

Harris Seeks Support for Veterans First Foundation

By Terri McCoy

A small group of the county's military veterans gathered at the Star Restaurant on Monday morning to discuss an alternative plan of action for the former Sugar Grove Navy base.

The group was organized by local fundraising guru and Relay for Life coordinator, Don Harris. Harris told members of the group about his plan to form the "Veterans First Foundation," a nonprofit organization that would utilize the Navy facility as a haven for homeless veterans across the state. West Virginia currently has over 300 homeless military service personnel.

Harris, who served 29 years in the Navy, told members of the group that in addition to providing shelter and "a place to call home," he wanted to bring in outside resources to address other challenges that the veterans may be facing. He listed some of those challenges as unemployment, substance abuse, traumatic brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The possibility of partnering with an area learning institution, such as James Madison University or Eastern West Virginia Community and Technical College, to provide educational opportunities was also highlighted by Harris.

Roger Ashley, a former Naval officer, stated, "Those of us that served in uniform didn't become successful by ourselves." Ashley mentioned the idea of a "sea daddy," the Navy's unofficial mentoring program in which a seasoned sailor takes a new recruit under his wing to provide guidance and support.

The group of former veterans collectively agreed that the first order of business was to halt the proposal of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) which wants to use the former Navy base as a temporary shelter for unaccompanied children.

Harris' answer to the dilemma is to raise funds as a group to purchase the Navy base. He outlined his goals for the meeting which included establishing a board of directors for the nonprofit, raising \$100,000 to get into the bidding process for the online auction of the property and to discuss a national marketing campaign for fundraising.

Peggy Hawse, regional coordinator for Senator Joe Manchin, attended the meeting and stressed to attendees the importance of contacting elected officials by mail. "It is extremely important to have physical documentation of your opinions when elected officials are talking to government agencies or other organizations," Hawse stated.

Congressman Alex Mooney, who was not at the meeting, has released the following statement concerning use of the base: "I learned through press reports that Sugar Grove Naval Base is being reviewed by the [HHS] as a possible site for a 'temporary shelter for unaccompanied children.' I have requested a full briefing from the department on this issue. Moreover, I am concerned about the potential impacts on the local community. I want to hear from the residents of Pendleton County and get their opinions and thoughts about the situation. I urge residents to contact my office in Martinsburg at 304-264-8810 or my Washington D.C. office at 202-225-2711."

Gene McConnell, president of the Pendleton County Commission, informed Hawse that Senators Capito and Manchin and Congressman Mooney had been made well aware of the commission's stance on the HHS proposal. He also noted

that he had hoped that the future occupant of the base would “produce a positive outcome for the county. This [refugee shelter] is not a positive solution.”

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