

‘It's Gratifying to See the Number of Veterans We Have Been Able to Help'

A marathon event created and operated by VFW members in Missouri has helped raise more than \$130,000 toward veterans since its inception in 2016

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Having completed his first marathon in 2015 at 78 years old, Bob Gravley had an idea.

A Korean War veteran, Gravley crossed the finish line of the OBX Towne Bank Marathon that day in Outer Banks, North Carolina, with a notion of hosting a marathon back home in Salem, Missouri. Salem, in all its rural splendor, is exactly 26.7 miles south of Rolla, Missouri, and Gravley believed it ideal for a marathon centered on veterans.

When he returned to Salem, Gravley presented his idea to American Legion Post 99, whose leadership agreed to sponsor the event. A Life member of VFW Post 6280 in Salem, Gravley then turned to his Post for help in managing the event.

“We needed a group of organizers to get things going,” Gravley said. “I was confident they could do all the organizing to get this event off the ground.”

Backed by Post 6280 Commander Eric Surles, Post members soon volunteered in support of the event, which by now Gravley had dubbed the Honoring our HEROES Marathon.

“Our Post involvement in the HEROES Marathon was a natural progression from our skydiving, kayaking and 5K events that we have sponsored in the past for national and state epilepsy foundations,” Surles said. “Learning from our experience in the past, we formed a committee of volunteers and planned for the event to happen one week after Veterans Day each year.”

Surles and Post 6280’s volunteer committee handled logistics, finding venues for the starting and ending of the races, insurance and runner transportation to the starting place, as well as food and drink and the proceeding ceremony to end the event.

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When word spread, as it often does in small towns, Surles received additional support from VFW Post 2025 members in nearby Rolla, led by Commander Dwight Sundeen.

The inaugural Honoring our HEROES Marathon welcomed more than 200 participants, who could choose to run or walk the marathon, half-marathon or a 5K. They met in Rolla and drove 26.7 miles to Salem, where the races began for the day.

“We learned a lot the first year,” Surles said. “Like renting a building for a postrace party. It had to be done indoors because it is too cold in November to have a finish-line party outdoors. But we were also surprised at the number of runners from across the U.S. and even South Africa.”

EVENT ATTRACTS 500 RUNNERS ANNUALLY

The 2016 debut event also netted \$10,000, which the HEROES committee donated to the AUSA Warrior in Need Fund at the nearby Army installation Fort Leonard Wood in the Missouri Ozarks, and the Dent County Veteran’s Emergency Fund.

“With our proximity to Fort Leonard Wood, we have a higher-than-average number of veterans in our area, and sadly, more than 1,000 live in poverty,” said HEROES Board President and Army veteran Richard LaBrash, a Life member of Post 6280. “It’s gratifying to see the number of veterans we have been able to help through this event.”

Since 2016, the Honoring our HEROES Marathon event has grown in size and scope, becoming a nonprofit organization several years ago, as well as welcoming more than 500 participants on average each year and raising more than \$130,000 in support of veterans to date.

“Thanks to the support of our community, we’ve been able to donate more than \$100,000 of the proceeds to local veterans causes since HEROES began,” Surles said. “It has helped us fund our Unmet Needs program, veterans’ medical transportation, training for service dogs, beautification of our local memorials at Veterans Park and support of our Gold Star families. It also helped us donate toward our St. James Veterans Home, as well as into many other local veterans charities.”

The Salem to Rolla marathon course also is U.S.A. Track and Field-certified now, which allows competitive marathoners to participate and use it as a qualifier for renowned national marathons such as the Boston Marathon, according to Surles.

The event’s size also has grown, incorporating several new races and unique ways to praise veterans and those killed in action.

“We have added a relay marathon, where teams of four runners divide the workload into 6-mile intervals before crossing together at the finish line,” said HEROES Race Director

Marilyn Sweitzer. “We have also added a 10K, an Honor Walk half-mile and instituted the No Hero Left Behind initiative, where volunteers accompany the last runner/walker on the last three miles of the race.”

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT MAKES EVENT ‘UNIQUE’

The No Hero Left Behind initiative, according to Sweitzer, was something instituted after the inaugural event in 2016, a nod to retired Army Sgt. 1st Class Troy Hardwick, a Post 6280 Life member, who walked the half-marathon in full combat gear and rucksack. To symbolize the military’s code of “No Man Left Behind,” Hardwick crossed the finish line and turned around to accompany the last participant in.

“We also have made the last mile of the course an Honor Walk, a stretch honoring our local veterans by having their individual profiles and service [hung up along the route],” Sweitzer said. “This last mile also comes decorated with hundreds of flags and patriotic signs.”

In 2022, Missouri State Representative Ron Copeland (R-Mo.) procured 100 U.S. flags for the event, joining hordes of other veteran-based organizations that have continued to join the cause in some capacity.

From VFW Posts 6280 and 2025 to those in nearby Pulaski County (Posts 4956 and 4238), all members volunteer to help with logistics and setup of the course, according to LaBrash. But the HEROES marathon also receives ample support from others. The local Disabled American Veteran’s Chapter 49 preps lunch for runners, American Legion Post 99 supplies course monitors and Mission 22, a nonprofit devoted to ending veteran suicides, has a Gatorade stand along the 22nd mile of the route.

“I think that’s what makes our event so unique,” LaBrash said. “We have so many different veterans organizations involved. The South-Central Regional Veteran’s Group decorates Veterans Park along our route with flags, and the ROTCs and Student Veteran’s Resource Association at Missouri University of Science and Technology have all been involved. That is in addition to local law enforcement, Boy Scouts, church groups, businesses, the Lions Club, Shriners, Rotary clubs and a large cadre of soldiers from Fort Leonard Wood.”

As for Gravley, the Air Force and Korean War veteran continues to be a presence at the event he helped pioneer. Having run the first three years, he now walks the 10K alongside his grandchildren. The event provides him with an opportunity to mentor younger generations on the importance of service and patriotism.

“It is heartwarming to see all of us band together to say thank you,” LaBrash added. “This event is an homage to those who have given us the freedoms we enjoy — because our veterans paid the price.”

The eighth annual Honoring our HEROES Marathon is slated for Nov. 26.

This article is featured in the 2023 April issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.