



Division of Veterans' Services

Secretary Robert I. Wilkie, U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs, Awards New York State Division of Veterans' Services the 2020 Abraham Lincoln, Pillar of Excellence Award for Innovative Program Delivery Supporting Veteran Families

The Honorable Robert L. Wilkie, Secretary of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) awarded the New York State Division of Veterans' Services the 2020 Abraham Lincoln Pillar of Excellence Award for Most Innovative State Program for New York State's *FreshConnect Checks* program. The program, a partnership with the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets (AGM), has distributed hundreds of thousands of dollars in farmers' market vouchers for veterans, service members and their families to access fresh food around New York State.

The U.S Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs' (NASDVA) worked together to establish the Pillars of Excellence Awards to identify and formally recognize innovative state programs that support or exemplify VA's strategic goals and priorities. Awards were presented for programs in three categories: Elimination of the Disability Claims Backlog, Improving Veteran Access to VA Benefits and Services, and Innovative State Programs. Each year, states submit the work and programs they have developed within their organizations to compete for an award in any of the above categories.

Director Jim McDonough of the New York State Division of Veterans' Services said, "We are honored to have earned the 2020 Abraham Lincoln Pillar of Excellence Award – a first for New York State and the Division of Veterans' Services - for Innovative State Programming. The *FreshConnect Checks* Program is a valuable tool for our assigned staff to initiate a first conversation with those we serve, our veteran families, in the most unobtrusive way. *FreshConnect* food vouchers meet veteran families where they are, in community settings, supporting outreach and engagement like no other product in the Division's portfolio. These simple conversations with potential clients simultaneously address hard-to-see food insecurity by offering access to affordable, fresh farm products. These exchanges between staff and veteran families often evolve into discussions about veterans' benefits, programs and services that people may have earned in service to our nation. The *FreshConnect* Program remains a

valuable opportunity to connect and engage with veterans and service members in their communities.”

New York State Agriculture Commissioner Richard A. Ball said, “Governor Cuomo’s FreshConnect Checks program is a vital tool that expands access to fresh, local foods for veterans and their families, and additionally supports New York’s farmers and communities. We are honored that the Department of Veterans’ Affairs has recognized this program with the Abraham Lincoln Pillar of Excellence Award, and are proud, working with the NYS Division of Veterans’ Services, to be a part of the award’s legacy of exemplary, innovative programs that put our veterans first.”

This year, New York State submitted for the award its enormously successful program, *FreshConnect* checks, which it partners with AGM on to provide each year. The *FreshConnect* Program began as a pilot program in 2014. The program provides booklets of *FreshConnect* checks to veterans, service members, and members of their families worth \$2 each (\$20 total booklet value), redeemable for fresh food products at New York’s farmers’ markets and farm stands. NYS AGM has continued its strong support of this program, doubling the funding available since the partnership began in 2014. In 2019, NYS DVS staff distributed \$200,000 worth of *FreshConnect* checks to be used across New York State.

In 2019, NYS DVS completed its most successful distribution year to date with the distribution more than 100,000 *FreshConnect* checks. In addition to their cash value, these items were valuable tools for “breaking the ice” at outreach events. Frequently, conversations starting with distributing the *FreshConnect* checks evolved to discussions about other Veterans’ benefits, programs, and services. These dialogues often led to the veterans, service members, or family members accepting DVS’ offer of follow-up meetings with a Veterans Benefits Advisor to facilitate connections to other available benefits and resources.

For more information on the FreshConnect program, please visit <https://agriculture.ny.gov/consumer-benefits-farmers-markets>.

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