



Cooking Up Community and Changing Lives for Veterans

Imagine moving into a new home after years of uncertainty, only to face the daunting task of rebuilding your life from scratch. For many veterans, this is a reality. But thanks to Operation: Veteran Connect and the incredible support of the Humana Foundation, veterans are not only finding a place to call home but also gaining the skills, resources, and relationships they need to thrive.

In January, we launched an inspiring initiative at Bahia Apartments in Tampa, where veterans gather bi-weekly to receive fresh produce, learn to cook healthy meals, and connect with their neighbors. Each event is designed around three goals that nourish hearts, minds, and bellies.

1. Delivering Fresh Produce

Through a partnership with Access to Fresh from Dube's Farm and Market, every veteran left each event with two weeks' worth of fresh fruits and vegetables. Healthy food is a game-changer, especially for those who've gone without it. One veteran, lovingly nicknamed "Sarge," shared, "I haven't been able to afford food since I moved into my apartment, and I've lost 30 pounds. I'm so thankful for the food you delivered."

2. Teaching Healthy Cooking Skills

Each veteran received their own air fryer to help make cooking nourishing meals at home more manageable and less intimidating. Volunteers led hands-on cooking lessons at every event to demonstrate innovative ways to whip up delicious meals using their produce and air fryers. Menus included crisp salads, air-fried veggies, and proteins. One veteran shared, "When I moved in, I only had a key and a bed. I didn't know anyone, and I didn't know how to take care of myself." With each event, we're turning that uncertainty into confidence.

3. Building a Sense of Community

After preparing meals, veterans sat down together to enjoy the meal, sparking conversations and connections that will grow stronger after every gathering. We want to transform the culture of their community from strangers to a support system of neighbors and friends. Afterward, they joined in games of bingo, cards, and dice, sharing laughs and building bonds over friendly competition and fun.



These events were equally as impactful for our Operation: Veteran Connect volunteers, who were able to use their superpowers to empower veterans. Rosalind, a former Army cook, found healing in leading the cooking classes, saying it gave her purpose and joy. Janalee used humor, compassion, and expert knowledge of veteran resource navigation to help individual attendees tackle challenges they were facing. And brand-new volunteer Nancy hasn't stopped talking about how proud she is to be part of a passionate group of volunteers genuinely invested in improving the well-being of struggling veterans.

Through Humana's support, we're proving that a little kindness, some fresh food, and a shared meal can change lives.



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It's both ridiculous and completely relatable. Honest, vulnerable human connection can bring joy and healing, yet it's the source of our biggest fears. I encourage you not to freeze or falter in fear. Instead, seize every opportunity to join in conversation and service. You never know what you'll learn and the friendships you'll make.

You'll read in this newsletter how we're fighting for more human connection on all fronts. We're planting caring volunteers throughout Tampa Bay in all types of spaces, eager to be a friend to those who need it. People like "Grandpa" Sessions, who serves in the classroom watching for students like Destiny who are having a rough day, or volunteers like Sharon, who gives every veteran who comes into the VA a friendly smile and a helping hand, and Senior Disaster Support volunteers who create opportunities for neighbors to meet neighbors.

Friends, the need has never been greater. The challenges we face in today's world call for more helpers, more doers, and more hearts willing to step up. If you've ever thought about volunteering, now is the time. It's our fellow humans who will get us through the toughest of times.

-Robin Ingles, CEO

Pasco County Comes Together for Seniors

We were honored as the January featured charitable organization at the Pasco County Tax Collector's Office. Thanks to the leadership of Mike Fasano and the generosity of Pasco County residents, your donations are making a difference in the lives of seniors who need it most.

These funds go directly toward supporting our mission to keep seniors purposeful, engaged, and connected through volunteering AND their service in the community supports hungry families, lonely elders, struggling children, and seniors recovering from recent hurricanes. Thank you for turning compassion into action and ensuring no one faces life's hurdles alone.



We're Building Connection and Camaraderie to Help Seniors Weather the Storm

Jerry sat terrified on his kitchen table for hours as the flood waters rose to over three feet. Francis was in the hospital when Hurricane Milton hit, overcome with fear that her dog, who was at home alone, wouldn't survive the storm. Arthur lost all his belongings, including his car, and went days without eating. Dorothy slept on a soaking wet mattress when her roof was damaged and rainwater poured into her bedroom. These heartbreaking stories from seniors who faced Hurricanes Helene and Milton alone were the catalyst for our NEW Senior Disaster Support Program.

After hearing these stories, we knew their experience could have been different if they had support from their neighbors. Now, we're intentionally building friendships and a network of support within older adult communities so seniors like Jerry, Francis, Arthur, and Dorothy feel comfortable asking their neighbors for help when they need it most.

We've adopted 3 senior communities throughout Pinellas County that were significantly impacted by Hurricanes Helene and Milton. Each month, we host events to bring residents together to share hurricane recovery and preparation resources, enjoy fun activities, and most importantly, build camaraderie so they have someone to lean on before, during, and after a storm.



Our Senior Disaster Support team attended the Better Together VOAD Convening in Ocala to connect with experts and ensure we have the knowledge, skills, and resources to help seniors recover from recent hurricanes and be prepared for future disasters.



Interested in creating a safer, stronger tomorrow for our seniors? Donate, volunteer, or adopt a community today! Email SDS@SeniorsinService.org or scan the QR code to learn more.



Operation Veteran Connect is Furnishing Hope

In just 3 months, we've furnished the homes of 125 Tampa Bay veterans who were impacted by recent hurricanes or transitioning from temporary housing to permanent stability.

These aren't just couches and beds—they're symbols of hope. For many, the furniture replaced sleeping bags on bare floors and lawn chairs used in place of sofas. Now, these veterans walk into homes that are warm, welcoming, and truly their own. They finally have the comfort and dignity they need not just to survive—but to thrive.

For Navy veteran Christian, the program has been a lifesaver. After Hurricane Milton destroyed the roof of his home, Christian found himself living in a hotel. Though relieved to finally move into permanent housing, he arrived to four empty walls and no belongings. Christian, who works multiple jobs helping other veterans, shared, "Having a peaceful home is extremely important for your mental health." Thanks to Operation: Veteran Connect, he now has a furnished space and the stability to focus on giving back to others.

Army veteran Rosalind has been instrumental in making this project a success! After receiving services from Operation: Veteran Connect, she joined our ranks as an active volunteer, eager to pay it forward. Now a core volunteer, she brings empathy and lived experience to every task, from teaching cooking classes to coordinating furniture shopping and delivery. She's helping her fellow veterans feel seen, supported, and truly at home.

When veterans serve veterans, they don't just provide a service—they build a community. And together, that community is transforming empty spaces into homes filled with possibility.



Happy National Volunteer Month!

April is National Volunteer Month, and it's the perfect time to honor the remarkable individuals who make our mission possible, our volunteers. Your dedication is nothing short of heroic. You are the heart of our mission, the hands that lift others up, and the spirit that reminds us all of what community truly means. We've highlighted a few of our volunteers below. They are a representation of the 1900+ volunteers who are serving throughout Tampa Bay. We are grateful for each one of you and the way you uplift our community in your own special way.



Angela: The Dream Maker

"When Mia comes out of the cafeteria, she has the biggest smile on her face! It's so rewarding to see her face light up that way and know that I'm making a difference."

Angela serves as a Lunch Pal mentor for a first grader named Mia. Once a week for the past two years, they've eaten lunch together. Angela talks to Mia about her family, travel, cultures around the world, and opportunities to go to college. She introduces Mia to a world outside of her neighborhood that is full of possibilities and fuels Mia's dreams for her future.

Angela's efforts have transformed Mia's outlook on learning, boosted attendance, and created a bond of trust and joy. Angela says, "I've always wanted to be a teacher, and it's not too late to meet my calling." This dedication earned her the title of "Outstanding Mentor of the Year." Angela proves it's never too late to follow your dreams and help others follow theirs too!



Lauren: A Pillar of Service and Compassion

Known as "Sis" around the Gulfport Senior Center, Lauren is a powerhouse of kindness and determination. Whether she's delivering meals, organizing bingo games, or helping seniors navigate tricky situations, Lauren's motto is simple: no one gets left behind.

Her impact extends far beyond her role with Seniors in Service as a Senior Companion volunteer. Her dedication touches every corner and age group of St. Pete. She empowers youth through educational initiatives, champions transportation, safety, and services on local boards and committees, and serves as a vital resource, connecting those in need with essential services.

Lauren's philosophy is clear: "Volunteering is a two-way street; it helps me as much as I help others."



Peter: The Behind-the-Scenes Hero

Peter is the volunteer every nonprofit needs! He quietly works behind the scenes, creating spreadsheets, making phone calls, developing timelines, and keeping everyone on task. Yet, the impact of his efforts led to capacity-building results that will increase our organization's ability to serve vulnerable populations for decades.

For the past 6 months, Peter has been instrumental in organizing contractors, volunteers, supplies, and purchases for two large projects, including renovations to our office to create a safer, more inviting space for volunteers and purchasing and outfitting a van and trailer to enhance outreach efforts. Even when faced with personal health challenges, including eye surgery and a long recovery, Peter remained steadfast in his commitment to see these impactful projects through to completion!



Sharon: From Survivor to Superhero

Sharon is a true fighter! After battling cancer, she found strength and healing through volunteering and now dedicates her time to helping veterans and seniors with their own health struggles. For over 4 years, Sharon has served 6-7 hours a day at the VA, helping veterans navigate online systems. Often, veterans arrive feeling frustrated and overwhelmed. Sharon is the smiling face that greets them at the door. With patience and humor, she de-escalates tense situations and then provides the focused attention they deserve to help find a solution. Over the years, Sharon has empowered countless veterans with the confidence to navigate the VA systems while assuring them she will always be there if they need more help. Sharon also serves as a Health Buddy, calling isolated seniors with chronic conditions to provide encouragement, tips for healthy living, and to let them know they have a friend who cares.



Anne: The Connection Maker

When Anne first joined Seniors in Service, she made one thing clear: "I am happy to help, but it has to be fun!" She is a natural networker, always ready to share the mission of Seniors in Service with a big smile and contagious energy. Armored in her Seniors in Service polo and nametag, Anne connects with people instantly striking up conversations with volunteers, community partners, and city officials. Not only does she recruit volunteers, but she also excites them about getting involved.

Anne's impact is perhaps best illustrated through her work with Carlin, a blind resident in a senior community where Anne serves. Carlin was struggling with loneliness after relocating to a new city. Upon hearing Carlin's story, Anne didn't hesitate, she reached out, arranged a coffee meet-up, and helped her find a new community of supportive women.

What started as a simple act of kindness has grown into a thriving Volunteer Hub, where Carlin now plays a key role in helping others discover ways to serve. Anne's ability to turn strangers into friends and friends into changemakers is nothing short of remarkable.



"Grandpa" Sessions: The Trust Builder

Each morning, "Grandpa" Sessions greets children with his signature "insect wave," wiggling his fingers like antennae to bring a smile to their faces. "That little wave tells them, 'Hey, I see you, and I'm happy you're here'." Mr. Sessions serves 30 hours per week as a Classroom Grandparent at Oak Grove Elementary.

When Mr. Sessions first met Destiny, her anger erupted in outbursts and fights, isolating her from her peers and leading to countless trips to the principal's office. Through patience and empathy, he created a safe space for Destiny to open up, often sitting with her during her toughest moments and asking a simple yet powerful question: "What's going on today?"

As trust blossomed, so did Destiny's potential. She discovered a love for math and found joy in challenging Mr. Sessions to friendly competitions, her brilliance shining through with each win.

For "Grandpa" Sessions, volunteering is more than just showing up, it comes from the heart. He was once a child whose teachers set him on the right path, and now he is doing the same for others. He is proof that the support a child receives today shapes the person they become tomorrow.





Spectrum is Helping Seniors Step into the Digital Age with Confidence

The internet is a powerful resource to help seniors remain independent, especially when mobility becomes more and more difficult. For the 4th consecutive year, we are thrilled to partner with Spectrum to empower seniors with essential technology skills. This collaboration aims to teach seniors how to use online resources for health, independence, mental stimulation, and social connection. In March, Spectrum joined our Senior Companion volunteer training to present a generous check as part of their Digital Education Grant Program, which is dedicated to enhancing the lives of community members through skills training and access to technology. Hillsborough County Commissioner Harry Cohen joined the celebration, emphasizing the importance of bridging the digital divide in our community.

Thanks to this grant, we will educate over 260 seniors on how to order groceries online, access health information, utilize digital learning tools for mental stimulation, and stay connected with family and friends. This initiative not only enhances their quality of life but also fosters a sense of empowerment and belonging. Together, we are making strides towards a more inclusive and digitally literate society.



A Full Circle Journey From Loneliness to Lifeline

After spending 50 years in a wheelchair and living alone, James's world was marked by isolation, leaving him irritable and hesitant to connect. When introduced to TelePals, a program designed to keep individuals socially connected through friendly phone calls, James resisted. He never had a best friend before.

But with gentle encouragement, James took a leap of faith. During his first call with a younger volunteer, an hour flew by in conversation. For the first time in decades, James felt a connection. TelePals became his lifeline, brightening his days and easing the loneliness that once seemed overwhelming.

Inspired by the kindness and companionship he received, he now volunteers through TelePals, offering the same support that once transformed his life. James proves that one phone call is a connection that can change everything.

TelePals is a vital program powered by compassionate volunteers like James, and the need for more caring voices is greater than ever. If you're ready to bring joy to someone's day, join us as a TelePals volunteer. A simple phone call could brighten a life, and yours, too. **Scan the QR code to learn more!**

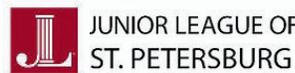
We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Suncoast Credit Union for their continued support of TelePals. Your generosity fuels connections that make our community stronger and more compassionate.



A big shoutout to Apollo Gymnastics in Oldsmar for choosing Seniors in Service as their charity to represent in the 2025 Charity Challenge Cup! Their incredible team spirit and performance earned a \$1,201 donation to support our mission.



Thank you to our funders!





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Classroom Grandparent Volunteers Shine at AmeriCorps Town Hall

“It’s a blessing to see their little faces shine every day. We love what we do, and I wouldn’t trade it for anything. It’s the best thing that’s happened to me. It keeps me young.”

Classroom Grandma Cooper shared these words with over 700 AmeriCorps staff on a virtual Town Hall meeting as she sat with her “next door Grandma” Ms. Butler at her side. These two incredible volunteers work together in adjoining Kindergarten classrooms at Colson Elementary School. They always arrive early, eager to greet the children as they walk into the classroom. Each day, Grandma Cooper and Grandma Butler support the teachers by assisting individual students who are struggling to understand the lessons or need the love, encouragement, and listening ear of a caring “grandma.” Both left a lasting impression, inspiring everyone with the difference they’re making in their communities.



You Can Make a Difference Too!

Join the ranks of extraordinary volunteers like Grandmas Gail and Cooper by becoming a Classroom Grandparent volunteer. Your time and care can help students thrive while filling your days with purpose and joy. Sign up today to start making connections that matter!

Scan the QR code to request more information or email us at FGP@SeniorsInService.org.

