

The First 50 Years Serving Columbia County

By Leanne Murray, Community Action Team, Program Operations Coordinator, Human Investment Department

2016 is a big year for Community Action Team (CAT); this Columbia County-based organization is celebrating fifty years of serving our community. There is a history filled with adaptation, expansion and impact. Columbia County got on board with the federally designated Community Action Partnerships by first providing services for young children through Head Start and for older Americans in 1966. Governed by a Board of Directors, it is a stand-alone non-profit organization that receives its primary funding from state and federal programs and grants. Local municipalities and private donors provide a small portion of funds.

Over the years services were added to address homelessness, affordable housing, weatherization, housing rehabilitation, Veterans benefits, disaster recovery, child and family development, utility assistance and more. Ultimately the agency became a community development corporation in order to be better able to partner with other community entities to serve Columbia County. In the late 1980s CAT created advisory boards in Tillamook and Clatsop counties because they didn't have their own Community Action Partnership agencies. In time those boards developed the local agencies we now know as Community Action Resource Enterprises (CARE) in Tillamook and Clatsop Community Action (CCA) in Astoria.

CAT plans to celebrate its 50 years on September 30 and the community is invited. As we lead up to the celebration, return here to read true stories of how the agency's work has had a positive impact on the lives of our neighbors and what the next 50 years might look like.

The first program to explore deeper is Veterans Services. Columbia County contracts with CAT to house its Veterans Service Officer. For three years now Russ Clark has been in this position and in that time he has increased the number of Veterans served by the program by sixty percent. There are over 6,000 Veterans in Columbia County, many of them with whom he served stateside and on foreign soil during his almost 22 years in the Army, so there are still more than 4,000 not taking advantage of the service and support he provides. Outreach is an important part of the Veterans Service Officer's responsibilities, so in addition to being accessible at his St. Helens office, Clark spends time each month in Rainier, Clatskanie and Vernonia.

Most of Clark's entire life has been either serving in the military or serving others who have served in the military. After retiring from the Army, he served Veterans while working at the Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs and later at Veterans Benefits Administration. Today he focuses his efforts on serving the Veterans and their families in Columbia County. Additionally, he represents his clients at the Federal Board of Veterans Appeals, serves as a member of the Veterans Treatment Court team, and as a board member, advisor and trainer at the Elks Veterans Bunker. He is fully informed of the wide gamut of the benefits Veterans may be entitled to receive.

Surprisingly, there are number of people who were honorably discharged from the military yet don't consider themselves to be Veterans. Clark wants to meet with those people and all other Veterans to

make sure they are receiving all the benefits to which they are entitled. If you know a Veteran, ask them if they have met with their Veteran Services Officer; they'll thank you for it.

To illustrate the impact Clark's advocacy has had, he shared a couple of true life examples. Due to the sensitive nature of these accounts, names and other personal identifiers have been withheld.

A Vietnam Veteran's wife was referred to Clark by a friend after her husband died suddenly of a heart attack. He did not have life insurance, they were too young to receive social security benefits, and she was still raising their teenage son. She had no source of income and was at risk for losing everything she and her husband had worked so hard to build for themselves. Clark was able to help determine that the heart condition that took this Veteran's life too soon was, in fact, related to his exposure to the toxic herbicide Agent Orange during his military service. As a result, his surviving spouse was due death indemnity compensation of \$1,300 per month and was able to receive health care through a Veterans Administration program. In addition, their son now qualifies for funds to help pay for his college education. Before meeting with Clark, this distraught widow didn't know she was eligible for any of these benefits and was grateful for his assistance in filing the claim and seeing it through to completion.

A Veteran who had served in the Navy in the 70s was facing eviction due to an inability to pay his rent when he came to see Clark. There were several things he could do to help this gentleman through a program called Supportive Services for Veteran Families, a Veterans Administration (VA) program designed to prevent homelessness and to help those at risk of becoming homeless. They started by having his physical disabilities connected to his tour of duty so that he could establish a stable income through his Veterans benefits. Additionally, he worked with the veteran to establish his physical disabilities as service related disabilities associated with his tour of duty. As a result the veteran was able to receive compensation for his disabilities and was able to establish a more stable income. Ultimately, the Veteran was able save enough money to buy his own home.

When Clark met with a Vietnam Veteran from St. Helens, he had been terminally diagnosed with lung cancer and doctors anticipated the man would live for another six months. Because lung cancer may be the result of exposure to the toxic herbicide Agent Orange, Clark pushed through the Veteran's claim in just one day. The claim was made retroactive to the first diagnosis recorded at the VA hospital. The Veteran was paid roughly \$30,000 in one lump sum and then about \$3,000 per month for the rest of his life. With the additional income and while his health allowed it, he was able to visit his children and grandchildren out of state. He fought the good fight and lived another full year with a much improved quality of life. If he hadn't come to see our Veteran Service Officer, that claim may not have gone through until after it was too late.

Columbia County's Veterans Service Officer is available to help ALL Veterans, not just those who are facing a crisis. There is such a wide range of benefits that a Veteran may qualify for, that it can be difficult to know all there is to utilize. Russ Clark is in place to help navigate the system and to advocate on behalf of Columbia County Veterans. He can help identify compensation that might be due to you, clarify your health benefits, point you toward vocational rehabilitation programs, connect you with someone who provides Veteran home financing or untangle a complicated claim.

To find out more about how Community Action Team might be able to help, please call 503-397-3511 or visit www.cat-team.org. Office hours at 125 N. 17th Street in St. Helens are 8:30 am – 5:00 pm, Monday through Friday. Veteran Service Officer Russ Clark can be reached directly at 503-366-6580.