



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Ted O'Brien

Thomas Cray

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Award: Honoring Our Veterans

Year: 2014

Thomas Cray, of Penfield, New York, embodies the highest standard of service to others. In a four decade career of advocacy on behalf of veterans, reaching back to just after he returned from two distinguished and decorated combat tours in Vietnam with the United States Navy, Mr. Cray knows what it means to give back.

Mr. Cray was founder and longtime Executive Director of the Veterans Outreach Center of Rochester (VOC), one of the nation's first such community-based centers. With a special focus on homeless veterans and those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and the personal and familial struggles that can result from it, the Veterans Outreach Center has become a critical nonprofit helping to meet the needs of Rochester and the Finger Lakes region's veterans.

During his time heading the VOC, the organization increased its revenue tenfold, expanded from 3,000 to 30,000 square feet, more than doubled its staff and tripled the number of veterans served. It offers an extraordinarily wide range of services, from psychotherapy to jail diversion initiatives for veterans struggling with drug abuse to free clothing to wear to interviews. The VOC organizes the largest veterans job expo in upstate New York Operation - Welcome Home - through which hundreds of volunteers greet returning soldiers. The Flag Store is also run by VOC, where people can purchase Made in America U.S. flags, with all proceeds paying for veterans' services.

Of particular note are the VOC's efforts to help veterans achieve gainful employment through career skills training and assistance with the job search process – programs that have helped hundreds of veterans overcome their challenges and achieve gainful employment. VOC programs have been repeatedly recognized as “Best Practice Models” by Department of Labor-funded reports issued by the National Coalition of Homeless Veterans.

Since retiring as Executive Director of the VOC in 2010, Mr. Cray has founded a new organization, the United States Institute for Veterans' Initiatives (USIVI). Rather than the service and support model followed by VOC, the USIVI's mission is to engage the broader community on veterans' issues and work to promote the idea that every American citizen bears responsibility for helping veterans achieve physical, emotional and economic well-being, in gratitude for their service preserving our nation.

In addition to his work with the VOC and USIVI, Mr. Cray has also served as a board member and President of the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, has been a member of the National Advisory Committee on Homeless Veterans, testified before the United States House of Representatives on veterans' issues, received the Woerner Kollmorgen Award for Public Service and been recognized with an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from Nazareth College.