



**Volunteer
Transportation
Center, Inc.**

24685 State Route 37, Watertown N.Y. 13601 (JEFFERSON AND LEWIS COUNTIES)
P.O. Box 515, 3 Commerce Lane, Canton N.Y. 13617 (ST. LAWRENCE COUNTY)
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www.VolunteerTransportationCenter.org

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Annual North Country Chili Cook-Off to Again Return with Modified Format Due to Pandemic

(WATERTOWN, NY) – The Volunteer Transportation Center, Inc. (VTC) will host its Annual North Country Chili Cook-Off again in a modified format this February.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the annual event was typically held at the Dulles State Office Building in Watertown on the first Saturday of February. Earlier this year, the cook-off returned in a modified format for the entire month of February. Due to high transmission rates of the virus and increased state protocols, the decision has been made to again host the event – which will mark its 23rd year – in a modified format.

“The North Country Chili Cook-Off was known for drawing hundreds to thousands of people each year prior to the pandemic. And we hope to be back to that point in the future,” said Jeremiah S. Papineau, Director of Communications and Foundation Director for the VTC. “However, as we continue to navigate the pandemic, we have to continue to do so in a responsible way that still keeps the spirit of our event alive.”

Last year, committee members put their heads together to figure out just how to do that for the 2021 event. They decided to focus only on the “Professional” category and hold the competition among participating restaurants throughout Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence Counties. Instead of a one-day event, the new version of the cook-

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off was hosted during the entire month of February in a “pub crawl” format, where those wishing to sample and vote on their favorite entries were able to do so at local restaurants.

The event, said Mr. Papineau, was a success, with 28 restaurants participating in the tri-county area. L.E.A.’S Diner in Heuvelton received the most votes for the People’s Choice Award and was declared the winner. Meme’s Diner in Felts Mills collected the most donations, earning the Top Fundraiser Award, raising \$560.

“Thanks to our amazing sponsors, participating restaurants and the support of the community, we were able to host an event that worked out very well,” he said. “We were overwhelmed with the support not just because it’s the cook-off and people look forward to it but because it’s also a very important fundraiser.”

The North Country Chili Cook-Off raises money for the VTC to provide transportation for Veterans and their families. Last year’s event raised \$28,000. The event typically raises upwards of \$40,000 in a normal year, said Mr. Papineau.

“Despite this event raising less than we would have seen in any other year, we are extremely happy to even have been able to host it,” he said. “The need for transportation has not ceased over the past year-and-a-half.”

That’s evidenced in the increase of clients served since the start of the pandemic, Mr. Papineau noted. In addition, at the onset of the pandemic, the VTC suspended its practice of placing more than one client in a vehicle as a way to limit the spread of COVID-19. While a commendable safety practice, it does come at an additional cost, he noted.

“With our suspension of combining rides, that has led to an increased cost for mileage reimbursement. That’s because we’re assigning more than one driver for a trip that, in the past, we could assign to only one,” he explained. “While it’s the right thing to do, it does come at an increased cost for the VTC.”

Restaurants interested in participating in the 2022 North Country Chili Cook-Off can do so again for free by filling out an entry form and either enter a chili from their existing menu or create a special chili for this event. Chefs are encouraged to offer samples of their entries at a cost of their choosing – which could even be free or free with purchase. The idea will be to get as many people to vote for their entry as possible. Those wanting to cast votes will be able to do so online through the VTC website, www.volunteertransportation.org, or by submitting their votes at participating establishments. The entry with the most votes will receive a plaque denoting them winner of the special edition People’s Choice Award.

In addition, participating restaurants will again be able to win a Top Fundraiser Award by collecting donations for the Volunteer Transportation Center. The participating team with the highest amount raised will receive this special recognition.

The cook-off, chaired by Amy McEathron, Carthage, is a great opportunity to enjoy some amazing chili and raise funds to support the transportation of Veterans and their family members by dedicated volunteer drivers.

“I am so excited that we are still capable of putting together a great pub crawl-style Chili Cook-Off to support such an amazing organization that supports our Veterans and our community,” said Mrs. McEathron. “With the pandemic, the costs have increased, so this is a great way to eat chili, visit restaurants and support the VTC.”

“I am so thankful for the community support that our tri-county area has for the VTC,” she added. “I say thank you for everything everyone does in this trying time.”

Mrs. McEathron — who is a past 5th District President and past Jefferson County President for the American



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Legion Auxiliary Department of New York — also appreciates “the many years of support from our community and the Legion Family.”

The North Country Chili Cook-Off Planning Committee is in the process of seeking restaurants interested in participating in this February’s event as well as sponsors. Those interested in participating or sponsoring the 23rd Annual North Country Chili Cook-Off may reach out to Mr. Papineau at 315-303-2590 or via email at jeremiah@volunteertransportation.org. The deadline to enter the cook-off or to be a sponsor is **Friday, Jan. 14, 2022**. This is to ensure chefs and sponsors are listed in a program for the event which will be both available online as well as printed and distributed.

ABOUT THE VOLUNTEER TRANSPORTATION CENTER

The Volunteer Transportation Center, Inc. (VTC), established in 1991, drives thousands of miles each year assisting community members in Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence Counties and beyond. Over the last 30 years, this essential non-profit organization has provided rides to health care appointments, food sources and other critical needs destinations for residents.

In 2020, our volunteer drivers provided 24,926 charitable trips over 913,921 miles in Jefferson, Lewis and St. Lawrence Counties. Of those miles, 404,009 originated in Jefferson County, 146,376 in Lewis County, and 363,536 in St. Lawrence County. That amounted to approximately \$406,695 in mileage reimbursement issued to volunteer drivers.

The staff, Board of Directors and volunteer drivers look forward to a time when transportation to community activities and services is accessible to all North Country residents regardless of economic or specialized needs. But for now, the mission drives on — striving to provide transportation to health, wellness and critical needs destinations utilizing volunteers and mobility management for anyone who has barriers to transportation.

For more information about how you can help the Volunteer Transportation Center, about its upcoming events, or to become a volunteer driver, contact the agency in Jefferson and Lewis Counties at 315-788-0422, in St. Lawrence County at 315-714-2034, in Oswego County at 315-694-6644, or Western New York at 585-250-5030. Volunteers drive their own cars, set their own hours and receive mileage reimbursement but, more importantly, make a difference in the community. To learn more, visit www.volunteertransportationcenter.org.