

MVA QUARTERLY REPORT

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

FROM THE HELM

Remembering our sacrifices by serving those who served



Jim Zenner
MVA Director

Twenty-one years after the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom — an engagement with profound consequences for many Americans, including many of us at MVA — we find ourselves remembering each other's sacrifices by seeking new and innovative ways to continue serving those who served and make the system better for future veterans.

This includes fraud prevention. Ever since President Biden signed the PACT Act into law in August 2022, there have

been those seeking to exploit the claims process to their own advantage. This is nothing new. Predatory "claims sharks" have always been swimming close to the shores of veterans and their families, offering assistance in navigating the murky waters of filing claims in exchange for a fee.

The fee, of course, is not necessary. County Veterans Service Officers are accredited by the state and are available to help veterans and their dependents navigate the sometimes-confusing process for free. To that end, pending legislation in the state senate ([S.B. 1124](#)) and the U.S. House ([H.R. 1139](#)) are designed to nullify fraudulent contracts that otherwise commit veterans to thousands in fees for services that may or may not be rendered, but in all cases could be accomplished pro bono by an accredited VSO.

Vetpro, the database our VSOs use to track the status of the veterans we serve, is getting on *InfoHub* so we can explore the possibility of using that platform for matching up with our fellow county departments. This would allow us to leverage the shared data, furthering our

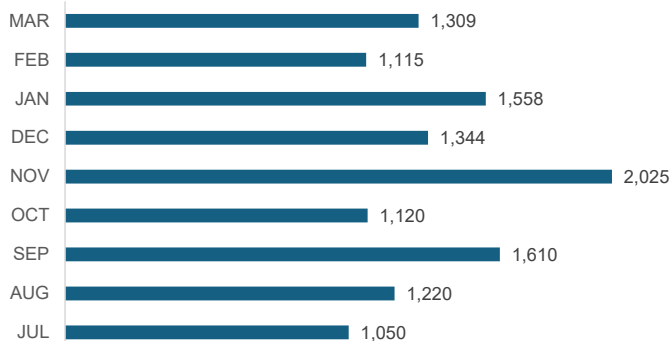
(continued on page 3)

In this issue

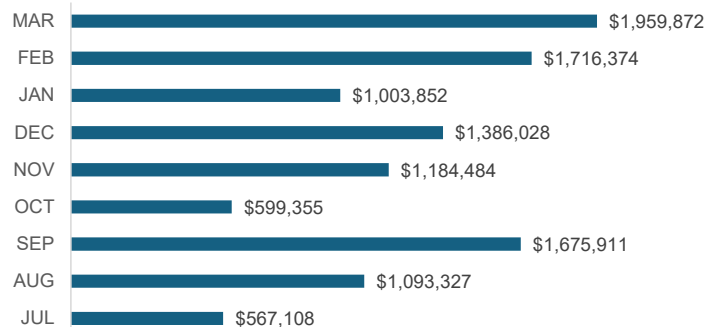
From the Helm	1
Spotlight on Support	2
Claims & Benefits	4
Chief Deputy Profile	5
Recent Events	7
Awards	8

FY 2024 YEAR-TO-DATE

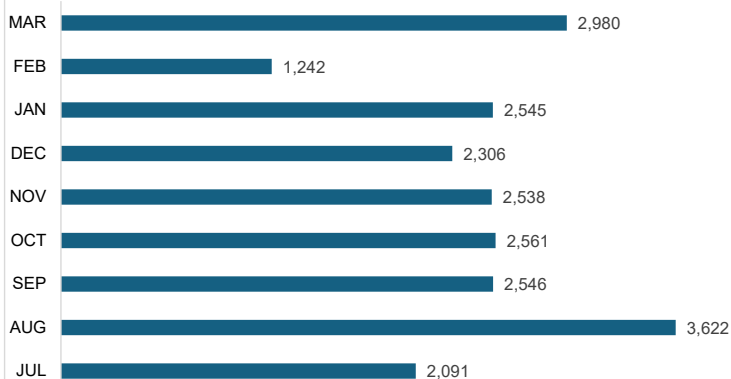
Number of Veterans Served at Patriotic Hall



Total Sums Awarded From All Claims Activity



Number of Claims Filed



Driven to serve: Admin analyst finds a home at MVA

Loida Blackley loves working at the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, and it doesn't take her long to tell you why.

"I'm very passionate about veterans, which is why I love this department," the Lynwood, Calif. native says. "Just working with veterans, around veterans, for veterans, and just having veteran events. I feel like I'm very at home. It's completely the reason why I'm with this department."

The former Veterans Service Officer who now works as a Management Analyst with the Administrative Services Division finds herself uniquely positioned to assist the department in a lot of different capacities.

"If I can be in support as administrative staff, or if I can be directly involved with the veterans, it doesn't matter — I'm down for it," Blackley says. "Wherever they need me, I say yes, as long as my supervisor is okay with it. I just want to help out."

She ticks off some of the tasks she takes on: assisting with her division's human resources operations, making reports, flyers, graphics, and handling various paperwork.

Given her background of working directly with veterans, she particularly enjoys opportunities to get away from her desk and work across the department. These include helping to set up and staff the department's Veteran Town Halls and LAVO (Los Angeles Veterans Orientations), events that welcome service members preparing for civilian life. Blackley will assist with set-up and tear-down, receive vets, staff tables and do whatever is needed.

"We're all wearing so many hats, there's so much to do," she says.

If someone from another division needs help, she's ready to jump in. For instance, she likes to assist the department's IT specialist. "It's only him — so I do inventory for him, or I create an Excel sheet for inventory, issue hardware out to new employees, or making sure if something is not working that we replace it — different tasks," she says.

Her understanding of the department's mission and her desire to help in any capacity grows from her four years as a VSO. "It's like a full circle for me, because, you know, I can relate 100% to what the VSOs go through, like all the stress, while dealing with our own issues."

That stress, in conjunction with some triggered experiences encountered during her 13 years of Army service that included a deployment to Iraq, led Blackley to take a year away from the department. During this time, she took college courses in public administration and then returned to the department two years ago to work in HR, her specialty while in the Army.

Now she takes the utmost pleasure in supporting the VSOs. "I assist them so they don't have to worry about things like paperwork, or leave, or promotion, or any questions. I like to provide that information right away."

"I'm just willing to step in anywhere help is needed because, in reality, MVA is my home, you know? So it's not like, oh, I just work at HR."

Her long hours "wearing so many hats" at MVA are balanced by "family time" at home. "It's much needed because — while I love work and being so focused on something — I'm able to just relax."



Loida Blackley upon arrival in Kuwait in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2008.



Loida Blackley now is an Administrative Analyst with the department.

(continued on page 3)

Blackley

(continued from page 2)

Blackley relaxes by spending time with her children — three daughters still at home and a son in the Air Force — her husband, 13 chickens, and three dogs. “I love my dogs — so therapeutic. I have two Rottweilers and one husky-bull mastiff. And they are just so sweet. They’re always there for you.”

Cooking is an essential ingredient to her happy home life. “It relaxes me, you know, because I’m like concentrated — I’m chopping vegetables, meat, I’m throwing it in the pan, sizzling.”

Her chicken-and-potato tacos get the most requests. “I like to cook because every house should smell good. And I want that memory to be with my children.”

For a change she’ll take her family and dogs up north, favoring places like San Luis Obispo and Cambria, where they enjoy the ocean and the redwoods.

As much as she loves being at home, however, Blackley’s happy to return each morning to MVA. She traces her love of service to vets largely to her upbringing: When she was a kid in her native Guatemala, watching her father constantly in service to his community as a police officer and then as a church pastor.

“He always was involved with the community, so I guess that kind of follows me. So everywhere I go, I just want to help,” she says. “I can’t stay quiet if I know the answer, and somebody’s asking for help.”

Given her drive for service, MVA is the ideal place. “I want to always feel like I have a purpose. And being here, there’s so much that you can do because they need you everywhere. It’s a small department. It’s the perfect place,” Blackley says. “It makes me feel good to be part of something so amazing.”

Zenner

(continued from page 1)

collective outreach in making veterans aware of expanded PACT Act eligibility and other benefits. To that end, we’re also entering into a data-sharing agreement with the VA to broaden our mutual visibility of the population we both serve.

Speaking of agreements, we recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Department of Aging and Disability for a two-way referral process so veterans can be screened for benefits on both ends. In other words, if a VSO is assisting a senior veteran with a claim that same veteran can also be put on A&D’s radar for Meals on Wheels and senior centers’ access. The VSO or A&D official simply enters the info into Microsoft Access, which kicks out an email to the other department. We’ve seen five such referrals this month so far. It’s an important development, considering more than 52% of veterans are over the age of 65.

Regarding veterans experiencing homelessness, this department is actively engaged in conversations with the county Chief Executive Office – Homelessness Initiative to involve other county departments in our mission to end veteran homelessness. We’ll need this united front to handle the impending “silver tsunami” which threatens to overwhelm the system with an aging veteran population.

Looking back at the sacrifices of those who’ve gone before, on Mar. 29 we held our 2nd annual Welcome Home Event for Vietnam Veterans, this time honoring the service of South Koreans who fought alongside American forces in that conflict. Once again, we hosted that event in the living museum that is Bob Hope Patriotic Hall, which we’re actively seeking to enshrine as a National Historic Landmark with the U.S. Department of the Interior. This is a five–11-month process and the research is exciting as we continue to unearth photos and old news clippings telling the rich story of this compelling structure.

Finally, I’d like to close with a dynamic development that serves as a testament to the hard-working, diverse contributions our employees continue to make. Zuleyda “Zuly” Santana, our Acting Chief Deputy since October was appointed as the permanent Chief Deputy effective Apr. 1. For more than two decades, she has faithfully served this county and for the past year has revolutionized our Administrative Division. I have no doubt she will continue to prove herself an invaluable asset to this department as we seek to grow and expand our presence in the community. (Read more about Zuly on page 5.)



VSO Gladys Romero explains the college fee waiver program

In-state tuition at one of California's great state colleges and universities is arguably one of the best deals in education. Even better if a student can get those tuition fees waived. An MVA Veterans Service Officer might just know how to do that.

Naturally, a death or disability from military service can never be repaid, but a country's gratitude to a family so affected might be expressed, however insufficiently, by a contribution to the education of its children.

Indeed, there is little more transformative for a family than education. Children and parents alike can brighten their prospects by embarking upon a college degree — unless that degree is unaffordable.

That is why VSOs at MVA work so hard to get families of deserving vets college tuition benefits. For these families, there is no better source than the California College Fee Waiver for Veteran Dependents program.

In fact, it is that time of year when VSOs brace themselves for the start of that program's application season. Starting May 1, hundreds of families will be calling, e-mailing, and walking into the offices of VSOs asking for help as they apply for the free tuition at any of California's state colleges and universities. Some students are already calling.

"It's a great deal," says VSO Gladys Romero, whose 19 years of experience with the program make her especially capable of assisting these families.

"The tsunami is about to start!" she muses, anticipating the surge of hopeful students and parents seeking her advice about the waiver for the coming 2024/25 academic year.

"I'm all ears," she says. "I like to help people."

A typical applicant, she says, needs coaching. She offers instructions on how to fill out the application (found on the CalVet website), what documentation to include, and which version of the program to apply for.

Besides the application, students would need to provide a VA award letter proving a parent's service-connected disability and a birth certificate or some other document proving the applicant is or was a dependent of the vet.

Sometimes documentation of income is also needed in the form of a 1040 Form or an IRS non-filing statement.

Sounds simple enough, but Romero points out that's where the confusion often starts. Applicants often need help to figure out, for example, which of the fee-waiver program's several categories they might qualify for, whether the waiver would disqualify them for federal aid, and whether income restrictions apply.

There are four separate "plans" that comprise the California Fee Waiver Program. Romero and her fellow VSOs assist with all of them. Plan A and Plan B make up the large majority of applications they see.

Plan A serves dependent children and spouses of veterans who either died or were rendered totally disabled as a result of military service. The stipulations for qualification are numerous and include that both children and spouse remain unmarried and that children be under the age of 27. For dependents who themselves are veterans, this age limit extends to 30.

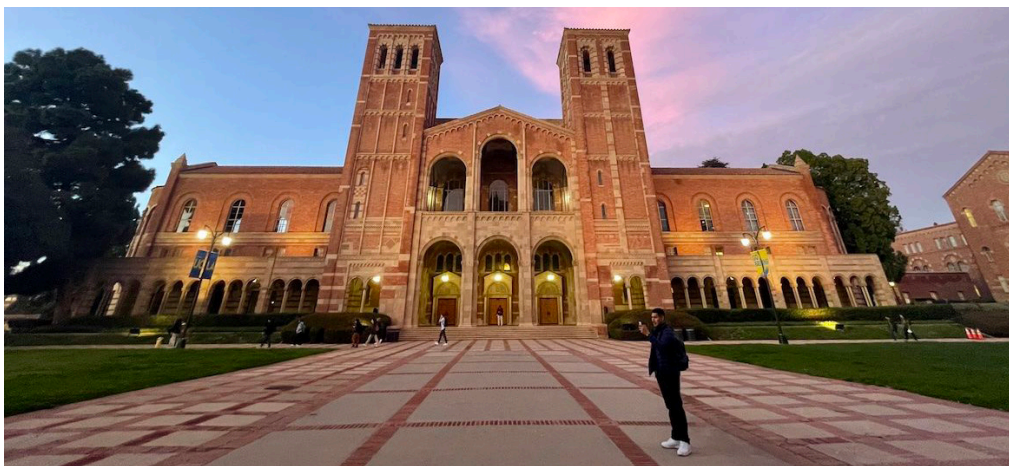
For a spouse to receive Plan A benefits, their veteran must have served during wartime. A wartime-service requirement, however, does not apply to applications of dependents. In addition, dependents of any veteran declared MIA or POW could qualify.

While there is no income restriction for Plan A recipients, they may not receive VA "Chapter 35" education benefits concurrently (explained later in this article).

Plan B is an income-restricted benefit, designed to serve dependents whose income lies at or below California's officially declared poverty threshold of \$21,561. Despite this limitation, the plan allows children of vets with any level of VA-documented service-related disability, as well as death or total disability, to receive the fee-waiver benefit. There is no wartime-service restriction.

Plan C covers dependents of California National Guard personnel who die or are disabled during official service to the state.

(continued on page 6)



The University of California at Los Angeles on their campus in Westwood.

New Chief Deputy takes pride in making a difference

When MVA's Chief Deputy Director Zuleyda Santana first interviewed to come to MVA, she remembers feeling attracted to the department's "very critical mission," as detailed by Director Jim Zenner.

But listening to his vision for growing and expanding the department's services for veterans, she could not help but wonder why did she not know more about MVA, particularly after 23 years working for the county including nine as a top administrator at the Fire Department.

"As a county employee and part of the county family, if I didn't know that these services existed, then I knew the community didn't know," she says.

The surprise of that realization led to a sense of opportunity — both for the department and for her: "I saw that there was a potential for us to really have an impact in our veteran community," she says. "I felt that Jim's vision really aligned with me and what I wanted to do, the impact that I wanted to create."

At first the idea of moving from one of the county's largest departments to its smallest seemed like an unlikely career move, but she soon saw it differently.

"I was ready to step out of my comfort zone," she says. After nine years at the Fire Department, her work was getting routine and she had become too comfortable. "I was looking to learn something new and to establish myself in either another county department or to do something completely different."



Telemundo interviews Chief Deputy Santana at Patriotic Hall in March.



The Santana family with Chef Franco Pepe at his restaurant Pepe in Grani during a visit to Caiazzo, Italy, last year.

By stepping out of her comfort zone, she arrived at a place where she could assume upper-level leadership yet involve herself directly with the department's day-to-day mission and those it serves. "Here I have the opportunity to really be in the nitty-gritty of things and tackle things and roll up my sleeves on my own — really learn everything from A through Z in a particular process or procedure — that's neat."

Now as chief deputy director she can dive deep into process and procedure across an entire department, whether it's in staff administration, budgeting, or delivery of services to veterans.

She uses her MBA training and years of executive experience to analyze and think strategically about how to realize Zenner's vision for serving vets in both big and small ways. After a year at the department — first as head of Administrative Services and then as acting chief deputy — she feels she's got an angle on much of that.

For instance, she's made progress in the way the department secures and grows its budget to better serve vets. Her days as the liaison between the Fire Department and the county's Chief Executive Office taught her "who to contact, who to connect with, what they want to hear, and what they want to see in order for us to have a successful outcome."

"I'm able to leverage my experience from Fire to determine how we are going to present the request, what information we need, what stats we need, and how we are going to tell our story."

As much as Santana likes thinking about organization and strategy, she says, "What motivates me the most is when I engage with the veterans." Not being a veteran herself, she takes seriously attending MVA events so she can get to know vets — events like

(continued on page 6)

Santana

(continued from page 5)

town halls and LAVO (Los Angeles Veteran Orientation) nights — and joining veteran-women workgroups.

“Talking to veterans allows me to learn about their challenges, their barriers, and the obstacles that they face so that I can be an asset to them, so I can leverage my role and my capacity to help eliminate those barriers — and that’s my goal,” she says.

It doesn’t matter to her if a vet needs something the department doesn’t normally provide. She brings up a time when a homeless vet walked into Bob Hope Patriotic Hall needing a shower — he got his shower.

Another time when a young woman at a LAVO event needed help getting her business off the ground, Santana took her number and then later instructed her in the process of getting disabled-veteran status for her business.

“We’re doing everything that we can to give that veteran assistance,” she says. “It doesn’t matter what they ask for, big or small. If I have the capacity — because I know the system — to walk them through it, then that’s what I’m going to do.”

Like that young aspiring businesswoman, Santana tends to see something of herself in the vets she serves. “I’ve gone through...” she searches for the words, “just struggles as a kid, as an immigrant kid, and you know, not having the resources readily available and having to find resources on my own. And now to think that, hey, you know what? I’m sure there was someone somewhere that knew how to do this, yet I didn’t know where to go, or they didn’t reach out to me. That’s why I do what I do — because I want to create change.”

She says, MVA is a great place to do that: “You know, it’s very rare to really see a department as passionate as the one that we have. Most county departments are large and they know who their constituents are, but they lack that passion,” she says. “At MVA the passion to serve and the passion to help others is here. And that’s what motivates me to ensure that I’m doing the best, that I’m giving 100% every day.”

While it’s that passion that draws her to work every day, it’s her family that makes her glad to head back home. She credits them — her three teenage children and a particularly supportive husband — for allowing her to devote so much time and energy to a demanding career in public service.



Santana and her family in Rome.

Her immigrant upbringing, she says, has given her a “no days off” work ethic, but once a year she and the family take an overseas trip to some place they’ve never been, lately parts of Europe and Japan.

Instead of managing the trip down to the last detail, like she would some project at work, when traveling she prefers the adventure of just winging it: “I buy the tickets and we say, ‘Okay, we’re going to go here and we’ll figure it out.’”

She says for example, “When we went to Japan we just said, ‘Hey, you know what, we know we’ve got to be close to a train station and we know that these are the areas we want to explore. And then we just go, and we figure it out.’”

College fee-waiver

(continued from page 4)

Plan D serves dependents of Medal of Honor recipients. Age and income restrictions apply, though VA educational benefits may be received concurrently.

In addition to these benefits, Romero and other VSOs answer families’ questions about the VA’s educational benefits. These substantial benefits are known as Survivors’ and Dependents’ Educational Assistance, often referred to as DEA or Chapter 35 benefits, and qualifications for them differ somewhat from the state benefit.

For instance, Chapter 35 benefits apply equally to spouses and dependents. Though there is no wartime requirement, the relevant service member’s death or total disability must be service-connected. There are also allowances for dependents of service members who were deemed POWs for at least 90 days.

Unlike the California benefit, children who are married are not disqualified from the federal benefit. Also, unlike the state benefit, funds may be used for apprenticeships and on-the-job training, and beneficiaries may receive career counseling as well.

VSOs at MVA will explain the details of Chapter 35 benefits to interested families, but they do not actively participate in the application process. The VA requires its own representatives to assist students with their applications.

One important stipulation of both programs is that a student who qualifies for both the California Fee Waiver Program and Chapter 35 benefits must normally choose between receiving one or the other. An exception permits income-qualified dependents to receive both and divert the Chapter 35 benefit to cover costs of education other than tuition. Spouses, on the other hand, must choose which of the two benefits they will take. In both cases MVA VSOs can help applicants fill out and submit the paperwork.



RECENT EVENTS



MVA's very own Chief Deputy, Zuleyda Santana, was honored at a Mar. 20 awards ceremony for county employees at Patriotic Hall. Zuly's dedication and hard work on behalf of the department and the L.A. County veteran community have truly made a difference. A well-deserved recognition!



Coinciding with Veteran Women Month as declared by the Board of Supervisors, Wounded Warrior Project & US Vets hosted a two-day community roundtable Mar. 25-26 at Patriotic Hall to discuss gender-specific care & services, suicide prevention, homelessness/housing, advocacy & engagement. Rep. Julia Brownley (CA-26) also joined the discussion.



On Mar. 29, Patriotic Hall hosted the 2nd annual Welcome Home Event for Vietnam veterans, this time honoring the contributions of South Koreans who served alongside American forces in that conflict.



Julian Dixon Library in Culver City was the venue for the Apr. 10 Veteran Town Hall in Supervisorial District 2. Presentations were made by the VA, CalVet, VPAN, PsychArmor and MVA.



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

Editor: W.R. Wilson

Writers: Lee Ordeman,
W.R. Wilson

Graphics: Ann Brandstadter

L.A. COUNTY VETERAN SERVICE AWARDS

February 2024

Veterans Service Officer: Emby Gonzalez (MVA)

MVA Support Service Staff: Loida Blackley

Battle Buddy: Simone Bent (DMH VPAN)

Support Line Agent: Oscar Morales (DMH VPAN)

VPAN Support Service Staff: no nominees

Community Partner: Tambra Axel (VOALA)

Creative Solution: no nominees

Volunteer: Azariah Kebede (MVA)

March 2024

Veterans Service Officer: Joel Luna (MVA)

MVA Support Service Staff: Custodial Team

Battle Buddy: Scarlett Adewale (DMH VPAN)

Support Line Agent: Kathleen Jimenez (DMH VPAN)

VPAN Support Service Staff: Liza Rodriguez

Community Partner: Raymond Adams & Delbert Thompson
(Veterans Justice Outreach program – West LA VA)

Creative Solution: Dario Grant (DMH VPAN)

Volunteer: John Oppenheim (MVA)



KEEP UP WITH MVA!

@LACMVA



**COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES DEPARTMENT OF
MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS**

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

SUPERVISOR HILDA L. SOLIS



Los Angeles County Supervisor

HILDA L. SOLIS

First District

PRESENTS A

**VETERAN
TOWN HALL**

**May 15, 2024
5:30 - 8:00 P.M.**

City of El Monte Community Center
3130 Tyler Avenue, El Monte, CA 91731

Presentations from:

Tentative speakers:

- Department of Military and Veterans Affairs
- VA Los Angeles Regional Office
- San Gabriel Valley VA Clinic
- VA National Cemetery Administration
- California Department of Veterans Affairs
- Veteran Peer Access Network (VPAN)
- PsychArmor



Register today
via Eventbrite

