



A guide to bring OVS to your community

Welcome letter from Operation: Veteran Smiles Founder & Director, Amelia Day

Hello and thank you for your interest in my 4-H community service project, Operation: Veteran Smiles (OVS). I'm thrilled that you want to be a part of this project, which provides powerful support for veterans and unforgettable experiences for the volunteers who serve them. With the help of this guide, I hope you will feel inspired and prepared to bring OVS to more communities and veterans across the country. It is my hope that you will come to love this project as much as I do. Together, there's no telling how many veterans we can impact with the power of a smile!

To understand OVS, you should know a little bit more about me. I grew up in somewhat of a military family. Both of my granddads are veterans and so is my dad. My granddads served in Vietnam and Korea, while my dad served in the first Persian Gulf War. Because of them, veterans have a special place in my heart. Because of them, I have seen and heard firsthand the sacrifice that our veterans make while serving our country. It is because of them, that Operation: Veteran Smiles exists.

Operation: Veteran Smiles began in 2012 after I went to the VA hospital with my dad for one of his visits. During that trip, I met veterans who fought in the wars that I had learned about from my dad and through my history books. What struck me particularly hard was that many of these veterans were completely alone. Some of them were amputees; many were in wheelchairs; some stayed in their rooms and, tragically, what most of them had in common was that they were frowning.

Throughout school, I had read of the incredible victories and horrific tragedies these veterans went through to protect our nation's freedoms. This made me wonder, "Why are they not

happy? And why are they alone?" When I returned from that visit, I did some research. I learned that many of our veterans receive treatment hundreds of miles from their homes. This means that a lot of these veterans are far from their families and friends. With no support or encouragement, it's easy to see why there are so few smiles. And from that knowledge, Operation: Veteran Smiles was born.

OVS started with handmade cards, and over the years it has expanded to include "Smile Kits". These essential hygiene and entertainment items provide some of the basic comforts of home. However, what I have found is most meaningful to our veterans is the time we give to visit with them. The cards and care packages are important as a means of offering support and comfort. But in many cases, face-to-face interaction with OVS volunteers is the most impactful gift of all. For some veterans, OVS volunteers may be the only friendly face they see from outside that hospital.

It is for that reason I am so thankful for your interest in bringing OVS to your community. Never in a million years did I expect OVS to grow outside of Georgia. It has been a dream and wish come true. I am so excited to see so many people that care about our veterans as much as I do. I can't wait to see what you do at your local VA hospital. I know you will do great things! Thank you for your help with this project and thank you for helping spread OVS' legacy to our U.S. veterans!

Sincerely,

Amelia Day
Founder & Director
Operation: Veteran Smiles

Learn more at:

www.4-H.org/ovs

4-H is the youth development program of our nation's Cooperative Extension System and USDA.



How to start an OVS project in your community

1. Establishing Contact with your Local VA Hospital

To start an OVS program in your area, you must first establish communication with the veteran's hospital in your area. Each hospital operates differently, but in Dublin, Georgia, I interact directly with the Supervisor of Recreation Therapy and the Director of Volunteer Services. These are the people that help me plan delivery dates and arrange where we will be delivering.

You can find your local VA hospital using this website:
www.va.gov/directory/guide/home.asp.

I encourage you to call or visit to establish who your main point of contact(s) will be. This is the person who can help you arrange delivery days, and understand the rules that govern the local hospital.

2. Recruiting Volunteers

Once you have permission from the VA hospital, you must gather volunteers and donations. OVS cannot operate without volunteers to make cards, pack the donated items into care packages and deliver those packages. Local 4-H clubs, churches and other youth organizations are a great place to recruit volunteers. Facebook event pages are also very helpful. I typically establish a delivery date with the VA hospital 4-6 weeks before the planned delivery. That way there is time to gather your volunteers and supplies.

3. Collecting Supplies

Make sure you have a headcount for how many veterans you will be delivering to from your contact at the VA hospital. Gather enough donations to make the needed number of care packages. In the below list, I've divided potential items into two categories: "essential" and "nice-to-have." I try to make

sure every kit has all the essential items, and I add nice-to-have items whenever possible. I typically collect travel sized items because they are easier to pack into a freezer bag or plastic bag, but full-sized items are also great if you have access to them.

Important note: Most VA hospitals do not allow razors and mouthwash as acceptable donations, so make sure these items are not placed in care packages.



Essential Items:

- Toothbrush
- Toothpaste
- Soap
- Shampoo
- Conditioner
- Pocket-sized tissues



Nice-to-Have items:

- Lotion
- Lip balm
- Playing cards
- Book or devotional
- Washcloth
- Comb



Do Not Pack:

- Razors
- Mouth wash

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4. Pre-Delivery

Before you make a delivery, confirm that your volunteers have made enough cards to go with your Smile Kits. Also make sure you have enough volunteers to deliver the packages. OVS sends volunteers in groups of 4-6 per ward. If we have youth volunteers, we send each group with an adult. Having enough supplies and volunteers is the most important part of your planned delivery day. I recommend making a checklist to help you keep track of your inventory, volunteers and schedule.

Another thing to consider is transportation. You may need to help your volunteers arrange a carpool, or provide instructions for public transportation. A shared platform like Google Docs can be helpful for arranging a carpool system.

5. Delivery Day

When you first step into a VA hospital it can be a little overwhelming. Try not be startled, and do what you can to prepare your volunteers for what they may see. These veterans have sacrificed their time and energy to serve our country, and that sacrifice may have come at a permanent physical cost. Try to enter the hospital with a contagious smile and words of encouragement. Make sure that you follow all the rules that the VA asks of you, and be the best representative of yourself, your family and your community. Delivery days can be tiring, but try to give every veteran you see the same energy and attention, from first to last.

The most important part of your delivery will be the human interaction with the veterans. Many of them have stories to share. It means a great deal to them when you make eye contact and listen to what they have to say. Please feel free to ask questions, and remember that they may ask questions as well. Always remember to use your manners and proper etiquette, and understand that this is more than just dropping cards and Smile Kits, it is the human interaction that really means the most to them.

6. Thanking Your Volunteers

After each OVS delivery at the Dublin VA hospital, I make sure to take group photos of my volunteers to publicly thank them on social media. If possible, try to use the hashtags #OVS and #4HService so that we can keep track of all the great projects taking place across the country.

I also try to treat my volunteers to a pizza lunch to thank them for their time and dedication to our veterans. Your thank you to your volunteers can be however you choose. It doesn't have to look exactly like this, but it is important to show appreciation to your volunteers for their time and efforts.

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