

Latrobe Bulletin

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Local group links veterans with farmers for on-the-job training

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Fred Slezak, owner of Lone Maple Farm in New Alexandria, became the first farmer to be approved for the PA Veteran Farming Project. He's looking to hire a veteran as an apprentice at the farm with the opportunity of a possible full-time position. Photo by Amy Fauth

Some once family-run farms, including several here in Westmoreland County, are in need of skilled workers to continue the tradition of growing crops, raising livestock and other agricultural ventures.

Veterans returning from active duty often find it hard to just step back into their “old” life and are looking for new opportunities and find working the land to be not only rewarding, but a healing experience.

Troops to Tractors, a program of the Westmoreland Conservation District, works with the PA Veteran Farming Project to connect these veterans with successful farmers for mentoring, on-farm apprenticeships and internships.

This GI Bill on-the-job training program allows farmers to coordinate VA-approved apprenticeships for entry-level positions with the intention of transitioning to full-time employment after the apprenticeship is completed, according to Mimi Thomas-Brooker of Troops to Tractors. The program is not really promoted by the VA so it is underutilized. A fact Thomas-Brooker would like to see change here in Westmoreland County, where agriculture is such a significant industry.

Eligible veterans — veterans who have been honorably discharged — can learn a trade or profession over the course of six months or more as an alternative to a

degree program. Veterans may receive a housing stipend, just as with the more traditional GI Bill for college, which makes the program financially feasible for them.

“Veterans will learn the farming part, but also the business side of agriculture,” said Thomas-Brooker. “They’re going to get varied experience.”

A huge challenge, Thomas-Brooker said, is getting the word out to veterans that programs like this one not only exist, but are a benefit that they’ve earned. She said when veterans returned from wars in the past they would join the VFW or American Legion. However, today’s veterans don’t have that. Part of her group’s challenge is using whatever means necessary to inform veterans of the benefit, including social media and traditional media.

For the farmers, the benefit is the opportunity to hire people with qualities learned in the military — some tangible and some intangible — at an entry-level salary, which will be raised when the veteran learns the educational skills that are a part of the approved plan. If the apprenticeship goes well, the farmers may make the arrangement permanent or even before the timeline expires.

One farmer — the first in Westmoreland County — hoping to find a veteran to help fill a growing need at his farm is Fred Slezak of Lone Maple Farm in New Alexandria. As a board member on the conservation district board for a number of years, Slezak was excited to be a part of the program.

Slezak has been approved for the program by the VA and is actively seeking a veteran to apprentice on his farm and agricultural service company.

For more than 100 years, the Lone Maple Farm has been in operation. In addition, Lone Maple Ag Services has provided farmers throughout the region with agricultural products since 1996. Slezak is searching for a veteran to learn the business from the ground up and perhaps ensure the future of Lone Maple.

At 62, Slezak said the work isn’t as physically demanding as it once was thanks to technological advancements in agriculture, but he still needs to think of the future of Lone Maple. He anticipates that a veteran is the perfect match for a number of reasons, including the skills they obtained in the military, such as hard work, dedication and a unique devotion to the land they defend.

“This is a great opportunity for farmers who don’t have family to pass their farms on to,” said Thomas-Brooker.

If you are a veteran with interest or experience in agriculture that is interested in the apprenticeship at Lone Maple, send your resume to the farm at PO Box 407, New Alexandria, PA 15670.

Some farmers, like Slezak, have sought out the program and gotten approval before looking for a veteran to fill the position. But in other situations, like the Dillner Family Farm in Gibsonia, a veteran interested in an apprenticeship located the subject farm and the farm began the approval process then.

As part of the approval process, Thomas-Brooker said it is important to stress that employers aren't looking for cheap labor.

"This is not free labor," she said.

Farmers are looking for veterans who are career minded and are interested in the agricultural field. The two biggest hurdles for veterans is acquiring the land to become farmers and the finances needed to operate a state-of-the art farm, including farming equipment. This apprenticeship can be a win-win for farmers and veterans, according to Thomas-Brooker. There are also incentives in place for employers who hire veterans, like reduced apprenticeship wages.

Although Lone Maple was the first farm in Westmoreland County to participate, it won't be the last. The Jamison Farm in Latrobe has recently considered the program.

"We are looking for employees willing to work and wanting to make a career with us. We are in the process setting up with the program and have had a few applications so far. We hope to hire soon," said Sukay Jamison. "I think the program is a good way to reach people looking for jobs that otherwise might not know about Jamison Farm and our need for employees."

If you are a farmer who is interested in learning about the program, visit www.troopstottractors.org or the group's Facebook page at www.facebook.com/PAVets-Farm.

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