

# MVA TODAY

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

## FROM THE HELM

### Ending veteran homelessness in L.A.: We can do this

Shad Meshad, co-founder of the [Vet Centers](#) program and founder of the National Veterans Foundation, a lifeline for veterans across the country, had a jumpmaster during the Vietnam War with a motto worth remembering: "If you're standing still, you're backing up."

In L.A. County, we are most definitely not standing still, and the result is a near-future in which ending veteran homelessness is not just a possibility, but a probability.

There are currently just over 2,900 vets experiencing homelessness in the county, and while that is too much, it's a striking 22.9% drop from 2023. This has been made possible through the dynamic partnership of our VA-led One Team, which has cut through the silos we've experienced as a community trying to get vets off the street.

By bringing up barriers and issues and resolving them as a team as we have over the past 1.5 years, we've reduced duplicative services while increasing permanent housing placement.

We are also working toward a well-developed By-Name List (BNL) tracking inflow and outflow of vets experiencing homelessness. Presently, there's around 1400 vets on that list, with an estimated 600 additional that are being added to it. The One Team is aggressively working to get a handle on their circumstances in order to ascertain why vets fall into homelessness in the first place.

L.A. County continues to demonstrate that, if properly resourced, eliminating veteran homelessness is possible. We can do this by housing 1,000 vets every year through well-coordinated lease-up events throughout the county, while putting an additional \$12-15 million of federal subsidies from vouchers into the effort. Starting next summer using emergency



**Jim Zenner**

hiring authority to bring on more housing navigation teams, and through partnership with the VA and Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, our goal is to have L.A. County designated as having achieved an effective end to veteran homelessness by July 2028.

Collectively, if we're able to achieve this outcome, it not only gives our vets a home, it also helps the county refocus on other vulnerable sub-populations while enabling MVA to invest more resources in Justice-Involved Veterans, suicide prevention and women veterans.

At the Nov. 20 Veterans Advisory Commission meeting, the department outlined a plan to be submitted for the county to implement next summer in partnership with the One Team toward the goal of ending veteran homelessness. That plan can be seen [here](#).

We're in this as a community, and here at MVA we're honored to be a part of that community. This Thanksgiving, I'm profoundly grateful for that honor and for the work it engenders.

### MVA By the Numbers

Number of veterans served at Patriotic Hall: 1,210

Number of claims filed: 3,048

Total sums awarded from all claims activity: \$1,758,786

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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



## Same-day Veterans Claims Clinic links vets to benefits faster than ever

Thanks to a collaboration with 2nd District Supervisor Holly Mitchell's office, a new kind of Veterans Claims Clinic held in Los Angeles last month has made it possible to connect vets to long-deserved benefits faster than ever. Its success bodes well for more such events in the future.

Sidestepping a bureaucratic process that typically takes between 4-8 months, more than a dozen veterans received their VA ratings for disability and pension in only one or two days over Oct. 22-23 at L.A.'s Magic Johnson Park. This remarkably quick turnaround was the result of a novel collaborative effort between the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet), and the county's Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (MVA), which led the event's planning.

Attendee comments collected by the organizers reflected deep satisfaction with the event:

- "This changed my life."
- "Everyone said I would never get a rating. Today I did."
- "Your employee made me feel like a real person. Truly cared."
- "Having all these services together shows the community cares for our veterans."

Some 300 veterans attended the clinic, another 200 people, mostly family, accompanied them. Thirty-five vets received examinations by VA medical examiners, and among these 12 received disability ratings that qualified them for compensation and/or pension.

In addition, 20 individuals received vaccines, and fourteen were connected with organizations providing or facilitating other benefits. Significantly, three homeless veterans were placed in temporary housing.

Joaquin Enriquez, who leads the MVA's Veterans Services Division and contributed greatly to the event's planning and ultimate success, says MVA's mission to end veteran homelessness was at the heart of the effort. It is estimated that 75% of L.A. County's homeless veterans are not receiving the service-connected benefits with which MVA and the VA could link them. The claims clinic went a long way toward reaching those individuals.

Enriquez says, "The event provides an additional avenue for us to get some money into the pockets of our veterans, to get them access to VA health care in an effort to keep them off the streets, if in fact that's the path they're on."

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VA Under Secretary for Benefits Joshua Jacobs addresses claims clinic attendees at Magic Johnson Park.



VSO Ken Gonzales explains the claims process to a veteran attending the clinic.



Approximately 500 veterans and family members attended the two-day clinic.



MVA Director Jim Zenner kicks off the Veteran Stand Down on the second day of the claims clinic.



CalVet Secretary Lindsey Sin speaks with a veteran about his benefits.



## Mentoring gives Army vet a new path of service

Something was lacking in his life, but Tanner Stotka couldn't quite put a finger on it. The veteran and recent college graduate had just moved to L.A. and figured maybe he just needed a new hobby.

"But because I'm passionate about what I do, all my hobbies tend to coincide with my work. I love to shoot, and I love to work out." The former Army Ranger had just started working for the U.S. Department of State.

"I thought, man, I would like to find something new that's kind of outside my work or something that's different," he says.

A natural planner (to a degree that sometimes makes him laugh), he spent weeks researching and weighing his options. "In that search," he says, "I found mentoring to be that next thing."

He applied to volunteer with Big Brothers Big Sisters of Greater Los Angeles. They match adults with kids who would welcome the influence of an adult in their life, a possible mentor.

"They took me in pretty quickly," he says. "They gave me options for matches, and I told them I wanted to really make a difference — so give me a challenge, give me a kid that's facing a tough situation."

They suggested a match with Oscar, a 14-year-old from Inglewood who shared some of Stotka's same interests. Like a lot of 14-year-old boys, he was into sports and fitness and also interested in the military and firearms.

"The first time we hung out, we clicked immediately," says Stotka. "It was a great match."

Oscar revealed he wanted to join the military someday. "So immediately I ask him, 'What do you want to do in the military?' And he's like, 'I want to be a Navy SEAL.' So, I'm like, 'Cool. Let's go do a beach workout together.'"

So on their first outing they drove out to Venice Beach, swam a bit, and then took turns humping an 80-lb. sandbag and two 30-lb. dumbbells up and down the beach,



*Tanner Stotka and his Little Brother, Oscar, ride horses on Mulholland Trail in October.*

throwing in intervals of burpees and sprints between lifeguard stations. "And he's motivated," says Stotka, "He's like, yeah, I want to see what I got."

"And he doesn't quit; he's really pushing himself. And, of course, I'm not really going military on him. I'm being supportive, I'm like, 'Come on, man, you got this!' — we're just having fun with it." When Oscar began to fade, they called it quits.

"He loved it," Stotka remembers, so he offered Oscar a challenge: "Someday, if we get to the pier and back, I'll give you a challenge coin, the Ranger coin. You don't have to complete it today, but eventually, throughout our time together, if you want to take on the challenge and complete it, then you get your coin," he says.

That was six months ago. Since then, the two have met up twice a month on average, timed for weekends when Stotka isn't traveling for work. They've been go-carting, horseback riding and gone for runs. Recently, Stotka gave Oscar a lesson on how to drive a stick shift at low speed in an abandoned parking lot. "I gotta throw in the man skills, you know," Stotka says with amusement.

He likes to introduce Oscar to foods he's never tried, most recently southern-style barbeque with brisket and cornbread. Soon they'll go for Korean-style barbeque or Middle Eastern food.

More important are the conversations they have, says Stotka. "Oscar's exposed to people committing crimes, people going into gangs, at his age too — 12, 13, 14, 15 years old. He's at a very sensitive age for that kind of stuff," says Stotka. "That's the

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## Veterans Claims Clinic

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He credits much of the event's success to close cooperation provided by CalVet, Orange and Riverside counties, the VA, and, of course, MVA. These organizations also provided the administrators, subject matter experts, and medical professionals needed to make the event happen. He credits MVA Director Jim Zenner's inter-organizational leadership as well: "He shepherded a lot of the required resources."

The new event, one of the first to be held in the country, follows the passing of the VA Modernization Act, which took effect in 2019 and allows for greater ease and creativity in streamlining the process by which veterans can claim and receive federal disability compensation and pension benefits.

Enriquez figures the VA initially showed interest in holding the event in L.A. County because the region has both a large veterans population and the service resources to support a large outreach event. "We have the ability to deploy more VSOs [Veterans Service Officers] without causing major disruptions to our day-to-day operations," says Enriquez.

In addition to the nine VSOs deployed by L.A. County, Riverside and Orange Counties provided several as well.

CalVet dedicated staff on site and remotely, and the VA brought a large complement of medical examiners to conduct physical exams. VA Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs) were also there and ready to adjudicate and rate the resulting claims.

Enriquez outlined the clinic's streamlined, same-day claims process step-by-step: A veteran sits down with an accredited VSO who creates and files a claim seeking a disability rating to determine level of compensation and/or pension. The claim is sent to CalVet representatives who then check the strength of the claim, and if it is deemed viable, CalVet forwards the claim to the VA queue.

If the VA accepts the claim, they schedule a C&P (Compensation and Pension) exam with a medical examiner right there in a VA Mobile Medical Unit (MMU), which resembles an RV tricked out like a doctor's office. The examiner's report is then added to all of the preceding documentation and supplemental information and placed before a VA VSR who adjudicates the claim on-site. Ideally, if all goes well, the vet gets their disability rating and is informed of their level of compensation that very day or possibly the next. Formal verification would, as usual, come to the vet later by letter from the VA.

In addition to assistance from the aforementioned organizations, veterans attending the clinic were able to meet with representatives from several dozen local agencies and non-profits offering benefits navigation and a variety of other resources. Some in attendance included Veteran Peer Access Network, HUD-VASH housing advocates, Village for Vets, Public Guardian, and Inner-City Law Center.

Word of the event drew vets from far and wide. Enriquez says that's because L.A. County VSOs have a good reputation, so it's not surprising when veterans travel from around the state and even neighboring states to seek their help. "This time we had veterans come in from Florida, Montana, Georgia, and from Pennsylvania," Enriquez says. "I even overheard someone say they flew in from Guam."

Enriquez says the success of this first same-day Veterans Claims Clinic warrants repetition and that he knows Zenner feels the same way. For next time, Enriquez envisions something on an even larger scale, involving most of MVA's 32 VSOs. "The clinic was obviously received favorably," he says, "So I would suggest we have one in the near future."

## Stotka

(continued from page 3)

new norm for a kid that age in an inner-city — drugs are OK, there's not really a whole lot of rules or values embedded in that." Guns are also part of that toxic mix, he says.

Over time their conversations have revealed the immense challenges Oscar faces day-to-day. "Wow, I have a lot of work to do," Stotka remembers thinking. "But that's what I wanted, so I was like, cool, let's get to work."

His military background gave him some insight he didn't expect. "Gangs have a pull because kids want to be part of something adventurous. They want to fit in, they want to do what in their eyes is cool," says Stotka. "I tell him, 'Hey, you can go do a lot of that stuff in the military, but legally, and what's more, you can do it for a good cause.'"

Stotka has developed an approach by which he prepares a new topic of conversation for each time they meet. Oscar takes these conversations seriously, and Stotka credits him with being a deep thinker.

"I'll bring stuff up, not saying, hey, this is how it is, but rather have you ever thought about this?"

Their talks have ranged from what leadership is to the importance of having goals in life and the value of making plans. "I just try to bring up something that will help him to start thinking."

"Having someone in his life he can look up to outside of the negative things in his community keeps him on track, makes him a little more grounded," Stotka says. "Providing him that positive influence and trying to lead by example, it gives him an alternative way to live outside of what he's exposed to every day."

He thinks about what positive effect he might be having on the boy. "How I'd someday measure that is if he gets to high school and graduates and doesn't

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## RECENT EVENTS



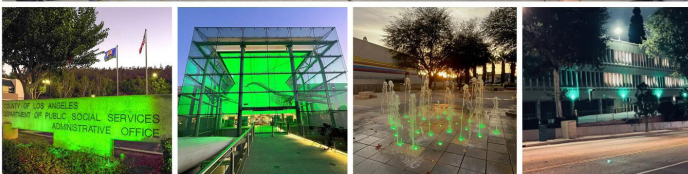
**NORWALK VETERANS VILLAS RIBBON CUTTING:** Thank you to the City of Norwalk for inviting MVA to the Veterans Villas event. This affordable housing project is a significant step forward in supporting our veterans here in Los Angeles. It is an honor to be part of a community that values and invests in our heroes. Projects like these change lives and provide the stability our veterans deserve.



**CHIEF DEPUTY SANTANA HONORED BY SUPERVISOR HORVATH:** Congratulations to MVA Chief Deputy Zuleyda Santana! Santana was honored at 3rd District Supervisor Lindsey Horvath's L.A. County Employee Recognition Day Celebration Event. This well-deserved recognition highlights Santana's commitment to excellence, leadership and service to our county.



**STATE GUARD 2024 CONFERENCE:** The State Guard Association of the United States invited Director Zenner to be a panelist during their annual conference in Long Beach. It was an honor to engage in meaningful discussions about Justice-Involved Veterans and mental health diversion programs for combat veterans. Thank you to the organizers, panelists, and all who participated. MVA looks forward to future collaboration opportunities.



**OPERATION GREEN LIGHT:** MVA is incredibly grateful for the support of all of our county departments who joined in lighting up green for our veterans this past week!



## RECENT EVENTS

**VETERANS' THANKSGIVING:** Veterans Advocacy Group of America held its 8th annual Veterans Thanksgiving Appreciation Dinner at Patriotic Hall on Nov. 21. The event always draws a large crowd of vets & and their families from across L.A. for feasting and fellowship. We were particularly honored by 1st District Supervisor Hilda Solis and a host of community dignitaries.





## Stotka

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get into any trouble or addicted to drugs or anything like that,” he says. “It’s tough to measure something like that, but the last time I was with him, I asked him, ‘Hey man, what’ve you got going on outside of school and stuff? Talk to me. What are you thinking?’ And he’s like, ‘Yeah, I’m thinking about going to church.’ So, in his mind, he knows what the right thing is. And I know he knows because he tells me. He’s trying to walk that path.”

For Stotka, the positive effect on himself is easier to discern: “As I got out of the army and went through the transition, the tough transition that many veterans go through, I started to reinvent myself and transform that into not only my work in national security but overall, making a positive difference in society.

So, working with Oscar is the first thing I’ve ever done outside of the national security piece where I’m trying to make a positive difference in society. And it’s basically cemented the idea that you could think outside the box and come up with ways to benefit society and serve your community and find a purpose that coincides with protecting your country. You can get the same benefit out of it, and you can actually really make change. It’s a good path.”

### Meet the Editorial Staff

Editor: W.R. Wilson

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W.R. Wilson

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## L.A. COUNTY VETERAN SERVICE AWARDS FOR OCTOBER 2024

**Veterans Service Officer: Emby Gonzalez (MVA)**  
**MVA Support Service Staff: Jose Garcia**  
**Battle Buddy: Pedro Arias Perez (DMH-VMFS)**  
**Support Line Agent: Mariah Araiza (DMH-VMFS)**  
**DMH-VMFS Support Service Staff: David Saucedo**  
**Community Partner: Jessica Zarley (JVS-SSVF)**  
**Creative Solution: Eduardo Madrid (DMH-VMFS)**  
**Volunteer: No Nominees**

## QUARTERLY AWARD WINNERS FOR 1ST QTR, FY 2025

**Supervisory District: Goodwill-SD3 (VPAN)**  
**Program Manager: Leo Chirinos (JVS-SD1)**  
**Veterans Service Officer: Hector Castillo**  
**MVA Support Service Staff:**  
**\*Tie\* Stephanie Guerrero & Tatiana Rosas**  
**Battle Buddy: Pedro Arias Perez (DMH-VMFS)**  
**Support Line Agent: Eduardo Madrid (DMH-VMFS)**  
**DMH-VMFS Support Service Staff: Sergio Lopez**  
**Community Partner: Jorge Marcia (DMH-VMFS)**  
**Creative Solution: Hector “Manny” Arroyo (JVS-SSVF)**  
**Volunteer: Skyler Frias (VA)**



**KEEP UP WITH MVA!**  
**@LACMVA**

# You're invited to the Los Angeles Veterans Orientation

L.A. welcomes military service members!

Thurs, December 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!

**Vet·er·an**  
/'vedərən, 'vetrən/  
a person who has served in the military, regardless of discharge status or duration of service.

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:

[bit.ly/3At5DfF](https://bit.ly/3At5DfF)



Los Angeles  
**Veterans Collaborative**