Science Savvy

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Crossing the 'digital divide' can be a tough challenge for veterans and their families, but the nonprofit Tech For Troops organization is empowering under-resourced veterans and their families by providing sustainable lifelong digital skills backed with training, education, and technology.

"Active-duty military personnel are released with highly technical skills that are often relevant only to the work they've done with the military," explains U.S. Marine Corps veteran Mark Casper, president and chief executive of Tech For Troops (T4T.) "They often have no training that is relevant to the civilian workforce. The results are daunting: Each day an estimated 22 veterans commit suicide; the post-9/11 veteran unemployment rate is 40% higher than civilians; and 12% of the homeless population are veterans.

"Tech For Troops has four main programs to impact these stats," Casper continues. "The 'floor' is 100% guaranteed data destruction and the three 'legs of the stool' are: first leg, veteran education – in person and online – for family economic development; second leg, using our T4T gaming community and 'Aiming for Zero' program to impact veterans and families, preventing veteran suicide; and the third leg, responsibly recycling from donated electronics. Through these four programs, Tech For Troops hopes to achieve the elimination of the digital and technology divide in the under-resourced veteran community. This community includes the families of the veterans and active-duty personnel transitioning out with little digital literacy skills. We also aim to reduce the '22 a day' suicide rate of the veteran community to zero! And responsibly recycle over 100 tons of IT equipment each and every year."

Based in Richmond, VA, Tech For Troops was founded in 2013 by a mother and her son: the son had friends who had enlisted in the military after high school, and then couldn't find jobs after returning from Afghanistan. They had no way to afford the computer necessary to apply for their military benefits, write a resume, or apply for jobs. So, the duo decided to collect used PCs and Macs, refurbish them, and provide them to veterans' support organizations.

What started as a small operation providing free donated computers and training to veterans has grown exponentially since Casper came on board as executive director in December 2015. Although the program started in a garage, the Tech For Troops facility now has grown to more than 8,000 square feet.

Today, Tech For Troops supports veterans and veterans' service groups by collecting used technology that would usually end up in landfills, refurbishing the laptops and other devices, and providing the reloaded technology, along with training, to veterans in need for low or no cost.

"Working computers can provide a new life to struggling veterans rather than being discarded," Casper points out. "Many veterans face two significant barriers when competing in the modern workforce: the lack of a computer and the lack of the skills needed to effectively use that computer. Through Tech For Troops, over 1,500 veterans have

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bridged the digital divide and 425 have learned basic computer literacy skills, resume creation and how to apply for a job online. T4T has connected with over 200 volunteers yearly, recycled over 800 tons of IT equipment, and distributed computers to veterans across the country."

Casper also started an educational program in 2018, hosting training and classes on computer literacy, financial literacy, and personal cybersecurity. "We serve more than 600 under-resourced veterans and their respective families every year; our goal is 1,000 per year," Casper asserts. "Tech For Troops provides computers to veterans who enroll in community colleges, universities and trade schools but don't have a computer, furthering the education and economic development across America. We've had veterans who were able to go to university and get their diploma; once those veterans applied for and acquired good-paying jobs, they came back and gave their T4T computer for another vet!"

The organization's "Aiming For Zero" suicide prevention program serves thousands of veterans and others through online and in-person engagement. "Our Aiming For Zero program has saved eight lives that we know of in 15 months; this is heartwarming!" Casper asserts. "We look to communicate and support active-duty personnel, veterans and spouses, and civilians in the same gaming community, since suicide doesn't just affect the veteran doing the unthink-

able, it affects families, friends, co-workers and anyone who knew the vet. Tech For Troops finds this abhorrent and is doing as much as we can to reduce this to zero."

Corporations and individuals support the organization through donations of money, equipment, and time. "Tech For Troops relies on multiple ways of fundraising: foundation grants, individual generosity, corporate support and the sale of items that cannot be provided to a veteran," Casper comments. "T4T receives so much more than computers – we receive drones, cell phones, servers, routers, switches, desk phones, and more – no matter what, we guarantee data destruction for all devices with data on them. Devices such as these, we sell to provide funding to our programs. A recurring $11 a month financial donation – $132 a year – supports one veteran, electronic equipment and volunteers; we need that support! We also partner with Easter Seals veteran staffing to provide job opportunities."

Casper says word-of-mouth about Tech For Troop's success stories are the organization's most powerful marketing tool. "Eight lives saved… makes my heart sing; thousands of veterans educated; over 800 tons of IT equipment kept out of the landfill; companies and individuals trusting T4T…makes my heart sing!" he enthuses. "Friends, customers and corporations spread the word for us. We have four core values – Honesty, Loyalty, Integrity and Stewardship. We live by these, and I believe it shows to our supporters." 🇺🇸

T4T's four core values are Honesty, Loyalty, Integrity, and Stewardship