

THE FIELD REPORT

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A RECIPE FOR ENRICHMENT WDVA'S VORP, VITERBO UNIVERSITY COLLABORATE TO TEACH VETERANS COOKING CLASSES

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VORP Outreach and Recovery Specialist Gerald Sieren, far right, transports Veterans, from left to right, Steven and Lawrence Legacy and David Haglund to cooking classes in collaboration with the Nutrition and Dietetics program at Viterbo University in La Crosse.

Gerald Sieren sat in front of the Joint Finance Committee in early February and explained how valuable the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs' Veterans Outreach and Recovery Program is to at-risk military Veterans. The program, known as VORP, assists Veterans who may suffer from mental and/or addiction afflictions.

Sieren, a Marine, has been working as a VORP outreach and recovery specialist for nearly three years. In the role, he sees firsthand the results of their service during time of wars and the things some Veterans must live with while trying to survive on the streets or under homeless conditions. He's able to relate to them – more than most people – through his own life and emotional experiences in the military.

"We cannot let our Veterans live a life in misery, many who die on the streets without our intervention," Sieren said to the committee. "It is our duty to care for the men and women

who serve this country."

It's that reasoning that encouraged Sieren to travel almost 150 miles to the State Capitol in Madison to testify at length about the need to continue funding for VORP. The WDVA's VORP initiative assists homeless or at risk of becoming homeless Veterans by providing life sustaining and betterment services such as housing, behavioral health

treatment and substance abuse services. Currently, VORP operates throughout 49 Wisconsin's northern counties with the goal of expanding to all 72 counties. But in order for VORP to succeed in accomplishing its goals, collaboration and interaction with outside groups and organizations is imperative.

One of those key partnerships is with Viterbo University in La Crosse. For the past two years, the college's Nutrition and Dietetics department has worked with many Veterans enrolled in VORP to teach them the basics of cooking and nutrition as they transition back to a healthy lifestyle.

Jamie Weber, a nutrition and dietetics instructor at Viterbo, has

her class of interns meet with a group of Veterans enrolled in VORP. The student interns pair up with a Veteran and teach them the skills of cooking and having a healthy, nutritional diet.

"Many of these Veterans were once homeless, and some of them had to cook over campfires a lot and eat at different community centers, so they haven't done a lot of cooking," Weber said. "We want to give them some tools and some recipes they can use to prepare in their new apartments."

The course starts with the group of Veterans gathering at Viterbo for a group cooking class and a blood pressure/ blood sugar screening. After the class, each Veteran is paired with an intern who will practice the cooking skills in the comfort of their own home. Food for both the group cooking class and in-home nutrition education sessions is donated by the Hunger Task Force.

During the home visit, the intern and the Veteran go through kitchen cupboards and incorporate ingredients they commonly use into the recipes, if appropriate. This personalizes the recipe and increases the likelihood of the Veteran preparing it in the future. Sieren travels with each

experiences and his interests and got to know him on a more personal level. He is very interested in art, so it's fun to help him incorporate that into cooking.”

It's the personalized home visits with the Veterans that make the biggest difference, intern Katherine Franz said.

“He used to cook a lot when he was younger, but he stopped,” Franz said of the Veteran she was paired with. “He really got excited about what we cook together, and he told me he'd take his nutrition more serious after this and try this recipe. He was really excited and was very appreciative.”

Sieren said that the many Veterans from VORP who have gone through the cooking classes have learned far more than just how to cook using a microwave, or a new stir-fry recipe. The many cognitive skills they continue to gain from the courses as

they transition back into a healthy lifestyle are immeasurable.

It does a lot more than just cooking... All the Vets like it; some say they learned a lot and others say they've already tried some of the things they learned. They really hope that this program continues.

Gerald Sieren, *VORP Program Specialist*



L to R, front row: Viterbo University Nutrition and Dietetics Interns Katherine Franz, Katie Rearick, Alexis Tebben, Carly Metcalf, Taylor Brownell pose with Veterans who are part of the WDVA's VORP initiative. **Back row:** Interns Erika Suchla, Sarah Egan and Annika Crossley.

Veteran and provides transportation using vehicles that are often donated by outside groups such as The Salvation Army. He also plays an active role as the interns provide nutrition education in the Veterans' home.

“Helping these Veterans learn more about nutrition and the different tools feels really good and I think that all of us, as interns, can say the same thing,” student intern Carly Metcalf said. “Every Veteran is different, and it really puts things into perspective for us. Our nutrition background, the science and everything behind it isn't all that important; the basic nutrition skills are really the most important factors.”

Sieren said that there's more to working with the Veterans than just teaching classes. Instead, learning to effectively communicate with them is one of the major benefits.

“I help the students make that verbal connection with them,” he said. “That way, they are able to talk at a level where the Veterans will be more receptive to it.”

Intern Annika Crossley said one of her favorite parts of the opportunity was to learn more about the Veteran she was paired with and hear his many stories.

“I wasn't really sure what to expect when we were planning the class but I really enjoyed it a lot,” Crossley said. “The Veteran I was paired with, I got to know a lot of his