

MVA TODAY

The monthly newsletter for L.A. County Department of Military & Veterans Affairs

FROM THE HELM

Targeting success: Marshalling resources based on need

Like any commodity, resources are finite. In our case as a department, those resources are threefold: funds, time and personnel. We only have so much money to allocate using a certain number of employees within a set amount of time.

Likewise, our targets are finite. Not unlike a target package on the battlefield, we can only set our sites on so many targets. So the key to success is strategically targeting our resources at the right targets.

Here at MVA, this means finding veterans where they are and addressing the needs specific to their individual requirements. We know that many veterans are in need of housing, whereas others are involved in the justice system. By creating divisions designed to address those situations, it helps marshal the right amount of resources to target a specific need.

The Housing Services Division is a relatively recent addition and continues to staff up under their new supervisor. Working with our partners at the county's Chief Executive Office – Homeless Initiative (CEO-HI), People Assisting the Homeless (PATH) and Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) we're housing veterans through the master-leasing program. I mentioned in the last issue that we'd recently filled apartment complexes in Burbank and West Hollywood and are actively looking for additional landlords with whom to partner in this endeavor.

For those veterans who find themselves involved in the justice system — or justice-involved vets (JIV) — we continue to partner with the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department to identify them during intake, address their needs during incarceration, and help them reboot their lives upon their release.

Speaking of identifying vets and their needs, we are working with other county



Jim Zenner

departments to screen those applying for services to determine their veteran status. That contact info is then funneled to MVA and a VSO follows up with them personally for connection to services and benefits.

We also recognize we're part of a larger community, and that community includes another at-risk subpopulation: foster youth. Veterans and foster youth can both learn from each other, so last month MVA launched a partnership with the Department of Youth Development and foster youth organizations as we seek to connect those they serve with military veteran mentors on a recurring basis here at Patriotic Hall. Veterans have a lot of life lessons to impart, and creating opportunities to do so benefits not only the recipient, but also the provider. *(For more on this see page 5.)*

As the department expands, our targets increase, which necessitates a need for greater resources. To better marshal the resources we have (and those we will have) MVA kicked off a series of meetings, workshops and focus groups

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MVA By the Numbers

Number of veterans served at Patriotic Hall: 990

Number of claims filed: 3,528

Total sums awarded from all claims activity: \$764,691

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Bob Hope Patriotic Hall

1816 S Figueroa Street
Los Angeles, CA 90015
Phone: (877) 452-8387

Bob Hope Patriotic Hall is open five days/week!

Hours of Operation

Monday	8 am – 5 pm
Tuesday	8 am – 5 pm
Wednesday	8 am – 8 pm
Thursday	8 am – 5 pm
Friday	8 am – 5 pm

From service to civilian: Nonprofit program facilitates transition

First in a two-part series about veterans reintegrating into civilian life.

Transitioning out of the military has never been easy, but it doesn't have to be as hard as it used to be. There are a number of agencies and nonprofit organizations that offer programs to help, reaching out to active duty personnel before their term of service expires to help them actively prepare for civilian life.

One such program is Onward Ops, a nonprofit that gives vets helpful tools and connects transitioning military personnel, or "members", with knowledgeable "sponsors," often veterans themselves, to support a service member's reintegration to civilian life.

Jeremiah Pitts, a Veterans Service Officer with the L.A. County Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, is one of those sponsors. He is also designated by Onward Ops' national leadership as a transition coordinator, overseeing placement of members with sponsors up and down the state of California.

Sponsors are volunteers trained for their role by Onward Ops, and they bring to the equation knowledge of their localities and personal experience of how difficult it can be to settle into civilian life. They can point members to health benefits, housing, and employment or just be a sounding board as the service member finds their way.

Pitts recalls back to 2010 when after four years in the Navy he was jobless and sleeping on a friend's couch in the Bronx. On a tip, he spent the last of his money to travel upstate to attend a job fair. He found employment, and on his first day on the job he had to learn to drive with a clutch and then pilot a big truck full of light fixtures into New York City. The stress, fatigue, and the cold of that winter's day brought on a bout of pneumonia.

"I was coughing up this terrible stuff," he says. He wasn't sure what to do. "I didn't know that you could go to the VA hospital, I thought that was for wounded vets like Lieutenant Dan, or like Forrest Gump," he laughs.

Fortunately, his parents, both Army vets, told him over the phone to get to a VA hospital. There he was assigned a doctor and given medicine — to his surprise all for free. Up until that point, he says, "I didn't really know what I was doing. There wasn't really anyone to help me."

That's the problem Onward Ops was built to solve, starting even before a person leaves the military: "If you're still a service member and you haven't been in the civilian world for a long time, things have changed," he says. "Having a veteran who's gone through it already, a mentor, a sponsor, is super helpful."

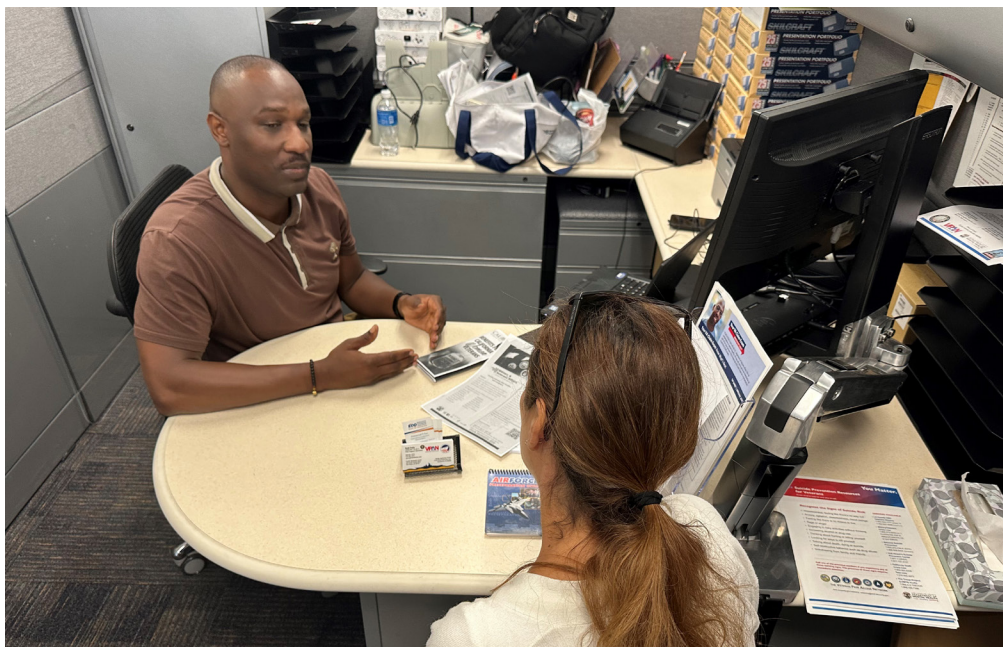
Every year roughly 200,000 service members leave the military. Out of this number, Onward Ops estimates that 30% end their service without a job lined up, while 71% neglect to sign up for VA benefits. Onward Ops addresses this situation, providing both practical and emotional support.

A program "by vets for vets," the program offers service members tools to help identify their transition goals and achieve them, along with a sponsor to mentor them along the way.

Within months of leaving the military, service members are offered the option to join Onward Ops when visiting their installation's Transition Assistance Office. Should they choose to enroll, they'll receive an account for the Google Workspace web platform, a cloud-based suite of apps that provides a virtual office and networking platform, including e-mail, video conferencing, business software, and ample secure document storage.

The platform encourages consolidation and organization of the slew of documents that service members generate via the discharge and transition process, including military and medical records, healthcare and benefits claims, and applications for housing and employment. They can also get AI-

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Veterans Service Officer Jeremiah Pitts is tasked with pairing sponsors with service members reintegrating into life as civilians in California.

Non-veteran finds another way to serve

Lance Asamura knew as a kid he wanted to serve.

“I’ve always had a sense of providing service, whether to the community or to veterans,” says Asamura, now a Veterans Service Officer at L.A. County’s Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (MVA). “It’s always been a passion for me.”

While growing up in LA, he’d seen his father volunteering his time, making a difference in their Crenshaw neighborhood, organizing self-empowerment activities for young people to keep them motivated and off the streets.

He’d heard other family members and friends talk about their military service. His uncles told stories of being stationed in Thailand during the Vietnam War.

And the neighborhood revered his late grandfather, one of the heroic generation of Japanese-American soldiers who volunteered for World War II, even after being ordered from their homes and into the now- infamous internment camps.

His grandfather served with the Military Intelligence Service, legends along with the 100th Infantry Battalion and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Known for uncommon bravery and effectiveness while enduring staggering casualties, they emerged as the most highly decorated troops in U.S. military history. The patriotism of Japanese Americans has never since been questioned.

Steeped in this legacy, Lance knew he’d serve too. But before he could sign up, one of those respected uncles suggested he’d get more out of his service if he went to college first. Asamura took that advice and enrolled in school.

During his studies, a part-time job in real estate paid so well that he set his books aside and became a mortgage broker full time. After eight years the profession imploded along with the subprime mortgage bubble in 2006. “I realized I’d better get a real job,” he says.

That “real” job came with the L.A. County Department of Mental Health, and

within a few years he was the first assigned to staff a new project called the Veterans Outreach Program. He’d go out in the field and find vets who needed mental health care but could not meet the qualifications for benefits with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

That assignment morphed into VALOR (Veterans and Loved Ones Recovery) program. Getting vets mental health benefits often required the help of other county departments. “I was asked to forge a relationship with MVA,” he says. He began to work closely with the supervisors and staff who would file paperwork for his clients.

“I got to know all the counselors, all the managers and supervisors because they would constantly see me sitting in their office with the clients I brought in,” he remembers. “The old supervisors took a liking to me. One day I just asked, ‘would I be able to take your test so I can better understand what I’m telling my veterans when I’m bringing them to you?’”

An unusual request, to say the least, but they agreed. He took and passed the test, even though he couldn’t file claims without being an MVA employee.

A few years later, when the MVA supervisors heard his program at DMH had lost its funding and Asamura was going to be transferred, they offered him a job filing claims at MVA.

He gladly accepted and now loves his work setting veterans up with the federal and state benefits they deserve. “Just doing what I do — to me it’s great.”

A hard and prolific worker, he’s known for the quantity of claims he files from his offices at the Culver City Veterans Center and the West L.A. VA Medical Center, scheduling clients, sometimes by the half hour.

He credits the large volume partly to the location of his office at the VA campus and the steady stream of vets who naturally come through that facility. “I come from a sales background,” he says, “So you under-promise and over-produce. Just by that nature alone, I try to do as many claims as I can for everybody.”

Otherwise, if he can claim any success as a VSO, he says he owes it largely to his enjoyment of connecting with the vets who come into his office, regardless of their background. “You’re not a number, you’re not just a claim I’m filling out,” he says.

“I like to think I try to make a connection with anybody that walks through my door,” he says. “It’s not just my passion for helping you as veteran, it’s also just finding something in common: maybe our families or shared stories, where we’re from, sports teams — anything.”

When not in the office filing claims, he spends his time with his family, including his wife of 14 years, Hope, and their ten-year-old son, L.J. They live in the Crenshaw

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Veterans Service Officer Lance Asamura and his son L.J. at an L.A. Lakers game in the Staples Center.

Onward Ops

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assisted help to create a resume that translates military skills, qualifications, and experience into assets for the civilian job market.

Not every Onward Ops member is required to have a sponsor. Upon signing up for Onward Ops, service members choose one of two options — to go as a “solo member” or a “co-op member.” Solo members interact with the program on their own, using the software assets and transition information specific to the locality where they expect to take up residence.

Those who opt for co-op membership will be matched with a local mentor. Well before they leave the military, members will be able to speak with their sponsor, to ask questions, get advice, and find out about housing, employment, healthcare, and education.

Sponsors are vetted and prepared for this role with certification training and check-ins with Onward Ops staff who can provide support and guidance.

Regardless of which Onward Ops path the transitioning military members choose, their intake process will start with a detailed questionnaire to create a profile that helps Onward Ops staff at the national and local levels get a sense of the members’ readiness, expectations, aspirations, and needs as well as any physical and mental health concerns.

Pitts says that one of the overarching imperatives of Onward Ops is to address the stress of the military-to-civilian transition, keeping a clear eye on self-harm among vets.

“Hopefully the little things we do with Onward Ops can help stop suicide among veterans,” he says. “We want to make a support system and let vets know that someone’s here for you — like if you have legal issues or need help with family issues, you can make a call.”

On their website, Onward Ops explains its mission to service members looking to sign up:

“The current process to transition from military service to life as a veteran is broken. There is too much information, often delivered too late, to provide a smooth landing. We are building a community where every new veteran has the tools, information, and guidance they need at the time they need it to achieve their goals in the next chapter of their life, and every destination community knows these new Veterans and their families are coming and can proactively receive them and connect them to the benefits and services they earned.”

Onward Ops was created in the spring of 2023 by the Expiration Term-of-Service Sponsorship Program (ETS-SP), a national non-profit organization working to help service members bridge the gap between military and civilian life. It claims to have enrolled 1,200 service members over the Onward Ops’ first year and expects these numbers to double in the next.

Our local ABC affiliate recently covered the Onward Ops program and one of their successful [sponsorships](#).

Asamura

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house he grew up in, not far from his parents and sisters.

He helps coach his son’s basketball team and takes him to karate class. “I’m nearly 50-years-old,” he says, “If anything, I’m staying active with my boy, playing golf, and just kind of chilling.”

Looking at the big picture, he says that though he missed out on military service, he is fulfilling his boyhood desire and his family’s belief in service. “In my sense — and I’m not shy about telling anyone — no, I’m not a veteran, but being here, I feel like I’m doing my service as much as I am able to serve them.”

Asked if any of his experiences with veterans particularly inspires him, he says, “Everyone one of them.”

When pressed, he offers the story of a Vietnam veteran who came from a military family. “Let’s call him ‘Bill,’” he says:

Bill came to me saying , “I didn’t do much in the military. I come from a military family. I don’t think I can get much compensation.” And he would just come by my office. Never would want to file a claim, but he would just sit there and want to talk. So eventually, and all of a sudden, we got pretty tight.

And he was telling me, “I feel comfortable at least telling you now. The reason why I didn’t file to get anything — I’m ashamed to say it — is because of MST [military sexual trauma] — something that happened while I was in.”

Actually, he could have claimed MST as part of a claim for PTSD, which qualifies for some substantial compensation, but he never wanted to have to share that with anybody, even if sharing it meant getting compensated for it.

This guy was a very proud gentleman and didn’t want to tell anybody what happened to him, and it turns out that was the

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QUALITY AND PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION: Thank you to LA County Quality and Productivity Commission for visiting MVA on July 29. The visit was an opportunity to showcase the department's operations and priorities. The commission consists of 17 members with diverse backgrounds and expertise and its intent is to understand and support county department operations by promoting innovation, efficiency, productivity, and quality of services.



MENTORING FOSTER YOUTH: On July 23, MVA convened a meeting with the Department of Youth Development and foster youth organizations to forge meaningful connections between foster youth and military veteran mentors. Collaboration is key as we explore pathways for veterans to engage with our youth, utilizing Patriotic Hall facilities to build bridges and inspire futures.

Asamura

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reason he had washed out of the military.

He was so fully ashamed because his parents then, when he left the service early, would start saying, "All your fathers and brothers were able to do this. Why aren't you?"

So he separated from his family, and left where they lived in New York, and he moved out here to California. He had no education, and he was riddled with depression and PTSD because of all that had happened to him.

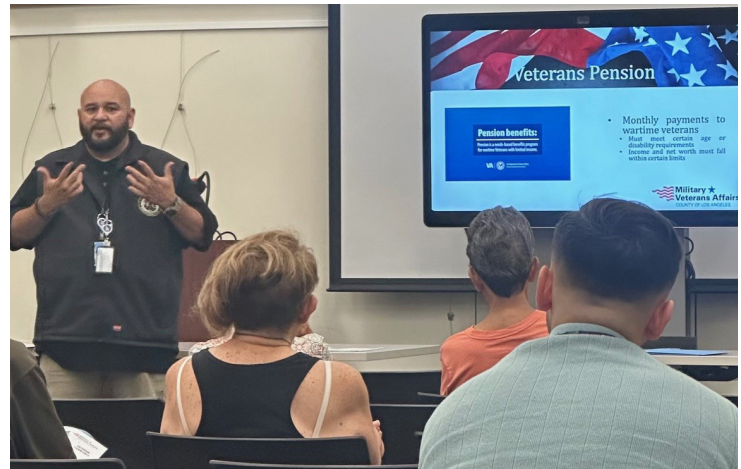
He never really got a job and just lived another 20, 30 more years out here mainly on Social Security disability, and then he started going homeless. I kept telling him, "Hey man, let's try to file a claim to get you at least some compensation. And finally I convinced him, and immediately he started getting compensation.

At first it's only a modest percentage, but he was like, "Oh, wow, now I can eat! Now I don't have to worry about food."

I said, "We're not done." And I kept helping him improve his claim, and over about a 3-year claim process, we finally got him to the full disability amount, 100%.

Within that span of time I also convinced him to go to counseling and he started realizing a couple of things: "Maybe I do need to go back and see my family. Maybe I do need to try to make amends before they pass away."

Long story short, one day he came running into my office. He was crying, and I thought something was wrong, and he says, "I'm taking your advice and my counselor's advice — I'm going back to New York, and I'm going to see my parents."



TOWN HALL: Veterans and family members participated on Aug. 14 in another Veteran Town Hall, this time graciously hosted by the Norwalk Library in Supervisorial District 4. Attendees learned about the services & benefits available to them with presentations by VBA, VHA, MVA, VPAN & PsychArmor.

Two weeks later, he calls me and says, "I tried to talk to my dad and all he did was just hug me and say, 'Where have you been?'"

So he's back with his family now — happy. I told him, "Hey, drop me a line sometime."

Zenner

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to create the department’s first strategic plan. More on that later, but it’s an exciting development which will literally shape the future of veteran services in L.A. County.

What we’re doing at MVA is gaining national recognition, as other municipalities seek to replicate our success and the success of other county initiatives like the Veteran Peer Access Network (which as I noted last month will come under MVA effective Oct. 1). To that end, I was honored to be appointed Aug. 1 as the vice chair on the Veterans and Military Services Committee of the National Association of Counties, or NACo.

NACo advocates for and promotes on behalf of 3.6 million county employees stretched over 40,000 counties. MVA and L.A. County have an opportunity in this space to serve as the driving force for dynamic innovation in the way this nation’s counties serve our nation’s veterans. So where we go from here in terms of how we marshal our resources and select our targets will serve as an example to others of what’s possible with the right plan.

Meet the Editorial Staff

Editor: W.R. Wilson

**Writers: Lee Ordeman,
W.R. Wilson**

Graphics: Ann Brandstadter

L.A. COUNTY VETERAN SERVICE AWARDS FOR JULY 2024

- Veterans Service Officer: Hector Castillo**
- MVA Support Service Staff: Stephanie Guerrero**
- Battle Buddy: Simone Silva (JVS-SD5)**
- Support Line Agent: Eduardo Madrid**
- VPAN Support Service Staff: Peter Hang**
- Community Partner: Jorge Marcia (DMH VPAN)**
- Creative Solution: Hector “Manny” Arroyo (JVS-SSVF)**
- Volunteer: No Nominees**

QUARTERLY AWARD WINNERS FOR 4TH QTR, FY 2024

- Supervisorial District: VPAN JVS-SD5**
- Program Manager: Jimmy Guevara (JVS-SD5)**
- Veterans Service Officer: Ricky Valenzuela**
- MVA Support Service Staff: JeNai Davis**
- Battle Buddy: Brock Milhorn (JVS-SD5)**
- Support Line Agent: Eduardo Madrid**
- VPAN Support Service Staff: Theresa Espinoza**
- Community Partner: Jessica Zarley (JVS-SSVF)**
- Creative Solution: Veronica Hernandez (JVS-SD1)**
- Volunteer: Kevin Strickler (JVS-SD5)**



**KEEP UP WITH MVA!
@LACMVA**



You're invited to the Los Angeles Veterans Orientation

L.A. welcomes military service members!

Thurs, September 5, 2024

5:30 PM - 7:30 PM

Bob Hope Patriotic Hall
1816 S. Figueroa Street
Los Angeles, CA 90015



Leaving military service?
Calling Los Angeles home?
This event will help set you on the path toward successful reintegration. Learn about all the resources and services available to you and your family and meet other veterans on the same journey. Network with potential employers and service providers in a casual environment... all designed to give you a soft landing in southern California!

Regardless of branch or time in service, don't miss this networking opportunity. If you have a family, you can bring them too!



Scan the QR code or utilize the following link to register for this event:

<https://bit.ly/4cfHGuz>

a person who has served in the military, regardless of discharge status or duration of service.

Vet·er·an
/'vedərən, 'vetrən/



The Steven A. Cohen Military Family Clinic at VVSD

Los Angeles Veterans Collaborative