

PARTING SHOT

AVVA President Sharon Hobbs (left), Sandy Miller (center), and John Rowan present Project Friendship's contribution to Lighthouse Social Services CEO Karyn Young-Lowe.



MICHAEL KEATING

Project Friendship

BY JEFF LEE MANTHOS

At the recent Leadership & Education Conference in Palm Springs, the Associates of Vietnam Veterans of America presented a substantial donation in the name of Project Friendship. What is Project Friendship, who runs it, and who are the beneficiaries of such generosity? Where do the funds come from for donations, and what can we as VVA members do to help?

First, some background for those unfamiliar with AVVA. Until speaking with Sharon Hobbs (*far left, photo*), president of AVVA, I knew little. For many years, early on in VVA, associate members fully participated in VVA activities, the only restriction was not being able to vote. In the late 1990s it became untenable to have associates combined with regular VVA membership for IRS non-profit status to continue. So the associates began a parallel organization, AVVA, in 1999. They formed as a 501(c)(4) non-profit, which allows them to donate funds to organizations they want to support. Out of that desire to fund charities that support veterans, AVVA's Project Friendship annual donation was conceived.

Every annual national AVVA meeting is held in a different location. In January prior to these meetings, the host city's charities that help homeless veterans are researched, with input from VVA Homeless Veterans Committee Chair Sandy Miller. At the following Board of Directors meeting in April, the charity is announced and the campaign to seek donations begins. Then, at the annual meeting, when possible, a visit to the recipient's facility is undertaken to meet staff and tour the grounds. In the case of charities that support multiple needy

groups, AVVA stipulates that its funds go to programs for veterans and their families.

Since 2014 AVVA has collected and donated more than \$56,000. Each year brings more donations for Project Friendship and more help for homeless veterans of all eras. All of the donations come from VVA and AVVA members—from individuals, chapters, and state councils. It is Hobbs' hope that AVVA's efforts to obtain 501(c)(3) status with the IRS will expand its fund-raising capabilities.

Even as the Vietnam War generation is aging, both VVA and AVVA are growing. AVVA's membership stands around 10,000 with a new chapter just formed in Columbus, Georgia, along with a new VVA chapter. Hobbs attributes this growth in membership, at least in part, to an increasing number of people retiring who are looking to involve themselves in something positive.

AVVA's future is uncertain—not unlike VVA's own pending conundrum regarding its dwindling demographic. What AVVA has going for it is that it is open to anyone who wants to join, and this may ensure its future. AVVA members include veterans from VVA but other time periods as well, plus others who simply want to help support veterans. Work has already begun on a strategic plan to remain viable in a changing future.

The AVVA mission statement reads: "To provide support to veterans and their families through programs, projects, and education." In adapting to a tentative future, AVVA plans to continue doing just that.

More information can be found at www.avva.org ■