



Princeton Elks Lodge #2129
"Operation Appreciation"
Letting America's Veterans Know That We Care



**Have we abandoned our servicemen and women on American soil?
"Elks Operation Appreciation Seeks to Change That"**

By Robert M. Church,

The mission of the Princeton Elks' "Operation Appreciation" campaign is to raise awareness of the issues facing America's Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans and to let all of America's veterans know that we care about them and appreciate their service and their sacrifices. During November throughout the country many events and activities are held to recognize our nation's Veterans and their families. While there is no doubt that these are good things to do, a deeper dive into the needs of our veterans will provide us with a much better understanding of who they are, what challenges they are facing and what can we do to empower them going forward.

Throughout the history of the Elks organization, it has recognized a commitment to America's servicemen and women and worked tirelessly to provide assistance and relief to their families while demonstrating a strong support and gratitude for their service and sacrifice. The Veterans Service Committee of the Princeton Elks Lodge, located in Montgomery Township believes that there has been no greater call than that which we now face as a community. "Every day 22 veterans take their own lives. That's a suicide every 65 minutes. As shocking as that number is, it may actually be higher." according to Tim McDonald, West Point Alumni and Co-Chair of the Princeton Lodge Veterans Services Committee. "I can't imagine any issue more pressing than this one".

The challenges faced by many of America's servicemen and women and their families are great under normal circumstances, but the present economy and never-ending red tape that must be negotiated to get support have magnified their uphill battles. In many cases, they may seem insurmountable to our young combat veterans, many of whom feel left out, alone or that they have been forgotten by their fellow Americans. For Gulf and Afghanistan veterans according to many sources these challenges include; finding employment, dealing with a loss of purpose and isolation upon return, long waits and frustration in obtaining health benefits for their families and/or disability benefits from wounds received in the line-of-duty and dealing with issues related to post traumatic stress disorder.

Bruce Totten, a former NJ State Elks Association Army of Hope Chairperson and Flemington business owner has spent and continues to spend hundreds of hours talking with, raising funds, and supporting unemployable veterans, many of whom are suffering from IED, amputations, shrapnel and knife wounds as well as PTSD.

"for one of my wounded warriors it took more than 26 months for the VA to finally approve disability benefits, during that time he was being forced to support a family of five on just \$700 per month, which by any standard is impossible" stated Mr. Totten who went on to say that "What's troubling is that this story is not as uncommon as we would all like it to be." With so many young veterans returning from deployment, many face the additional challenges of obtaining higher education or the training necessary to build the skills needed to return to their old jobs. Affordable housing is a tremendous challenge for many who may have never lived on their own before entering the military or military families who are desperately seeking counseling, services and financial and logistical support in dealing with caretaking and relationship issues related to their returning loved ones.

With all of these challenges, an article by David Martosko of Mail Online News, UK relating to U.S. Veterans lays out a very troubling future for these American servicemen and women if things don't change. According to a survey quoted that was conducted by the IAVA (Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America) nearly one third of all Gulf and Afghanistan veterans have reported considering suicide while forty-five percent

reported knowing a fellow serviceman/woman who has attempted suicide. Sixty-three percent say they know a fellow veteran who needs mental health assistance for an issue brought on by combat and fifty percent state that it has been suggested to them by someone close that they may themselves need mental health assistance. Eighty percent feel that the U.S. Government and the Veterans Administration are not doing enough to resolve concerns and provide the necessary assistance. These numbers are extremely troubling to the members of Princeton Elks Veterans committee many of whom are veterans or have family or friends who serve or have served in the Military. "These numbers, perceived or not carry a great deal of emotional weight with many Elks and with many members of our community." said Gary Allen, Elks Veterans Co-Chair. With all of this, the question has to be asked: Have we left our servicemen and women behind, without support, struggling to survive and feeling alone on American soil?

As an organization, the Elks have been called upon in the past to respond to the needs of our nation's servicemen and women and their families. The NJ Elks State Army of Hope Committee and Veterans Service Commission raises hundreds of thousands of dollars each year in support of veterans and their families who are in need and local lodges work tirelessly to help veterans and others within their communities. For the Elks November is Veterans Remembrance Month, but as an organization they often choose to do more than just remember. For these reasons, The Princeton Lodge Veterans Service Commission is not willing to answer yes to the question posed above without doing something to change it.