

Erin Dunn
Community Comment
August 2, 2016

This is Erin Dunn of the Fortuna Chamber of Commerce with a Community Comment.

By working at the Chamber office, I have the opportunity to meet lots of different people. Tourists—both from the US and abroad; business owners, people looking to start businesses, and a lot of out of town veterans. War veterans. Veterans who are down on their luck and have nowhere else to turn.

I think veterans come to the Chamber office for various reasons. One, we're located right next to the VFW Memorial Hall. Some people think there are services there, but it's really a meeting hall—there isn't an office with staff. Some come in because they are getting ready to catch the Veterans van that goes to Eureka or San Francisco and they might need to use the bathroom or the phone, or talk with someone.

For years, when a veteran came in to the Chamber office, down on their luck, looking for help of any kind, all I could do was call the County Veterans Services office in Eureka. A few times, I called the people associated with the Veterans building next door, but just because they were Veterans themselves didn't mean they were set up to help other Veterans. They could talk with the Veterans, but there wasn't much else they could do—maybe give them gas money.

My heart would break just a little when they left. I wished I could do more than look up contact numbers on the internet or let them borrow our phone. Like the VFW Memorial building folks, we're not set up to provide services that they need.

Then, a miracle happened. Well, I feel like it's a miracle and I'm pretty sure the Veterans needing support feel it's one too.

A long-time Chamber member, Ron Alexander, who has a graphic arts company, came in to talk with me about one thing or another, and the topic got around to Veterans. He was donating his time and work to an organization called Veterans Helping Veterans. An organization he started and where he is the Executive Director.

His mission is to help Veterans navigate the system of the North Coast Veterans Center, find housing, make medical appointments, and more. A Veteran helping another Veteran. Someone who understands.

A Veteran had come the week prior, and I felt inadequately prepared to help. I told Ron the story and asked if I could call him when someone came in needing assistance like that. He said yes.

I was startled at how emotional I felt about Ron's offer. Ron is what Fortuna has needed for a long time to support Veterans who just can't quite help themselves at the moment. I put his service in to action the very next week. A Veteran came in, I got his story, then gave Ron a call. Ron came to the Chamber office and helped the guy out. In the month of July alone I gave out Ron's number (or called on their behalf) to four Veterans that were in need of varying degrees of assistance.

I want to take this moment and thank Ron Alexander for filling the gap of services that our Veterans have so profoundly needed. Veterans Helping Veterans—a true lesson in service.

This has been Erin Dunn with a Community Comment.