

'It stays busy here'

Work picks up quickly for Sullivan County's new veterans service officer

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Photo by David Crigger/Bristol Herald Courier

Sullivan County's Veterans Service Office

» Veterans Service Officer: Rex Fink

» Address: 3425 Highway 126, Blountville, Tennessee 37617

» Phone: 423-279-2879

» Email: rex.fink@sullivancountyttn.gov

» Office hours: 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday, except designated holidays

» What the new office does: Counsel, advise and assist military service veterans, veterans survivors and their dependents in obtaining their rightfully earned benefits. These benefits include compensation, pension, burial benefits, health benefits, education benefits, dependency and indemnity compensation.

BLOUNTVILLE, Tenn. — This summer, under the din of the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests over George Floyd's death, the Sullivan County government quietly set up an office for one of its newest employees: Rex Fink, the county veterans service officer.

Fink heads the Sullivan County Veterans Service Office, which the County Commission agreed to create through a November 2019 resolution. He was hired in April and trained during the summer. The county has promised him a full-time secretary. But for now, Fink is the sole employee in an office launched to help the county's more than 12,000 veterans access the benefits they've earned through their military service.

“Hopefully, I can get as many people in here as possible,” Fink told the Bristol Herald Courier. “A lot of these guys sacrificed a lot (through their service), and there (are) certain things that they’re entitled to, and I just want to make sure they get what they deserve.”

Fink, a lanky 43-year-old whose dark hair has begun to gray, grew up in Church Hill and graduated from Volunteer High School in 1996. He said his interest in veterans started a year later, when he joined the Army.

Because Fink is color-blind, his assignment options were limited. He was made a mortuary affairs specialist — someone who assists with the recovery and care of fallen comrades.

“It wasn’t my initial choosing,” Fink said of the position.

But once he got into the work, he said he fell in love with it. He spent several years in Hawaii in the Central Identification Laboratory, a unit focused on finding and identifying remains of U.S. military personnel killed in prior foreign conflicts.



Rex Fink, who is the new veterans service officer for Sullivan County, works the site of a crash from the Vietnam War in Vinh City, Vietnam, during his active duty service.

Photo courtesy of Rex Fink

Fink then moved to Italy to do similar work with the U.S. Army Africa. Eventually, he visited almost every country on the African continent. His Army career as a mortuary affairs specialist also took him to former conflict areas in Germany, Southeast Asia and the southwestern Pacific region.

“I’ve been to 36 different countries,” Fink said. “[The work] brought a lot of opportunities that I never would have gotten if I’d stayed around in Church Hill.”

Beyond the travel, he said he found the work deeply compelling.

“We pulled 11 (sets of) remains off of a B-24 in Papua, New Guinea (from) World War II,” Fink said. “They hadn’t seen American soil since 1942. ... It means a lot to bring guys home (after) 60, 70 years. ...”

Fink also had to bring home remains of some of his contemporaries during a tour in Iraq in 2004 and another in Afghanistan in 2010. He said those assignments were emotionally taxing.

“Not only (did) we have to get the remains, but ... also ... the personal effects,” Fink said. “Letters from home, pictures of families and things like that. It is a very difficult job ... especially when they’re wearing the same uniforms (that you are).”

After two decades with the Army, Fink retired as a sergeant first class and returned to Northeast Tennessee to be close to his family — as well as the VA Medical Center in Johnson City, which he called “one of the best VAs in the country.”

He spent two years as a code enforcement officer in Johnson City, but by that point, he said he knew he wanted to devote his career to helping veterans. Fink had his first chance to do so as a disabled veterans outreach specialist with the Tennessee Department of Labor. But six months into that work, he heard that Sullivan County was hiring its first veterans service officer.

While Fink liked the work with the Department of Labor, he said he immediately knew that the Sullivan County position was the best fit.

» Military service:

— Spent 20 years in U.S. Army as a mortuary affairs specialist

— Traveled to 36 countries in his work of finding and recovering fallen military personnel

— Served tours in Iraq, 2004-2005, and Afghanistan, 2010-2011

— Retired as a sergeant first class



Photo by David Crigger/Bristol Herald Courier

“The VA is a very complicated system, and I learned working with some of these other veterans ... (that) they don’t have the resources that they need,” Fink said. “I get a lot of guys in here for stuff that they don’t even realize they’re eligible for. It does something for me to help these other people.”

After some online course work and a weeklong training session in Nashville, Fink became an accredited representative with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Essentially, that means that while he’s funded by the county, the VA has authorized him to help veterans submit their benefits claims.

Once his office opened, he quickly decided to put a waiting bench just outside the door, he said.

“I haven’t been accredited that long, but it stays busy here,” he said.

Between in-person and phone appointments, he estimated that he’s already seeing nine to 10 veterans a day. Some need hours of help filling out their paperwork, gathering evidence to support their claims or just understanding what information they need to submit to the VA, Fink said. Others are in and out after just a few minutes. Some show up simply wanting to talk.

“Their stories are amazing,” Fink said of his clients. “I’ll sit down here and have a cup of coffee with them if that’s what they want.”

Fink said the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed his ability to reach everyone who needs help, though. Because of safety concerns, he can’t take paperwork directly to veterans who are confined to their homes or nursing homes.

Some government offices have also gotten more challenging to work with, Fink said. For example, he’s trying to help the wife of a deceased veteran get the documents she needs to submit a survivor’s pension claim.

“She’s having difficulty locating her marriage certificate and (her husband’s) discharge paperwork, so I’m tracking that down through the National Archives,” Fink said. “But ... they have closed down as well due to this (pandemic). ... So it’s really put a strain on everything.”

But Fink stressed that he’ll do whatever he can to help Sullivan County’s veterans get the care they need.

“There’s entitlements that are out there that a lot of veterans don’t know ... they are entitled to,” he said. “I just want the information to get out that ... there is someone here to help.”