

MVA TODAY

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

Times change, and so does MVA

There's a film under consideration for a number of awards this year about the emergence of legendary folk singer Bob Dylan entitled *A Complete Unknown*. One of his greatest hits is a song from 1964 you've probably heard, "The Times They Are A-Changin'".



Jim Zenner

That might be a good candidate for an MVA theme song at present, because at this department the times are indeed always changing. And, I might add, changing for the better.

The end of last year saw a lot of change: Acquiring Veteran Peer Access Network (VPAN) and the Veteran Suicide Review Team (VSRT), partnering with the Warrior Heritage Foundation (WHF), and kicking off the inaugural Women Veterans' Summit (with the second one on the way this summer). This latter initiative is a forum in which we highlight individual needs specific to women veterans like child and community care and advocacy to state and federal partners on their behalf.

Key priorities for 2025 include an intentional effort to create workflows and procedures. This is critical to sustaining the fast-paced growth we are experiencing. Another priority is strengthening our department fiscally. In other words, not undertaking programmatic growth this year which doesn't come with dedicated funding. A third key priority is looking for ways to help our employees grow professionally, because this benefits not just them but the department as a whole.

You've read in my recent columns about the dynamic role WHF will play going forward. We'll be relying on them to take over event planning, building space rental and other duties, thereby relieving

a significant administrative burden on our department. The foundation will also launch programming specific to transition, well-being, and historical preservation.

One note about that preservation piece: While Patriotic Hall has informative exhibits on many of our nation's conflicts, there is not currently one about the Global War on Terrorism. For me and many of my

contemporaries, that was our point-of-entry into our nation's conflicts and as such the building's exhibits are overdue for an update.

Times will continue to change from quarter to quarter. While there's not enough space here to delve into into each quarter's goals, I would like to brief you on Quarter One for Calendar Year (CY) 2025:

- Onboarding the National Veteran Foundation (NVF) and Veterans Stand Together (VST). These two Community-Based Organizations (CBO) are taking the place of another CBO, Battleship Iowa, as the teams responsible for VPAN in Supervisorial Districts 2 and 4
- Finalizing the CY2022 and 2023 VPAN annual reports
- Creating a legislative outreach and engagement plan to further codify the relationships we've been nurturing with our elected officials at all levels
- Recruiting an IT supervisor to oversee the exponential growth of this department and the incumbent technological requirements which accompany it
- Finalizing the MVA Fiscal Year 2023-2024 annual report

(Zenner continued on page 4)

FROM THE HELM

MVA By the Numbers: January

Number of veterans served at Patriotic Hall: 621

Number of claims filed: 2,521

Total sums awarded from all claims activity: \$2,356,503

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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

PACT Act brings life-changing benefits to veterans' surviving dependents



Veterans Service Officer Joel Castellanos at work in his office at Patriotic Hall.

With an untold weight upon her shoulders, Mrs. J stood at the desk of Joel Castellanos looking for help. The MVA veterans service officer offered her a seat.

“What can I help you with?” he asked.

She propped her cane against his desk in Bob Hope Patriotic Hall and pulled out a letter from the Veterans Administration — Final Notice: Her deceased husband’s veteran’s pension was cut off after an internal audit, and now she owed the VA \$96,000 in overpayments.

After a lifetime working an assortment of jobs, she had no employment-related pension, her savings were depleted, and she was already under water. Her sister was paying her rent — two months so far — to keep her in her Section 8 apartment. She didn’t know what to do.

Mrs. J sat quietly and listened as Castellanos told her they could ask for a debt waiver and plead hardship. Sensing she was a little hard of hearing, he asked in a slightly louder voice if he had her permission to review her husband’s VA records. She agreed, and with the access afforded him as a senior VSO and the sleuthing instincts honed by lengthy experience, he dove into the VA database.

For months she’d been receiving letters from the VA warning of a problem due to overpayment. The Survivors Pension was income-dependent, meaning her Social Security payments that started in 2012 had put her over the income limit. When VA auditors noticed the discrepancy, they cut off the pension and demanded back 12 years of payments.

She went from living with a modest sense of financial security to the prospect of eviction.

Castellanos delved deeper. He looked at the veteran’s discharge records and involvement with the VA. He noticed that in 2001 Mrs. J had qualified for the Survivors Pension, often called a “Widows Pension,” linked to her husband’s Army service, which included a year’s tour in Vietnam in 1967. This modest pension was available only to survivors with a low income.

Castellanos told her he’d see if they could get some debt relief from the VA. “By the way,” he asked, “could she tell him what her husband died of?”

Heart attack, she said. Did he have hypertension, by chance? Yes, she believed he did. Castellanos asked if she had his death certificate? No, she didn’t think so. He asked her to bring him a copy when she could, instructing her on how to retrieve one from county records, and wished her good day.

Castellanos had a hunch he might be able to do more than help Mrs. J with the debt. Since enactment of the PACT Act on August 10, 2022, the VA had greatly expanded its list of medical conditions linked to military service, possibly qualifying a veteran for a disability rating. In addition, some of these conditions were considered “presumptive” for veterans of the Vietnam War, Gulf War, and post-9/11 conflicts due to likely exposure to toxins. These conditions include a variety of lung ailments and cancers. If a “presumptive condition” contributed to the death of the individual, it would qualify their survivors for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation. DIC is based on circumstances of the veteran’s service and is not income dependent.

For vets like Mrs. J.’s husband, who worked moving supplies on the ground in Vietnam, exposure to the widely used defoliant Agent Orange was considered de facto and presumptive.

Since the PACT Act went into effect, retroactive claims had resulted in sizable payments to survivors, but not so much for veterans. While veterans could claim only back to the date of the law’s passage in 2022, their survivors were permitted to file claims all the way back to the date of a first denial of DIC benefits, possibly going back decades.

Further review of records showed Castellanos that Mrs. J had, in fact, applied for DIC in 2001, but had been denied under much stricter requirements. Castellanos knew that if her husband’s death certificate indicated one of the VA’s presumptive health conditions, she could

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Fire response continues: MVA partners with state, federal agencies to support Disaster Recovery Centers

L.A. County continues to stand with veterans affected by last month's fires. Since mid-January, the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs has joined with CalVet, the Veterans Administration, and not-for-profit partners to deploy subject-matter experts specializing in veterans services at each of the county's two Disaster Recovery Centers (DRC).

The non-residential DRCs, established by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, provide immediate and long-term assistance to county residents seeking to rebuild their lives with the help of federal, state, county agencies, and private-sector service organizations. The DRCs open daily at UCLA Research Park West and in Altadena. The Altadena DRC, which came on line at the end of January, absorbed operations of the Pasadena City College location, which shut down in early February.

The DRCs host a variety of entities, including FEMA, whose representatives help with shelter support and monetary relief. Besides CalVet, there are numerous state agencies present, including the Department of Housing and Community Development, the Department of Motor Vehicles, and the Department of Insurance. Besides MVA, L.A. County departments in residence include the Department of Public Social Services, the Department of Mental Health, and the Department of Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk.

Soon after the fires struck, Gov. Gavin Newsom ordered CalVet to coordinate a comprehensive inter-governmental disaster response for veterans. CalVet in turn issued a call-to-arms to all relevant veteran service agencies, including MVA.

MVA Director Jim Zenner enthusiastically dispatched veterans service officers and Veteran Peer Access Network (VPAN) peer support specialists to join the collection of agencies coalescing to offer help. This help addresses immediate cash needs, food insecurity, housing loss, lost records recovery, guidance for insurance claims, medical and mental health care, and help to navigate the various county, state, and federal benefits.



Pictured (from L): CalVet District Manager Alberto Alpasan, Steven Choi of VPAN Goodwill-SoCal, Anthony Rodriguez of CalVet, CalVet Secretary Lindsey Sin, MVA Director Jim Zenner, and MVA VSO Emanuel Lopez visiting the FEMA Disaster Recovery Center at UCLA Research Park West last month.

Seven days a week, subject-matter experts from MVA, CalVet, VA's Veterans Benefits Administration, and non-profit housing providers backed by VA's Supportive Services for Veterans Families (SSVF) have worked a veterans service desk at each of the two DRCs. The five-member teams provide a one-stop shop for veterans and their family members seeking services.

The teams include an accredited veterans service officer to facilitate applications and appeals for federal benefits. These VSOs come from MVA, CalVet, and distant Santa Clara County, which dispatched personnel to aid L.A. County early on. A representative from the VA's Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) is also there to help with vital document recovery.

A representative from CalVet's regional office is always there to help vets navigate the state's veterans benefits and explain how they can work in complement with federal and county offerings. Alberto Alpasan, CalVet's district manager, leads this effort.

In addition, one of MVA's VPAN peers is on hand to address pressing needs, such as housing, as well as physical and mental health. Working closely with VPAN on critical housing needs are representatives from several private-sector providers that are backed and funded by SSVF.

While the teams are always ready at their tables to receive veterans and their family members, they are also on their feet, moving about the halls, canvassing for veterans not yet aware of the special assistance available to vets and their families.

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Castellanos

(continued from page 2)

reapply and qualify for a slew of benefits, including a monetary benefit substantially greater than her Survivors Pension.

Castellanos told her none of this, not wanting to get her hopes up. If the death certificate listed hypertension as a contributing factor, her troubles were over.

Based on the what he'd been told, Castellanos started the paperwork for DIC, and crossed his fingers. Days later the lady walked in and handed him the death certificate: "hypertension", it read. He thanked her and told her he'd be in touch.

Over the ensuing months, she called him occasionally to find out how the claim was going — when she might know something. He could hear the urgency in her voice. She was struggling to get by. Her debts were mounting.

On October 9, 2024, only six months after the claim had been filed, Castellanos logged in to the VA portal, and got the word he'd been waiting for. As he read, he let out a triumphal laugh.

The \$96,000 debt was forgiven. In addition, she qualified for DIC with an immediate monthly benefit of \$1,600, substantially more than the \$930 per month her Survivors Pension had paid her. Not only that, she would also receive back payments for DIC benefits dating back to when she first applied in 2001, minus the pension she'd already received. It was a sizable sum, tax free, adding up to \$248,000.

Along with the ongoing monetary benefit, she also qualified for healthcare, a home loan, an exemption from property taxes, and military base shopping privileges.

He knew she'd be receiving a letter from the VA informing her of her good fortune, but experience told him to give her a heads up — sometimes the direct deposit precedes the letter, surprising and even panicking the recipient.

He called her, but she didn't pick up. He left her a message: Good news, he said, the VA was forgiving the debt, and don't be surprised to find an additional \$248,000 in your checking account.

Remembering what she'd been through — having her pension cut off and demanded back — he told her not to worry: "That's your money," he said, "It's not a mistake."

Zenner

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There's clearly a lot of work going on and a lot of work on the horizon, but the important thing is while we're getting the work done, we're also learning. Case-in-point is the renewed emphasis on workflows and procedures. This priority stems from lessons we've learned as an organization as we deal with the challenges of change management inherent to the pace of transformation we're experiencing.

As always, I would like to close with an acknowledgement that none of this is possible without the collective efforts of our team and the support of the community we serve. Thank you.

Fire Response

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From the beginning, Joaquin Enriquez, supervisor of MVA's veterans services division, has served as point of contact for the CalVet-initiated effort. With support from MVA Director Zenner, he helped to organize the teams and now leads their day-to-day operations.

"This program launched fairly quickly," he said. "We assembled a formidable cast with a focus on commitment and intent, and then that same day we mobilized."

"Since day one, our team members — county, state, and federal — have been there for our vets and their families," he said.

MVA's first contribution to the disaster response came in January, when the department mobilized to help the Red Cross house and feed veterans evacuated from the West L.A. VA campus. For a few days, MVA hosted a shelter at Bob Hope Patriotic Hall for more than 130 veterans until the all-clear was given.

Enriquez stated that so far at the DRCs approximately 750 veterans and family members have been served by the veterans service teams.

He said MVA's immediate concern since the start of the program has been to make sure that no vets or family members are in need of shelter. "We've been very responsive in getting folks into housing or some kind of a shelter plan," he said, "whether that's using traditional methods and hotel vouchers or emergency funding to avoid any gaps when someone's lacking a roof over their head."

Enriquez has heard a lot of positive feedback from vets and their families. "From what I see, we've been very impactful," he said. "We answered the call-to-arms by the state and, by extension, CalVet, and we've met the veterans where they are, in the impacted

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RECENT EVENTS

HOUSING FAIR: On Feb. 20, Patriotic Hall held a Veterans Housing Fair during which more than 100 veterans received crucial support. The event, hosted by MVA, was made possible by partners including the City of Los Angeles, Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, Los Angeles County Development Authority, Delete the Divide, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs HUD-VASH Program. Landlords also attended, creating a valuable connection for veterans in need of stable housing while providing the landlords an opportunity to make a meaningful and life-changing impact in the lives of those who served this nation.



Fire Response

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areas, so they wouldn't have to make travel arrangements or commute to get to us."

The disaster recovery center at UCLA is scheduled to close March 14, while the mandate for Altadena's DRC runs through March 26. Enriquez said he's heard no decision on whether either center will operate past those dates, but regardless, services will continue to be offered, whether at those locations or elsewhere.

For information on the DRCs, including a complete list of agencies in attendance, Enriquez recommends L.A. County's DRC webpage: <https://recovery.lacounty.gov/recovery-centers>.

Meet the Editorial Staff

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L.A. COUNTY VETERAN SERVICE AWARDS FOR JANUARY 2025

Veterans Service Officer: Dennis Campos (MVA)
MVA Support Service Staff: Todd Tortorici
Battle Buddy: Enrique Conchas (JVS-SD5)
Support Line Agent: Christopher Waters (DMH-VMFS)
DMH-VMFS Support Service Staff: Edith Escobedo
Community Partner: Nicholas Tamer (U.S. Vets)
Creative Solution: No Nominees
Volunteer: Norma Pena (DMH-VMFS)

QUARTERLY AWARD WINNERS FOR 2ND QUARTER FY 2025

VPAN Supervisorial District: Battleship Iowa-SD2
Program Manager: Daniel Hermosillo (Goodwill-SD3)
Veterans Service Officer: Keith Niesen
MVA Support Service Staff: Jose Garcia
Battle Buddy: Maria Partida (JVS-SD5)
Support Line Agent: Valerie Molina (DMH-VMFS)
DMH-VMFS Support Service Staff: Briona Castillo
Community Partner: Dylan Streets (U.S. Vets)
Creative Solution: Aimee Bravo (SoCal Grantmakers)
Volunteer: Jeff Collins (Marine Corps League Detachment)



KEEP UP WITH MVA!
@LACMVA

COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES DEPARTMENT OF
MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

The Los Angeles Veterans Orientation

March 6, 2025
05:30PM TO 07:30PM

Bob Hope Patriotic Hall

1816 S Figueroa
St, Los Angeles,
CA 90015

Register today
via Eventbrite



<https://bit.ly/4i4s9la>



Join us at LAVO, where we support newly transitioned service members and those new to Los Angeles in making a successful shift to civilian life. From navigating essential resources to expanding your social network, we provide the tools you need to thrive.

LAVO serves as a gateway to connections and resources in Los Angeles. This event fosters peer networking and builds strong support systems for veterans of all ages.

