

MVA TODAY

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

FROM THE DIRECTOR

2024 off to a promising start as MVA tackles the issues head-on

The year has barely begun, but the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs has charged in like there's no time to spare. Following a flurry of events during which the building hosted committees, agencies, non-profits, elected officials and even a concert... there's still more to come. But these are all related to the direct approach we're taking, which basically constitutes a frontal assault on the challenges facing our veterans.

JUSTICE-INVOLVED VETS

We continue to break new ground when it comes to veterans involved in the justice system. Following on the heels of the unanimous Nov. 7 Board motion, the Lived Experience Advisory Committee held their first meeting at Patriotic Hall on Jan. 10. This group of formerly incarcerated veterans leverage their own unique backgrounds to better inform policy recommendations as they relate to this particularly vulnerable subpopulation. Additionally, the department has a Veteran Service Officer (VSO) assigned specifically to our jails to track all self-identified veterans for connection to services and character of discharge upgrades.

MASTER-LEASING

While the concept of master-leasing is nothing new, it is new on the veteran homelessness front. The way this will work is the county Chief Executive Officer-Homelessness Initiative (CEO-HI) will work with MVA to allocate funds which are then transferred to the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA). MVA and CEO-HI find landlords willing to participate in the program, MVA and VA match unhoused veterans with the apartment complexes, and then LAHSA pays the rent.

What's exciting about the business model we've adopted is LAHSA signs a



Jim Zenner

three-year lease with the landlord, which means the landlord doesn't have to worry about collecting rent from another government agency in addition to the tenant: LAHSA covers it all. The added security of the three-year lease in this arrangement is meant to attract higher-end developments in a wider range of zip codes than before. This incentivizes more veterans to avail themselves of the program.

What this all boils down to is security: Security for the veteran and security for the landlord, and with security comes stability.

HOMELESSNESS

Whenever a veteran has an appointment with one of our VSOs a question they're asked is if they're at risk of becoming homeless or if they currently are experiencing homelessness. Last month, 64 veterans identified as such. We then work with our partners on the VA-led One Team to address their condition. This is complicated work, in part because the process can be complicated, in part because human beings can be complicated. But what's not complicated

MVA By the Numbers

- Number of veterans served at Patriotic Hall: **1,344**
- Number of claims filed: **2,306**
- Total sums awarded from all claims activity: **\$1,386,028**

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is the determination of everyone on this team to put an end to veteran homelessness, one veteran at a time if necessary.

The fact that our ops tempo is high is nothing new, but some of the programs we've developed are in fact new. Just like introducing a new weapon system to the battlespace, these programs present new and innovative ways for engaging the enemy. As we learn how best to leverage these new capabilities, we'll be better positioned to take on the challenges facing our veterans head-on, and I'm optimistic about our prospects.



John Oppenheim, MVA Volunteer

Volunteer installs software and a vision for volunteering at MVA

When John Oppenheim first walked into Bob Hope Patriotic Hall he was impressed by two things: its beauty and its intimidating grandeur.

He imagined himself as a veteran seeking help, walking into that cavernous lobby and seeing no one but a security guard at a desk. “It could feel daunting,” he says.

During Oppenheim’s tour of the building that day in July, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (MVA) Director Jim Zenner explained his vision. “He wanted a more welcoming and personable environment for veterans,” Oppenheim recalls.

Zenner imagined staffing a concierge desk with volunteers who could welcome guests, answer their questions, give tours, escort clients to their appointments, perhaps with a Veteran Service Officer, or just have a chat and make sure they are comfortable waiting.

Oppenheim regularly volunteers helping elderly vets and has experience starting up a volunteer program in service of vets. “Some have called me an ‘advocate’ for vets — oh, no,” he laughs, “I’m an activist!” When he’s seen a problem with services for vets, he tries to fix it. So when Zenner explained his vision, Oppenheim understood completely: To best take care of veterans, the MVA will need to take care of volunteers as well.

Oppenheim is no ordinary volunteer. With 50 years of experience implementing business software, the retired executive and consultant volunteers much of his time installing dedicated software for nonprofits, including for volunteer management, as he did at a veterans service organization in Long Beach. After his meeting with Zenner, Oppenheim set out to do the same for MVA.

By November, he had connected a volunteer management software package with a new volunteer-intake portal on the MVA website. By January volunteers were already using the system.

Oppenheim says the software, Better Impact, is “the best there is.” It allows volunteers to use a computer or smartphone to easily manage the administrative tasks of scheduling assignments and shifts, tracking hours, and assuring compliance with state-mandated auditing.

And it’s scalable, he says, meaning that increasing the number of volunteers won’t overwhelm MVA staff with administrative duties. Instead it will free them up to better serve more clients with the help of those volunteers

The results can be transformative. He points to the experience of the Aquarium of the Pacific, where he saw how a “start-up” program for volunteers grew to 500 people without significantly burdening staff. “I’m an evangelist when it comes to using software and doing it right,” he says.

Oppenheim envisions volunteers will have a broader impact than just greeting visitors at Patriotic Hall. With the help of the software, volunteers can match their skills, abilities, and even professional expertise with opportunities for service, allowing MVA’s HR department to match the volunteers with jobs that make proper use of their talents, even assisting VSOs. He says, “In my other place where I implemented the software, the case managers came to rely on the volunteers.”

Oppenheim bemoans organizations that don’t make the best use of their volunteers and sees himself as a good but all-too-rare example of a volunteer using his professional experience and skills in the most effective way. “I’m an anomaly,” he says.



Air Force veteran and entrepreneur John Oppenheim has been instrumental in shaping the new volunteer initiative at MVA.

His experiences volunteering at other veterans service organizations haven’t been great: “They act like — you should feel lucky we’re going to let you volunteer here.”

He says that to keep volunteers they have to feel welcome and valued: “You’ve got to put them to work, you’ve got to care about them, you’ve got to take care of them, and many organizations don’t know how to do that.”

He says that won’t be the case at MVA. “Jim [Zenner] will take care of them,” he says.

“I’m excited because we need so many volunteers, because these older vets are isolated and lonely. Sometimes you just need somebody to go out and talk to them — not a psychologist, just a buddy.”

MVA helps disabled vets get the “DV” license plates they deserve



Veteran Service Officer Jeremiah Pitts (on right) assisting two veterans on a recent visit to Patriotic Hall.

Jeremiah Pitts loves helping veterans get the benefits they deserve, especially when it means helping a disabled vet get their Disabled Veteran (DV) license plates.

“We sign off on it, and they’re be so happy when they go to DMV to get their plates and get their registration waived,” says the Veteran Service Officer (VSO).

Every day from his desk in Bob Hope Patriotic Hall, the VSO helps disabled veterans figure out how to get DV license plates. Once these vets understand what documentation they need, it can be quite easy, he says. The paperwork and process aren’t as complicated as many of the vets have been led to expect.

Those veterans whose official discharge form (DD214) shows they are 100% mobility disabled no longer need a doctor to sign off on the DMV’s application form. Instead, VSOs can sign off on their own paperwork, a form VSD-001, thanks to a California law passed in 2020 that streamlined the process.

“And it is a quick process, too,” says Pitts. “You’re not in here for a couple of hours — we get you in and we get you out.”

The benefits of having DV tags can significantly help a disabled vet. The DMV waives the cost of the plates and the registration in perpetuity. And then there are the sweeping parking privileges: The tags permit the driver to park in handicap-designated parking spaces as well as many curbside locations forbidden to those with normal California tags.

It wasn’t always this easy. Before passage of the state law in 2020 (A.B. 408), the process could be notoriously time-consuming and bureaucratic, requiring the VA to provide documentation and approval by a physician.

In addition, says Pitts, staff at the DMV can be unfamiliar with the intricacies of special benefits for veterans. As a result, there is a lot of confusion and misunderstanding among vets regarding the DMV benefits.

Now county VSOs across California as well as private physicians can handle the simplified process, allowing vets to bypass the VA.

Pitts points out that the DV plates should not be confused with California “special recognition plates” designating other kinds of special veteran status, such as Purple Heart, Medal of Honor, or Prisoner of War. Qualified disabled vets can still get special recognition plates through the DMV, in which case their disabled status would qualify them for a blue Disabled Persons placard that can be displayed when parking.

Besides being able to help vets with DV plates, VSOs will also sign off on forms allowing vets to get a “Veteran” designation on their driver’s licenses, though no benefit extends from the designation.

A lot of vets don’t know about the DV benefit or how easy it now is to apply for it, says Pitts, who began working as a VSO at MVA in October after holding jobs serving vets in other capacities, including at the VA.

“Until I came to MVA, I didn’t even know about this,” he says. “And I know a lot of other veterans who don’t know about this who would benefit from it.”

The Navy vet says he personally understands the importance of this benefit. “I have mobility issues too, not 100%, but if I did, DV tags would help me greatly.”

“Many veterans aren’t aware of the benefits available to them,” Pitts continues. “We are here to help, and we are here to educate them on the benefits that they’ve earned, [in some cases] with their own body.”

RECENT EVENTS



On Jan. 9, Patriotic Hall hosted a Veteran Suicide Mortality Review site visit with Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Veterans Administration, including Dr. Matthew Miller, Executive Director of Suicide Prevention. The group discussed the mortality reporting process, timeline for the various stages of reporting and offering support to families as part of the Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans and their Families.



Despite a high-wind advisory, well over 100 vets and their family members attended a Jan. 10 Veteran Town Hall at the Lancaster library with Supervisor Barger's office in attendance. The event featured presentations by the VBA, VHA, MVA, PsychArmor and a variety of other reps including the office of Cong Mike Garcia (CA-27), VPAN, Antelope Valley Veterans Center, MHALA and Vets for Veterans.



Modern Warrior Live took over Patriotic Hall Theater on Jan. 17. The show follows one combat veteran's struggle, connecting with the audience through music and narration. Law enforcement and first responders joined veterans and their families for an evening of live entertainment.



There was a successful convening of the One Team on Jan. 11 led by VA and the community at Patriotic Hall. Veteran-serving programs enhanced connections for vets through networking while creating geographically-based case conference action plans. The vision is to build upon last year's successes, which included surpassing the goal of housing 1500 vets by more than 100. Housing placements are up 38% since One Team has begun.

L.A. COUNTY VETERAN SERVICE AWARDS FOR DECEMBER 2023

Veteran Service Officer: Joel Castellanos (MVA)

Support Service Staff: Jose Garcia (MVA)

Battle Buddy: Gerardo Perez (JVS-SD1)

Support Line Agent: Scarlett Adewale (DMH VPAN)

Community Partner: Jessica Peak (ELAC)

Creative Solution: no nominees

Volunteer: Michael Miser (DMH)

Meet the Editorial Staff

Editor: W.R. Wilson

Writers: Lee Ordeman,
W.R. Wilson

Graphics: Ann Brandstadter



KEEP UP WITH MVA!

@LACMVA



presents:

Gallery of Heroes

African-American Military History Month

Speakers include:

- Bobby McDonald, USN, recognizing the Buffalo Iron Riders
- Tonya Savice, USAF, Creative Expressionist
- Trayvon Harper, USN, Graphic Designer/Photographer



To register for this event



Scan the QR code above
Or used the following link:
<https://bit.ly/4aXvy2l>

February 7th, 2024

10 AM - 1PM

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

For questions about this event, please contact: Tatiana Rosas, trosas@mva.lacounty.gov