

Lehigh Valley Recognizes the Impact of Veteran-Owned Businesses

By Paul Muschick and Nicole Radzievich Mertz
LEHIGH VALLEY - In a cybersecurity command center in South Whitehall Township, Army veteran Michael Hawkins runs Netizen with the same discipline he once brought to the field to protect clients from digital assaults.

Twenty miles away, fellow veteran Chad Butters grows the grains he will use for Eight Oaks Farm Distillery's prized bourbon, using a regenerative farming practice that leaves things better than they found them.

Both are proof that service does not end when the uniform comes off.

"If you hire someone coming out of the military, you know what their skillset is, you know what their mindset is. You know what their work ethic is, what their so-called 'hard' and 'soft' skills are. Hard skills can be taught, soft skills can be much, much harder to teach but they are ingrained in you in the military," Hawkins told Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corporation (LVEDC) in a 2022 interview.

Netizen and Eight Oaks Farm Distillery are among the 500 veteran-owned businesses in the Lehigh Valley, employing about 5,000 people, according to the U.S. Census' Annual Business Survey 2022, the latest data available.

Veteran-owned businesses, which account for 4% of all Lehigh Valley businesses, play an important role in our economy.

Butters, an Army aviator for 25 years, said in a video by Discover Lehigh Valley that veteran-owned businesses strengthen communities because they "have a mindset of being purpose-oriented and community-oriented."

"The support that you give to that veteran-owned business is coming back to the community. There's no doubt that that veteran-owned business is concerned about making an impact that's a positive impact within their communities," he said.

Hawkins served as an information systems security officer and military police investigator in the Army. During his service, he was named one of the Army's "most proficient and capable leaders."

Netizen helps the military, manufacturers, regional banks, health care providers, and more prevent cyber breaches with security monitoring, compliance and vulnerability assessments, and penetration tests.

In the 2022 interview with LVEDC, Hawkins explained how his service prepared him to launch his own business.



"My background was technically law enforcement, but they found out I have unique skills when it comes to technology. I was appointed the information security systems officer for basically every unit I was in. I did similar work for the Department of Veterans Affairs in Philadelphia once I got out of the military," he said.

Eight Oaks Distillery, in Lynn Township, is a "farm to glass/farm to bottle" business with a 40-acre farm where it grows all the grains it uses

to craft a wide range of award-winning spirits, including bourbon, rye whiskey, vodka, and gin. It obtains other ingredients, such as apple cider for its apple jack, from nearby farms.

Eight Oaks partners with several veterans' organizations, including Tails of Valor and the Farmer Veteran Coalition.

Some of the employees at Eight Oaks Distillery and Netizen are veterans, too.

"If you tell a veteran this company or person has an emergency, that this is now our mission focus and it needs to be done by this date, then it's done by that date. The mission-focus and team orientation is really beneficial in this industry," Hawkins told LVEDC.



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