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SDDVA December Column – Reaching Out: Supporting Veterans and Those in Need During the Holiday Season

As the holiday season approaches, it's easy to get caught up in the rush of festive preparations—shopping, cooking, and planning gatherings. However, this time of year can be particularly challenging for many people, especially veterans and those facing financial difficulties. The holidays can remind them of the struggles they encounter in daily life, from loneliness to financial instability. This is a moment for us to extend our hands and hearts to those who need help the most.

Our veterans—those who have served our country with honor—often face challenges long after their military service ends. Unfortunately, not all veterans are aware of the resources available to assist them, and others may find themselves isolated or lacking sufficient support during the holiday season.

This is why it is crucial for veterans to contact local county and tribal veterans service officers (VSOs). These officers are committed to helping veterans navigate the available support systems. They can assist with benefits claims, housing, healthcare, and mental health services, ensuring veterans receive the help they deserve. Contacting your VSO is a proactive step to guarantee that you, the veterans, and those in your community are not overlooked this season.

211 is a critical resource for individuals experiencing financial hardship, food insecurity, or emotional distress. It serves as a helpline and online tool that connects people to essential services and community programs. Whether it's accessing food pantries, mental health support, financial aid, or housing assistance, 211 can help direct individuals to the appropriate resources in their vicinity. This service is free, confidential, and available 24/7, making it an invaluable asset for those who feel overwhelmed and uncertain about where to seek help.

Another great resource for veterans is the 988-crisis line. By pressing 1 after dialing 988, veterans are connected to trained responders who comprehend the unique challenges that service members and veterans face. If you are fortunate enough to be able to help others this holiday season, consider these practical ways to make a difference:

1. **Donate to veterans' charities:** Numerous organizations are dedicated to improving veterans' lives. Whether contributing to food drives, toy collections for children of veterans, or funding mental health services for those who served, your contribution can make a real difference.
2. **Volunteer:** Many organizations that support veterans, people experiencing homelessness, and those in need rely on volunteers to assist with meal distributions, gift wrapping, and general community outreach. If you have the time, consider donating your energy to a local cause.
3. **Spread the word:** Sometimes, people don't know what help is available. Use your voice to encourage others to contact 211 or 988, county or tribal veterans service officers, local veterans service organizations, or other community services.
4. **Offer a listening ear:** Sometimes, the greatest gift you can give someone is your time and attention. For many veterans, the holidays can be lonely. A simple phone call, letter, or invitation to a holiday meal can provide meaningful support.

Remember that we are all part of a larger community this holiday season, and every effort to help someone in need makes a difference. By reaching out to local resources such as 211 or 988, engaging with county and tribal veterans service officers or veterans service organizations, and offering support to those struggling around us, we can ensure that the holidays are a time of warmth, compassion, and connection for everyone—especially for those who have given so much for our country.