

MVA QUARTERLY REPORT

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

FROM THE HELM

MVA: The buck stops with us



Jim Zenner
MVA Director

President Harry Truman used to have a sign on his desk reading “The Buck Stops Here” and the meaning is clear: At some level, those in charge must take responsibility. That’s how we feel at MVA when it comes to caring for L.A. County veterans and their families, the buck stops with us.

Some of those bucks necessarily go to travel as we represent the department and the county. This month that

meant short trips like the one to Long Beach for the Southern California Veterans Conference and a little further down the coast for the CalVet Leadership Summit in San Diego. Here at home, we hosted our 3rd annual Patriotic Hall Open House. (*Read more about these on page 7.*)

Speaking of meetings, we’ve been meeting a lot with our teammates at the Department of Mental Health (DMH) as we integrate Veteran Peer Access Network (VPAN) into our department while figuring out how best to work with the rebranded Veteran & Military Family Services (VMFS) at DMH. The latter will be moving away from the navigator and peer model toward an FSP, or Full Service Partnership, designed to deal with vets and family members experiencing severe mental illness.

Meanwhile, VPAN at MVA will continue connecting vets and their families to the same services they’ve always offered like housing, employment, income and food insecurity assistance, just to name a few. Bottom line: The public will see no change in service as we manage this transition. To

ensure we continue to streamline services without interruption, we’re meeting with all the VPAN Supervisorial District teams. We started that process last week at the Battleship Iowa, meeting with SD2 and 4.

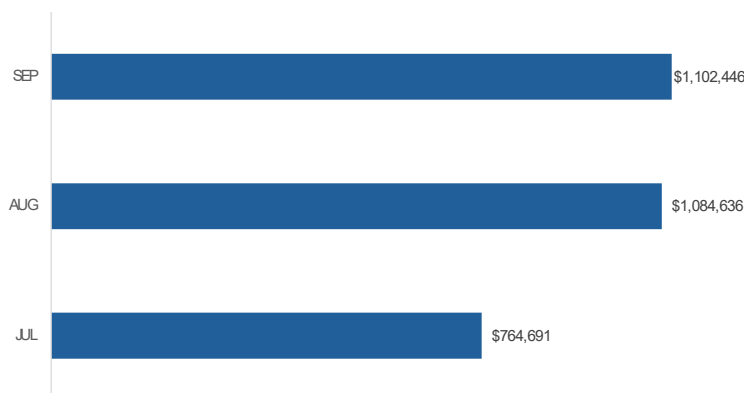
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FY 2025 1st Quarter in Review

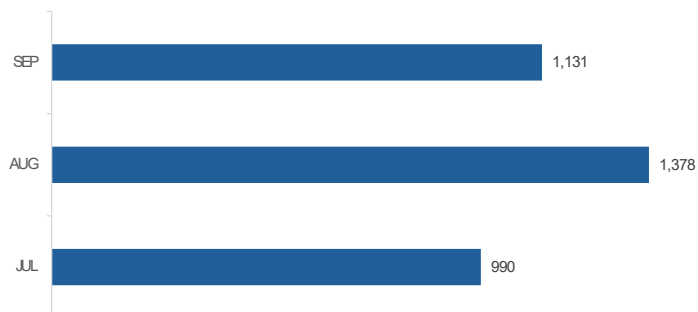
Total Sums Awarded From All Claims Activity



Number of Claims Filed



Number of Veterans Served at Patriotic Hall



Stephanie Guerrero and the open door

Stephanie Guerrero's office door is always open.

The executive secretary to MVA Director Jim Zenner wants you to know she's there for you.

"I never really shut my office door because I want people to know that they can walk in whenever they need something," she says, "I want them to feel the same support that I felt — it's my way of giving back."

She's talking about how she felt nearly eight years ago, starting out as an intern with the Building Operations Division and then an inexperienced typing clerk in the Veterans Services Division.

"I appreciated the assistance, patience, and the guidance that I received then," she says. "I'll never forget that I wouldn't be where I am now if I wasn't provided the same support myself when I was just starting out — little eager beaver just wanting to learn."

She smiles to think of those days. "That's how I was. I just wanted to learn, like, 'Teach me!', you know. I would just sit by people, and I'd watch them," she says. "I think that's how I was able to move up, because I just was hungry, I wanted more. I didn't want to stay where I was at."

While just an intern in the Building Operations Division, she had to learn quickly. The building manager at the time was often out sick, and so his duties, including the scheduling and booking of meeting rooms and other facilities in the building, fell to her. She also managed its maintenance. "Everyone would look for me, as I was to some extent managing the building."

She credits Tatiana Rosas for helping her through that period. Rosas had experienced something similar, having to step in during absences of a previous building manager and helping to oversee the renovation of Bob Hope Patriotic Hall, all while holding down her main job as executive secretary to the director. Rosas understood the younger woman's plight and took her under her wing.

"She was my mentor," Guerrero says. "She provided guidance. She allowed me to pick her brain a lot, and she really helped me through that time and to grow in my career. I relied on her very heavily."

Rosas, who is now executive secretary to Chief Deputy Director Zuleyda Santana, continues to support her protege. "We're very good friends," Guerrero says. "She's someone that I can trust. She's kind of like a second mother to me. She's always encouraged me, like, 'You can do it, you can do it!' She's pushed me. She's great."

A year into her initial two-year Career Development Internship, she was offered a full-time position in the Veterans Services Division, providing clerical assistance to Veterans Service Officers (VSO), even though, she says, she was still struggling to learn everything and wasn't yet up to speed for the required typing exam. "I think they saw that I was a hard worker and considered an asset to them, especially because I was mentored and trained by Tatiana, the executive secretary to the director."

In 2019, Rosas had to step away from her job as executive secretary to the director due to medical leave. Guerrero was tapped to fill in for her mentor.

Taking on a more demanding role with much more responsibility, it was sink or swim, but again Guerrero could rely on her colleagues to help her figure it out. Rosas could advise her by phone, and her colleagues, particularly those in admin and HR, were



The Guerrero family: from left, Stephanie, Jason Jr., Aleenah, Audrinnah, and Jason.

— and have always been — there for her. "We're a solid team," she says. "I know I can count on them."

She's been in the position for five years now, made permanent in 2021. Since Zenner took over in 2022, the pace and workload have increased steadily. "Now we're so much bigger, we've been growing at an accelerated rate since Jim came on board."

What's it like? "Fun, exciting, thrilling," she says without hesitation.

"It is a wild ride. I feel like I'm on a roller coaster and you get that adrenaline rush," she says. "That's how it feels every day — it's intense."

"It's constantly moving — every day is different," she says. "I just get so many

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Zenner

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We also held the first-ever SoCal same day claims clinic this week at Magic Johnson Park. The VA has been holding them across the country since the first one held in Colorado. This is a natural extension of the Modernization Act which has streamlined and automated the claims process, meaning that while my Vietnam veteran father had to wait 3-5 years for a claim to be processed, veterans today need wait only 3-6 months. Now that's the kind of progress I truly wish my father would've lived to see.

This claims clinic was not only a novel approach to the claims process here, it also presented a unique opportunity to help us find the roughly 75% of veterans living in L.A. County who are not service-connected. Utilization of VA services is somewhat lower in L.A. than the national average and wondering how many Vietnam vets, for example, are not on our radar keeps me up at night. If you know of one, we want to meet them!

A legal process we can get started for veterans at a claims clinic—or during any appointment with a VSO—is discharge upgrades. The Pentagon recently announced that 800 veterans unfairly discharged for their sexual orientation under prior discriminatory policy had their discharges upgraded to honorable. This can make a huge difference in someone's life, particularly as it relates to employment opportunities. But there are thousands of veterans who still haven't found the resolution they deserve. (Read more about the Pentagon's announcement [here](#).)

Finally, the National Association of Counties announced last week that our efforts to end veteran homelessness were being recognized for the unique blend of collaboration and innovation we've brought to the challenge. Together with our One Team partners, we will end veteran homeless.

Guerrero

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inquiries, so many requests. I'm multitasking all day long."

To get it all done, her workday starts at 7 a.m. "I'm one of the first ones who arrive to work and typically the last one to leave," she says. "I'm not even joking — there've been times when the security guard has had to tell me it's time to go.

"It's just because I have so much work. It's a big responsibility," but she's not complaining: "It truly is a privilege, you know, and I don't take it lightly. It just is a lot."

She lists some of the things she'll do in a day: She'll send out correspondence, get the director's signature on any number of items, review and proofread documents, arrange his schedule, including arrangements for visitors, meetings, speaking engagements, and travel, and she logs his travel expenses for reimbursement.

One of her most exacting responsibilities is the ongoing management of VSOs' applications for training, which is required for accreditation with the state. On deadline she shepherds the process of collecting their personal information for letters requesting to attend the school. "There's just a long list of items that I have to include in the letter. And right now, I'm tracking for five new employees," she says. "I have to just remind myself they don't know the process."

It's painstaking work, but she feels that's what she's there for, that's why her door is open. "I'm here to assist, I'm here to help, and that's what I do. I mean, I do that at home, I do that at church, I do that with my family," she says. "I'm just here to serve, really — that's all it is."

The days are long, but when she finally makes the long commute home to Norwalk, she looks forward to seeing her husband and children — two daughters, 18 and 15, and a son, 11. Once home, she might go for a walk with her husband, check on her father who's blind and lives alone, or if it is a Wednesday, set up for Bible study. She and her husband host the weekly gathering for neighbors, friends, and fellow church members.

On the weekends Guerrero, the eldest of seven siblings, spends time with her extended family — lots of nephews and nieces — and does errands and chores for her father. "I'm his caregiver. I share that responsibility with my sister," she says. "Thank goodness I have her because I don't know how I would do it all by myself."

Once in a while she'll head out alone and make time for herself, something she's teaching herself to do. She'll treat herself to a manicure or hair appointment or do something else fun "because I do notice that I'm constantly serving others a lot."

The family spends Sunday, "the Lord's day," at church and attends two services. "The one I usually sit in and get fed the Word, and then the second one we serve." She also leads the church's youth ministry.

She says her faith has helped her find a foundation for her life and sense of service. It gives her a sense of stability and safety that she did not know or enjoy as a child. "You know," she reflects, "when you're younger, there's a lot that's out of your control."

"That's probably why I am the way that I am, why I make it such a high priority to put others first and to serve them," she says. "And I love kids, so I serve in kids ministry."

Army vet finds fulfillment in changing others' lives



U.S. Army Specialist Ricky Valenzuela takes a moment before heading out on patrol in Baghdad during September 2007.



Ricky with his wife Janet and daughter Calley Ann in Acton, Calif., last October.

Ricky Valenzuela remembers the day his toddler asked him and his wife about their jobs. His wife said she was a teacher, which pleased the girl. When she asked, "Daddy, what do you do?", Valenzuela didn't know what to tell her.

He worked in the high-intensity, dog-eat-dog world of global logistics, competing to sell speed-of-delivery to clients across the country so that the products people sold and ordered online arrived on doorsteps the quickest.

"I was a logistics manager, running warehouses throughout the country and internationally — a broker." Managing distribution centers and supply chains, he competed for clients by orchestrating the sourcing and movement of products around the globe, then warehousing and delivering them faster than the other guy — something he calls "selling time."

His answer puzzled the little girl, and it left Valenzuela feeling troubled.

"The work made me a lot of money," he says, "but in the end, you know someone's getting screwed over sometimes." He wished he could have the same job satisfaction and sense of purpose as his wife.

That's when he made the switch to veterans' services. He found a job with Mental Health America of Los Angeles (MHALA), helping homeless vets get into stable housing by means of federal grants. Working three years at the nonprofit's Palmdale office, he rose from outreach worker to case worker and then assistant program manager.

"The work was satisfying," he says. "When you went home at the end of the day, you knew you were helping people, helping them change their lives."

His work caught the eye of Keith Niesen, a senior Veterans Service Officer with L.A. County's Department of Military and Veterans Affairs. Also working in the Palmdale area, Niesen found Valenzuela a reliable partner in helping disadvantaged veterans. They teamed up when down-and-out vets needed both housing and health care.

"We worked hand-in-hand," says Valenzuela. "It helped the veterans, obviously,

because when someone's suffering from mental health problems or substance abuse, and on top of that having no or low income, getting service-connected disability is life-changing. The money can actually make the difference between just placing someone in housing and actually making sure they're permanently housed and don't fall back out of housing."

They worked so well together that last year Niesen suggested he apply to MVA for a VSO position that was opening up in Palmdale. It worked out, and for the past year Valenzuela has manned the MVA desk at Veteran Peer Access Network's Supervisorial District 5 Rally Point, handling more than a 100 service-connected disability claims a month.

Now he's helping veterans receive a fuller range of benefits, from education to mortgage help, special driver's licenses, discharge upgrades, healthcare, and especially disability pay. "It's a better job and on top of that you get to do something more impactful than just putting vets in housing," he says. "You're changing their lives forever by getting them service-connected."

Being a veteran himself helps Valenzuela connect with his clients. His nearly seven years of service in the U.S. Army (2005-2012) included an extended 18-month deployment in Iraq as an infantryman with the 1st Cavalry, 2nd Stryker Regiment, starting with the 2007 troop surge.

Following his service, Valenzuela started a business degree in the California university system. He found he preferred online study instead, so he finished his bachelor's with the University of Phoenix, "the Harvard of online universities," he says wryly.

He calls working in Palmdale "a blessing," since he already lived there and grew up in the area. "I used to commute down to

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A conversation with Lt. Col. Patricia Jackson-Kelley is a delight

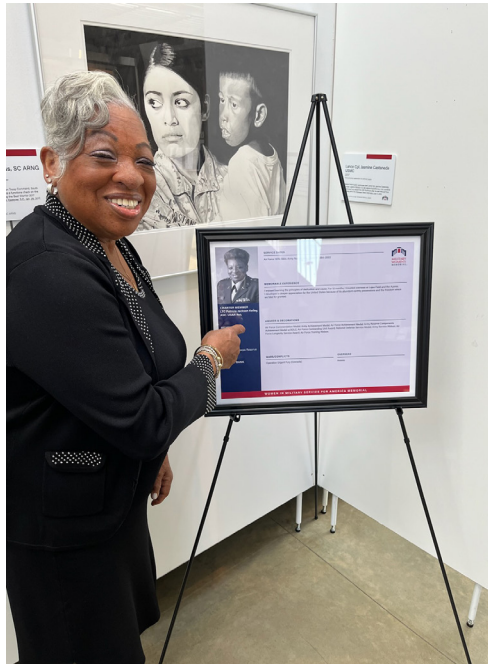
When you find her at the monthly meetings of L.A. County's Veterans Advisory Commission, where Lt. Col. Patricia Jackson-Kelley represents the 2nd Supervisorial District, she'll be approachable, happy to talk, easy with a laugh, and as willing to listen as she is to share her experiences and thoughts on veterans' issues.

When asked about her accomplishments, her voice gets quieter, perhaps shy, but she's quick to share credit, as when pressed about her work at the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center, where she finished her nursing career as the Women Veterans Program Manager. "We accomplished a lot," she admits.

During a 26-year military career, active duty and reserves, she earned the rare distinction of serving in three branches — Air Force (active duty) and Army, Navy, and Air Force Reserves. As a charge nurse at the VA's West L.A. Medical Center, she managed a challenging 40-bed substance abuse ward in which women were commonly placed among a majority of male patients. Later she rose to the role of Veteran Women's Coordinator (currently called Women Veterans Program Manager) — one of the first 21 individuals appointed to this position in the VA system. As such she was able to address such equity issues, identifying and implementing recommendations for the improvement of the health and safety of women veterans.

While at the VA Medical Center, she also served as an initial board member of U.S. VETS. She served on the Foundation for Women Warriors board of directors, is a former president of the National Association of Black Military Women, and served as Commander of the American Legion Jackie Robinson Post 252. Appointed by the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, she served on the Sexual Assault and Harassment Prevention Task Force Working Group. She also served on the Advisory Committee of the VA Center for Minority Veterans.

Of all her accomplishments, she says she is most proud of her work at the VA



Retired Lt. Col. Patricia Jackson-Kelley points to a display featuring her biography upon her induction into the U.S. Army Women's Foundation Hall of Fame at the Military Women's Memorial in Arlington, Virginia, last year.



Patricia Jackson-Kelley and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin attend a celebration honoring the all-black, all-female 6888 Central Postal Directory Battalion at the Military Women's Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery on June 15, 2022.

Medical Center on behalf of women. Upon assuming the role of Women Veterans Coordinator, her work to address inequities in the treatment of women was ample. "There were no considerations for the unique needs of women veterans," she says. "The canteen didn't even sell sanitary napkins, and the canteen manager was not the least bit interested in addressing this need."

Among the challenges she faced, there was no space dedicated for a women's clinic, and she was constantly competing to allocate clinical hours for women in a space shared by a general surgical clinic. For mammograms women had to undress in a hallway behind an improvised shower curtain.

She says, "Before I left, by my forging ahead and my aggressiveness, making sure that those things got done, we had a state-of-the-art mammography unit, we had a dedicated women's clinic, and we had programs that were dedicated to women veterans."

Jackson-Kelley has been recognized nationally numerous times for her accomplishments. To name a few of her accolades, she was named the VA's Southern California Woman Veteran Of the Year and received the PFC Gladys Schuster Carter Trail Blazer Award from the National Association of Black Military Women. She also received the City of Los Angeles Hall of Fame Award, and the Los Angeles County African American Employees Association awarded her its Crystal Eagle Award. In addition, she has received public commendations from President George W. Bush and former VA Secretary Robert McDonald.

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VSO in View

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LA — like Burbank, Glendale, Santa Clarita, Long Beach — all over the place. Now that I don't commute, I can't complain."

Less time commuting means more time spent with his wife of 15 years and 7-year-old daughter. And when he's not at work or at home, he's likely driving her around to Girl Scouts, gymnastics, or dance classes. On the weekends the family is likely to head off to one of the many parks up and down the coast or in the mountains with their camper-trailer in tow.

Having lived and worked in Palmdale so long pays off. "Doing the job I did before and having those contacts and being connected to the community, I definitely have a better sense of the veterans here," he says. For instance, he maintains working relationships with the offices of state Sen. Scott Wilks and U.S. Congressman Mike Garcia.

He says, "I know the community. I'm part of the community groups and nonprofits I worked with at my previous job."

Those include Vets4Veterans, People Assisting the Homeless, the VA's Antelope Valley Vet Center and, of course, his previous employer MHALA, who can help with housing in particular. He collaborates with these groups regularly.

"It's a referral basis," he says. "They send me people, and then when I know vets need their services, I send them right out the door and straight to them."

The cases he likes working on the most tend to be when veterans come in wanting to appeal a denial of a claim.

"That's pretty fun to do," he says, "because you're helping them unravel why the VA said no, and then how do we get the VA to say yes. What evidence is missing — was it a legal thing or did the VA miss something? And going through it with them, digging into the case, and actually filing what they need and helping them get service-connected, that's pretty cool."

He remembers an older man who came to him wanting to appeal the repeated denial of a disability claim. Seeking only 10% disability, the veteran suffered from tinnitus caused by noise exposure during service in the Navy.

Without much difficulty, Valenzuela figured out the problem. The VA had simply failed to locate the man's official military personnel file (OMPF) with the Naval Reserve. Valenzuela found the OMPF and submitted the records along with a new claim for service-connected disability benefits. The result was an award of significant back benefits plus an on-going monthly benefit going forward. In addition, the vet was awarded a sizeable reimbursement for a VA housing loan funding fee. It would have been waived had the man's disability rating been handled in a timely manner.

"That [reimbursement] was off of one little claim. With one clerical error the VA was trying to say he wasn't a vet, when in reality they just didn't have his records from the Navy," Valenzuela says. "He was pretty excited."

The two are still working together on increasing the veteran's disability rating which would increase his monthly benefit. Seeing the process through can pay off in big ways, Valenzuela says. "These vets are not only getting their back pay — now they're getting a monthly payment for the rest of their life."

"In this line of work, at the end of the day, no one's getting screwed over," he reflects. "Instead, you're helping them."

Jackson-Kelley

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Last year Jackson-Kelley was inducted into the U.S. Army Women's Foundation Hall of Fame. The Foundation gives the award "to recognize service that reflects extraordinary inspiration and patriotism," according to its website.

"That was the most incredible experience of my lifetime," she says. She felt humbled to be ranked among generals and senior enlisted officers who had such inspiring, trailblazing biographies.

"I was just so proud to rub shoulders with and stand among such people," she says. "It was an awesome experience."

She credits any success she's had to the inspiration and example provided by her paternal grandmother and mother: "the two most influential women of my lifetime."

"While young I lived primarily with my grandmother," she says, "My grandmother was a very strong, uneducated but very intelligent woman.

"My mother was the person that believed in education. I can remember telling her that I had no intentions of going to college. And she said, 'Oh, yes, you will go to college,'" Jackson-Kelley says with a laugh. "I wanted to work and make money. You know, that was my goal. And she said, 'You can work, but you will be going to college.' And sure enough, I did."

At the time they lived in Washington Heights in New York City. "I started out as a nurse's aide where my mother was also a nurse's aide, at Bellevue Hospital. And I can remember the respect that she had from people at the hospital, staff and patients alike.

"She was very soft spoken, very gentle, but you did not want her to get her dander up," she laughs fondly. "You know, she was quite different than I am. She had very little to say, but when she spoke, you listened."

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PATRIOTIC HALL OPEN HOUSE: MVA joined with the Department of Mental Health & the Sheriff's Department to host their 3rd annual Open House on Oct 4. Panel discussions also included CalVet & County Veterans Service Officers from across the state and focused on the latest in services for vets & their families and what to expect in the near future.



STATE OF THE VETERAN: On Oct. 2, the Southern California Veterans Conference descended on Long Beach, where Director Zenner took part in a panel discussion about how county government is concentrating its efforts aimed at assisting vets & their families through a unique blend of dedicated leadership & innovative initiatives.



CALVET LEADERSHIP SUMMIT 2024: Thank you @mycalveteran for hosting a successful 2024 Leadership Summit Oct. 6-9 in San Diego. This event provided an opportunity for Director Zenner and MVA leadership, partnering counties, and community partners from across the state to discuss critical priorities affecting the veteran community. Together, we reaffirmed our dedication to ensuring that California's veterans are the best served in the nation. Thank you also to @teamstepusa for providing critical resources to military and veteran families experiencing food insecurity.

Jackson-Kelley

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Today, it's Jackson-Kelley to whom people listen. She speaks from years of experience in veterans' issues, women's issues, health care and policy. As the longest-serving member of L.A. County's Veterans Advisory Commission, she reports to 2nd District Supervisor Holly J. Mitchell while collaborating with fellow commissioners to develop policy recommendations for the Board of Supervisors.

She is happy to see an increased level of engagement and activity within the Commission. As a result, she feels, the advisory body is enjoying more relevance with the county Board of Supervisors. "Our voices are being heard," she says.

She attributes this vitality to the tone set by the Commission's chair, Anthony Allman, and to Jim Zenner, director of MVA. "Anthony is all into what he's doing," she says, "And he definitely has done an excellent job. We've made some remarkable headway under his leadership."

"With Jim Zenner at Patriotic Hall," she says, "you really feel welcome as a veteran, and you can see that — oh my God — his heart and soul are just poured into 'What can I do next? What can I do to enhance the overall experience of the veteran?'"

Looking ahead, she'd be glad to see better veteran turnout to hear speakers and attend informational meetings and Commission meetings.

At a recent meeting of the Commission, the manager of the West Los Angeles VA Medical Center's Women Veterans Program came to speak about improved offerings for women. Jackson-Kelley was disappointed by the level of attendance for such an informative talk and discussion. "We need to do more to enhance attendance at Patriotic Hall," she says.

The commissioner says she also intends to look at veterans' employment within the county government. To that end she hopes to see updated statistics on the county's hiring of veterans, broken down in various ways, including age, ethnicity, and gender, in order to compare these figures with those of past years.

"I'm hoping to find out how many veterans are employed by Los Angeles County, and if the county is really doing their part as far as taking care of veterans, as far as hiring them and how many are in leadership roles," she says. "I'd also be interested in knowing if there are any issues with the county's hiring of veterans — for instance, if some employers are having concerns about veterans possibly having a history of PTSD."

The Veterans Advisory Commission meets every 3rd Wednesday of the month at 1:30 pm. Meetings are held in-person at Bob Hope Patriotic Hall (1816 S Figueroa St, Los Angeles, CA 90015) and streamed virtually.

L.A. COUNTY VETERAN SERVICE AWARDS



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

Meet the Editorial Staff

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September 2024

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VMFS Support Service Staff: Sarah Vongsack

Community Partner: Dominic Lopez (West LA VA)

Creative Solution: Joel Castellanos (MVA)

Volunteer: Skyler Frias (VA)



KEEP UP WITH MVA!
@LACMVA



EMPOWER TOMORROW MENTOR TODAY!



About Us:

At BBBSLA, we foster one-to-one mentorship matches that ignite the power and promise of Los Angeles' youth. Our program is all about making a difference while building meaningful connections and lasting memories. Volunteer as a mentor and become part of a community that is making a BIG impact!

Flexible Time Commitment



Got 4 hours a month to spare?

- 2 outings per month
- 2 hours per outing
- Choose a schedule that works best for you and your Little!

Ongoing Support



BBBSLA is here to help with:

- Activity ideas
- Hosting group events
 - Frequent Check-Ins to see how you and your Little are doing!

Ready to make a difference?



SCAN TO APPLY



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