that's why I volunteer to help here (in Sequoia Plaza Mobile Home Park) any way I can."

During 2015, as the AVAG program moves into more of the forty Affordable Community Living and Santiago Communities Inc., Martin will continue to distribute the furniture until it runs out. In addition, there is a handyman who works with Martin helping veterans with special needs.

"I love my job," said Martin, a Green Beret Vietnam veteran, "It's real simple, as the good news about it spreads to veterans, we can in turn help more veterans. Our AVAG meetings are interesting as the veterans are bringing their wives now and that keeps thing lively, believe me."

AVAG is not a government organization. It is a private non-profit 501(c)(3) formed to help veterans who live in the forty Affordable Community Living and Santiago Communities Inc. in five western states. 

For further information about the Free Furniture For Veterans program call Lee Martin: 562-787-9437, or e-mail him at: leemartin112@aol.com.

Free Furniture for Veterans begins its second year.



Army Korean War Veteran James Brown, left , and Navy Veteran Mike Goens, give a thumbs up to the recently announced free handout to veterans of painting kits, moments before Brown received his package



Navy Veteran Bob Goens hands Air Force Veteran Jeff Scism a 16-piece painting set.



16-piece home painting kits which contain rollers, paint brushes, scrapers, a drop cloth and other items needed to paint a house became available to veterans through the AVAG program.

Navy Veteran Mike Goens picks up a stack of 16-piece painting sets that were to be distributed free of charge to veterans.



Veterans could visit doctors or hospitals closer to home under federal proposal

By Alex Young
South Jersey Times
February 16, 2015

Congressman Frank LoBiondo (R-2) has reintroduced a bill that seeks to expand reforms enacted last year by allowing veterans to receive hospital care at non-Department of Veterans Affairs facilities, he announced in a statement recently.

LoBiondo said last year's reforms were a step in the right direction, but they didn't go far enough.

Under the 2014 VA reform law, veterans have to fall into certain categories to use a non-VA facility.

They either have to live more than 40 miles from a VA medical facility or outpatient clinic, or they have to show that they waited at least 30 days for an appointment at a VA facility.

When reached by phone Friday, LoBiondo said that because of the area's VA clinics, veterans in South Jersey don't qualify for the distance category even if they need to get a service that is only offered at one of the larger medical centers.

Joe Hannagan, veterans' service officer for Salem County, said many veterans in South Jersey -- especially those from Atlantic and Cape May counties -- face a tough road of reaching a VA hospital in Wilmington, Delaware, or Philadelphia.

"They have to be put on a bus and travel three hours," he said. "They stay at the hospital half a day and then go back home."

LoBiondo said there is a bus that starts in Atlantic County and heads through Vineland before going on to Wilmington.

"It's a new bus, but it's not the best option if you're an older vet and you've got a long ride on your hands," he said. "All of the vets on the bus have to have their appointments in Wilmington before you head home."

State Sen. Jeff Van Drew (D-1) said this legislation would be a huge benefit to the veterans in his district, as well as in other areas.

He said veterans in Ocean County have to travel all the way up to East Orange to get special treatments.

Van Drew also believes the act could give a nice boost to the local economy at local hospitals.

"The hospitals are so anxious," he said. "I meet with hospital representatives regularly, and they're really pleased about us heading in this area. There isn't a hospital yet that isn't anxious to be involved in some way."

"It's not going to be easy. ... We thank the congressman for his work and look forward to working with him in a bipartisan way. We'll continue to push no matter how long it takes."

LoBiondo believes this bill would be a big positive in fulfilling a promise to the nation's veterans.

"These are men and women who have put their lives on the line in service to the United States," he said. "They were promised that we would take care of them and their health care needs."

LoBiondo's new bill would eliminate the distance and wait criteria and allow veterans to go to the doctor or hospital of their choosing.

"South Jersey veterans must continue to travel out of state for complex medical care despite quality health care providers available locally," he said in the release. "My legislation would give South Jersey veterans that choice and complete the reforms Congress began last year."

The act would require the VA to establish pilot programs in each of the 23 Veterans Integrated Service Networks and would provide eligible veterans with a unique identification card that would allow them to receive medical care at non-VA facilities at the VA's expense.



Congressman Frank LoBiondo

The legislation specifically states that LoBiondo's 2nd Congressional district will be one of the pilot-program areas.

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Veteran's Spotlight

Featured Veteran – Mike Keele

When the furniture arrives, it's crated in cardboard containers and needs to be assembled.

Enter key veteran volunteers, including Vietnam Veteran and general handyman Mike Keele, of Rancho Cucamonga, who served with B Company, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, with the storied 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). As a crew chief Mike was responsible for keeping his UH-1H (Huey) flying in all sorts of weather and against many varied and deadly forms of enemy anti-aircraft gunfire.

The 1st Cavalry was a major helicopter presence throughout the Vietnam War and during Mike's one-year tour of duty from late 1967 through 1968, he earned a Distinguished Flying Cross, an Air Medal with 24 Oak Leaf Clusters, and a Bronze Star Medal for his heroic service to our Country. The DFC was earned flying top secret missions into Laos and North Vietnam attached to the eight-year secret war during the Vietnam War.

"Mike Keele has been a great asset to our team," said Lee Martin. "He's hard working, stays until the job is done and receives no remuneration for his efforts, he simply takes pride in his work and being able to help provide free furniture to our veterans."

During the last year several dozen pallets of furniture have been given to veterans who live in the forty manufactured home communities where more than 600 veterans live across five western states, under the direction of American Veterans Assistance Group (AVAG) Executive Director Lee Martin.

After receiving the pallets of free furniture

from an anonymous donor, volunteers and members of the (AVAG) have held a series of "Free Furniture For Veterans" giveaways in communities where the AVAG program has been established under Martin's direction.

"Getting the furniture out of the boxes, organized, assembled and ready for display takes many hours of work," Martin said. "Mike is one of our key players who dedicates his time and energy to help with this project and in any other area where I need assistance."

The father of one son, with two step daughters, six grand children and two great grand-children, Mike stays busy as an active honorary member of the Special Forces Association Chapter 78, where he works tirelessly on fundraisers and special projects. He also enjoys working with high school students in the Rancho Cucamonga area talking about the Vietnam War from a veteran's perspective.

Through his service in the secret war where the 1st Cav choppers inserted and extracted small, six-man Green Beret reconnaissance teams deep into and out of enemy territory, Mike has earned membership in the Special Operations Association, where he serves on the tally committee in annual association elections.

The Franklin High School graduate majored in Police Science and Administration at CSU, Los Angeles. After graduating in 1973, Mike served as a deputy sheriff with the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department for 15 years before moving to the Los Angeles County Public Defender's Office where he worked for 21 years.



AVAG Volunteer, Vietnam Veteran Mike Keele puts together a piece of furniture that was eventually given to veterans living in Santiago Communities.



B/229th trooper Mike Keele in An Khe, December 1967

Today, when not assisting veterans or working in other projects, Mike can be found in his garage where he and a small cadre of automotive fabrication aficionados build cars and go-karts from the frame up. And, on occasions, he can be found at the Irwindale Speedway, passing everyone on the track with alacrity and ease.

"It's an honor to work with Lee and his merry band of volunteers," Mike said. "The Lord has been good to me over the years and I thoroughly enjoy being able to help veterans in this small way." 🐦

Editor's note: This is the second *Veteran's Spotlight* feature that will appear in all future editions of *AVAG News*. If you have a suggested veteran to be spotlighted, please call John Stryker Meyer at 619-892-5983 or e-mail him at idahonezero@sbcglobal.net. Thank you.

WWII Veteran Lou Rossi celebrates 100th Birthday at Casitas La Verne Estates

LA VERNE – Cloudy skies and sprinkles outside Casitas La Verne Estates didn't dampen the fun and spirits of WWII Veteran and long-time resident Lou Rossi's 100th birthday celebration with more than 100 of his extensive and loving family and friends.

And one thing was clear: Lou's spirits and enjoyment of life haven't lessened any over his first century of life.

After Father Charles Ramirez of our Lady of the Assumption Catholic Church said grace, he turned toward Lou and introduced him.

Without missing a beat, Lou got his party rolling in a festive spirit: "Thank you Father," he said. "I'm looking forward to my next 100 years! Let's go!!"

Over the next three hours, various family members from great-great granddaughters to his grandchildren and in-laws reviewed his amazing "never say die" history since the day he was born January 24, 1915 in Waterbury, Connecticut, to Eva and Joseph Rossi.

The "never say die" spirit first surfaced at the young age of five, when Lou contracted diphtheria, a traumatic event that claimed many youngsters at that time. Lou told the *AVAG News* that one of his earliest memories was remaining in quarantine at his grandmother's home during a nine-day "crisis period" that "still seemed like it went on forever," he said.

Undaunted, Lou bounced back rising to valedictorian of his grammar school — back when that level of education ran to the eighth grade. His perfect grade average earned him a trip to Washington, D.C., where he met President Calvin Coolidge.

After a brilliant high school career in a preparatory program, life threw Lou another health challenge: tuberculosis. After spending nine months in a sanatorium, Lou's health improved enough so that he was able to work as a magazine salesman to help his family to survive the Great Depression.

As the nation moved toward WWII, Lou took his electrical engineering skills to work increasing the electrical capacity of torpedo manufacturing. During that tumultuous period of time he met the lifelong love of his life, Mina

Capelletti, a recent widow with two daughters. "I was in love with her from the very first moment I set eyes upon her," Lou said.

When WWII arrived, Lou entered the Army and was assigned to the Army Security Agency, the forerunner of the NSA today. Lou worked on highly specialized equipment that assisted in breaking the Japanese military code, which gave a crucial advantage the U.S. throughout WWII.

During the war, he and Mina married and were blessed with the birth of their only son, John, who demonstrated his father's spirit in kindergarten when he escaped school and ran home, telling his startled parents that he pulled the jailbreak because he hated his teacher. Lou and Mina were married for 55 years before she passed away in 2003.

As Lou's birthday party proceeded, those stories of his past flowed throughout the event telling of his love for music — he wrote a song for his son's wedding, one for Mina, his brilliant work as an electrical engineer, including spending time working on the lenses used for the Hubble Space Telescope.

And, of his rebel spirit, where when attending college he became disgruntled with fraternity rituals and mean-spirited hazing. So, he formed a non-fraternity student group on campus, which focused on friendship and camaraderie without the pain and expense of hazing.

Also, during the event it was clear that Lou hadn't lost his appetite, enjoying a round of appetizers, before eating a hearty meal — the food was delicious and plentiful, including seconds, and some dessert before eating his birthday cake.

His great-grandson, Daniel Rossi, said, "Lou is an amazing man, to this day. When we were working on putting together his history for the party, I was amazed at how sharp his memory is and how vivid it is to this day, as he buried me in details of such things as the color of the porch 20 years ago... he's just an incredible man!"

Lou attributes his "first 100 years on earth" to a sense of love for his family, kindness to



those around him and his devotion to God as the secrets of his success... "And most of all, I couldn't find a better place to live than here" at Casitas La Verne Estates where he's lived for more than 30 years.

Then he told everyone they're invited to his 110th birthday party in 10 years. 🦋