FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: October 1, 2015  
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Boston: Volunteers of America Massachusetts hosted its 4th annual Veterans Leadership Dinner on Wednesday evening at the Seaport World Trade Center to raise funds to support veterans facing homelessness, unemployment, addiction and mental illness. Each year, supporters of this event change veterans’ lives with their generosity – and this year, donors made a particularly large impact.

The evening began with the presentation of the Capt. Thomas J. Hudner Award, given each year to a current or former service member who has gone unrecognized, but deserves to be celebrated. This year’s award was presented in memory of Mr. Robert Femino of Canton, Massachusetts. Femino was a long-time Board Member and friend of the organization, who unexpectedly passed away in February. He served as a Seabee, a member of the US Naval Construction Battalion, during the Vietnam War. The special award was received by Femino’s two sons, Adam and Bobby Femino.

Additionally, the Local Civilian Hero Award, presented each year to a person or an organization that shows determination and courage in taking on challenges within the veteran community. This year’s award was given to the Bergquist family of Norwell, Massachusetts, who were honored for the deep impact they’ve made through the nonprofit organization they founded, Cell Phones For Soldiers, which aims to provide free communication service to active-duty military members and veterans across the country. The award was received by Gail, Bob and Brittany Bergquist.

Tom Bierbaum, President and CEO of the organization said, “We are so grateful for the ongoing support we’ve received from the community for our veterans programs. This event brings together so many people who are passionate about serving veterans, and it’s their devotion, commitment and generosity that allow us to continue these programs year after year.”

Secretary of Veterans’ Affairs for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Francisco Urena, spoke and praised Volunteers of America Massachusetts and its programs for continuing to be a beacon of hope for veterans in need. The City of Boston’s Commissioner of Veterans’ Services Giselle Sterling also attended, greeting guests and thanking Volunteers of America staff for their dedication to supporting veterans’ initiatives.

Lastly, guest speaker and former client of the Volunteers of America Massachusetts veterans transitional housing program in Somerville, John F., shared his journey with audience members, giving a glimpse of how the consequences of PTSD changed his life. His message was deeply poignant: that individual veterans need encouragement to break through the stigma of mental illness and substance abuse, before consequences take over their lives. John’s heartfelt thanks to supporters was greeted with enthusiastic applause.

Volunteers of America Massachusetts is many things to many people. We are a trusted community provider, a passionate advocate for individuals struggling to get back on their feet, and a partner helping other community based organizations throughout Massachusetts. Volunteers of America Massachusetts provides vital social services to thousands of women, men, and young people each year. For more than 100 years, Volunteers of America Massachusetts has promoted an individualized approach to caring for
others, based on respect for each individual’s right to make informed, independent decisions about their health and happiness. To learn more, visit us online at www.voamass.org.