

Veterans helping veterans through the Veterans Mental Health Council of Central Alabama

By Karim Shamsi-Basha

May 4, 2018



Veteran volunteers assemble rucksacks to be distributed to other veterans through the VHMC of Central Alabama. (Mark Rubino)

Veterans helping veterans.



That is what happens at the Veterans Mental Health Council of Central Alabama (VMHC), headed by John Bankhead, at the Veterans Affairs Hospital (<https://www.birmingham.va.gov/>) in Birmingham. The organization (<http://www.vhva.org/>) was established nationally four years ago.

“Our goal is to create a better relationship between doctors and veterans, something that’s been lacking in the VA for years,” Bankhead said.

“Getting that done was a hard task. We take the concerns of veterans, log them on paper, investigate them and then take them to leadership to be dealt with in a positive manner.”



Executive Adviser Mark Rubino concurs.

“The Veterans Mental Health Council of Central Alabama is a collection of men and women who have served in the Armed Forces (<https://www.military.com/join-armed-forces/us-military-overview.html>) and continue to serve by helping fellow veterans with mental health concerns,” he said. “As an advisory council, the Veterans Administration looks to them to help the VA provide better care for thousands of veterans in central Alabama. They also provide peer-to-peer mentoring to help guide veterans in securing benefits and other essentials they need to live healthier lives.”



John Bankhead is an Alabama Bright Light

from **Alabama NewsCenter**

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On Memorial Day, Bankhead and his team will assemble rucksacks and fill them with healthy items for the veterans, celebrating Memorial Day and Mother’s Day combined.

“The rucksacks were an idea I had a couple years ago about trying to do something for the veterans in a positive manner,” Bankhead said. “We also add devotionals to them for the veterans.”

The rucksacks have been positively received by the veterans. The VMHC assembles and prepares the rucksacks for delivery a few times during the year.

Rubino considers this effort a minor part of what needs to be done.

“As a veteran myself – and having a brother who is a veteran receiving mental health care in another state – I have known first hand for more than 25 years the challenges facing veterans in receiving the care and resources they need. Mental health is something that affects the broader population, and the Veterans Mental Health Council of Central Alabama represents a tremendous opportunity for Alabama to better support our service members and veterans,” he said.

Handing out the rucksacks and taking care of veterans not only helps them, but helps the veterans who give time and effort.



The rucksacks assembled by VHMC contain healthy and positive items, prepared by veterans for veterans. (Mark Rubino)



Veteran volunteers enjoy doing things to help other veterans. (Mark Rubino)

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“Doing all of this has really helped me grow. It’s the first time in my life that I’ve helped somebody with anything,” Bankhead said. “I come from a drug and alcohol background where I just took from people. So this time I’m giving back and it’s really made me a whole new person. I don’t have to be the person I was.”

On Memorial Day, take a moment to thank a veteran.

Alabama Bright Lights captures the stories, through words, pictures and video, of some of our state’s



This program is designed to help veterans who've sacrificed to help so many. (Karim Shamsi-Basha)

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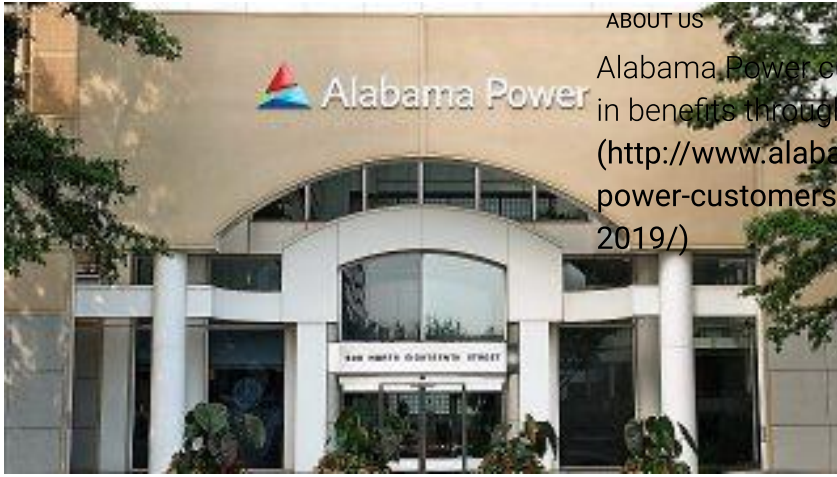
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