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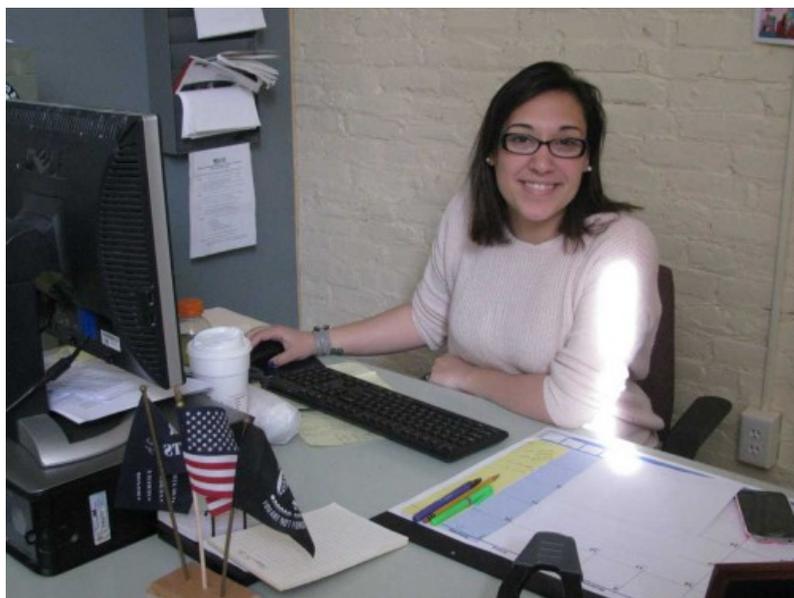
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Local veterans have a strong new ally

By MARK SARDELLA

WAKEFIELD — “When I really feel strongly about something, I don’t give up,” says Wakefield’s new Veterans Services Officer Alicia Reddin.



NEW VETERANS SERVICES OFFICER Alicia Reddin will help guide veterans through the often tricky maze of federal benefits’ rules and regulations. (Mark Sardella Photo)

That’s good news for veterans in the district that includes Reddin’s territory of Wakefield and Saugus. Reddin is replacing former VSO Andrew Biggio, who has moved on to join the MBTA Police.

Herself a U.S. Navy veteran, Reddin operated heavy equipment with the Navy SeaBees, using bulldozers and cranes to build roads and work the quarries in places as far away as Guam.

How she enlisted in the Navy is further evidence of her decisiveness and determination.

After she graduated from Melrose High School at age 17, Reddin didn't feel that she was academically ready for college. So she walked into a recruiter's office in Malden Square on a Friday afternoon before Memorial Day.

"I left for boot camp the next day," she recalls. "It was a great decision. I was glad I kind of dove in head first."

Returning to the states after active duty, Reddin joined the Navy Reserves where she worked as a career development counselor for enlisted men and women as well as officers, providing advice and guidance on career development, financial aid and educational benefits.

In 2010, she became a Veterans Services Officer (VSO) in Hingham where her counseling talents were recognized and she was moved into working with veterans and families who were affected by substance and alcohol abuse.

"That's how I accidentally fell into VSO work," Reddin says, "and I fell in love with it."

And now, in addition working full-time, the girl who wasn't ready for college is a PhD candidate at Lesley University in Cambridge.

In her new office in the basement of the McCarthy Senior Center on Converse Street, Reddin talked about the kinds of things a VSO does and what she hopes to accomplish in Wakefield.

or veterans Administration claims as well as applications for Chapter 115 financial aid from the state

Under Chapter 115 of Massachusetts General Laws (M.G.L. ch. 115), the Commonwealth provides a uniform program of financial and medical assistance for indigent veterans and their dependents. Qualifying veterans and their dependents receive necessary financial assistance for food, shelter, clothing, housing supplies and medical care in accordance with a formula which takes into account the number of dependents and income from all sources. Eligible dependents of deceased veterans are provided with the same benefits as they would were the veteran still living.

Reddin described Chapter 115 as basically a "homelessness prevention program." She cited examples of recipients who may be retired veterans on a fixed income who are not quite where they need to be financially to survive.

"This is where we can make a huge difference in quality of life," Reddin said.

Reddin also brings her expertise in career counseling to bear in new job. She says that a top priority will be helping veterans enroll in college or technical school and working with them on employment issues.

"We have a lot of unemployed and severely underemployed veterans," Reddin says. She plans to hold workshops on creating resumes and cover letters as well as providing individual assistance in job searching skills.

But it's not just the veterans themselves that Reddin is concerned with.

"There's a whole other population that cannot be forgotten," Reddin stresses, "and that's family members and widows of veterans. Recently, I've been working with a lot of widows."

Another duty is helping veterans' survivors with funerals and assisting funeral homes to make sure that military honors are done correctly.

Sometimes, she says, she simply "acts as an ear" for veterans and family members for whom "having someone to listen" can be just as important as any other service she provides.

One project that Reddin hopes to play a big role in is helping the town restore and maintain its veterans' monuments and memorials. The Civil War Monument on Veterans Memorial Common is an immediate concern as it has been showing signs of deterioration for years.

She recently got a commitment of support from the selectmen and Town Administrator Stephen P. Maio and

has contacted a company in Vermont about doing an estimate to determine what it would cost to refurbish the monument. Once the estimate is received, Reddin hopes that grants and private donations will pay for most of the upgrade. She plans to consult with Selectman Phyllis Hull, who spearheaded the successful project to replace the World War II Monument.

The other local veterans' memorials are also on her radar. "Every monument is as important as every other monument," she said. She noted that last year some cleanup of veterans' graves was done. She hopes to finish that project and then zero in on the monuments and make sure they are all in pristine condition.

Meanwhile, Reddin continues to actively pursue her PhD at Lesley University. She is doing her doctoral dissertation on female veterans and the challenges they face re-integrating into society.

When she's not working or going to school, Reddin enjoys spending time with her husband, Michael, her daughter Rosalie, age 7 and her son Gabriel, 18 months. And of course there's the dog, Neely, named after former Boston Bruins star Cam Neely.

"We're huge Bruins fans," she says.

In the spring and summer, Reddin also plays softball in a women's league in the city Somerville where she grew up before moving to Melrose.

Where does she get the energy to do so much?

"I'm definitely a Type A personality," she says. "I'm friendly and persistent and a little bit loud. I think that sometimes that's how you have to be to get things done – but still with a smile."

And Wakefield's gregarious new VSO wants to meet you.

"Even if you don't need service, if you're a veteran I'd like to shake your hand and meet you," Reddin says, "just to know you and so you can know me."

Visit the local district Veterans' Services web page at www.mwsveteranservices.org and sign up to for the mailing list to get news and announcements.

Follow VSO Alicia Reddin on Twitter @wakefieldVSO.

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