

MVA TODAY

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

FROM THE HELM

Integrating VPAN, identifying vets and specifying needs: Evolving to meet the mission

For any species, evolution is the key to survival. Government agencies are no different. As such, MVA continues to evolve as we learn more, do more and expand our initiative.

Integrating VPAN

Following a unanimous board motion earlier this year, Oct. 1 is the deadline for integrating VPAN into MVA. We've been busy meeting with the Department of Mental Health and Southern California Grantmakers to ensure the VPAN contract is smoothly transitioned to MVA. Above all, we are adamant that services will not change but remain as they are for the community, and we are working on joint messaging to that effect. A lot of time, energy and thought is being put into this collaboration.

Justice-Involved Veterans (JIV)

The Countywide Criminal Justice Coordination Committee (CCJCC) coordinates everything JIV-related for the county. On Sept. 11, the Board voted 5-0 to create a subcommittee within CCJCC which will represent 40+ government agencies which this department will chair. There was a lot of excitement in the air with this development as agencies agreed there needs to be a more coordinated approach with respect to veterans in general, not just JIV, and this could serve as a catalyst for just that.

Claims Clinic

MVA is partnering with Supervisorial District 2 on a same-day claims clinic Oct. 22-23, 9 AM – 3 PM at Magic Johnson Park in South LA. This innovative idea first started in Colorado and goes basically like this: A veteran comes in for help with a claim, followed by a medical exam, sometimes resulting in same-day adjudication and a service-



Jim Zenner

connected disability rating. Talk about one-stop shopping! We're hoping to serve 500-700 veterans, with an emphasis on those experiencing homelessness, but any vet is welcome.

Women Veterans

Our work this summer with women veterans, notably the summit we hosted in early July, continues to inform our planning (see page 4). Specifically, childcare was raised as an obvious concern, so we've ensured that childcare (and food) will be available at the claims clinic.

Identifying Vets

There's two ways the county identifies veterans: 1) Vet the Vote, in which veterans serve as poll workers during election season; and 2) When vets register their DD214 with the county recorder. This latter option is highly recommended especially if the veteran is experiencing homelessness or at risk of it. MVA is partnering with the county

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MVA By the Numbers

**Number of veterans served at
Patriotic Hall: 1,378**

Number of claims filed: 3,715

**Total sums awarded from all
claims activity: \$1,084,636**

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Bob Hope Patriotic Hall

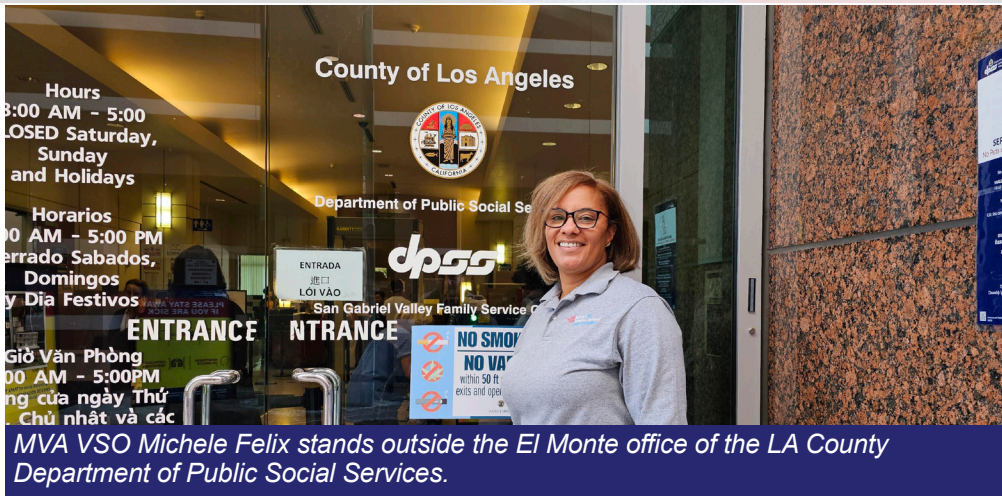
**1816 S Figueroa Street
Los Angeles, CA 90015
Phone: (877) 452-8387**

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

VSOs offer more than just claims assistance



MVA VSO Michele Felix stands outside the El Monte office of the LA County Department of Public Social Services.

It's a sad fact, but not every veteran can qualify for VA benefits.

The last thing a Veterans Service Officer (VSO) with the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (MVA) wants to see is a veteran walk away without the benefits they seek or, worse, without food and shelter. But despite a VSO's best efforts, an "other-than-honorable" discharge on a vet's record will rule out VA benefits, such as pension, health, housing, and education. That's the law.

Yet in these cases, a vet never leaves without resources. They might even find hope of a second chance.

"The first thing we try to do is to get their discharge upgraded," says VSO Michele Felix. She regularly refers clients to Inner City Law Council, which works in partnership with MVA to offer vets pro-bono legal services. "They are our preferred organization to help with filing for discharge upgrades," she says.

Given that it's not uncommon for society, its laws, and attitudes to change over time, sometimes years later a veteran can upgrade a discharge by appeal. When an appeal is successful, the resulting access to VA benefits can be life-changing. However, in cases where an upgrade is not possible, a vet's next best hope will be services provided by L.A. County, particularly its Department of Public Social Services (DPSS).

For this reason, MVA partners with DPSS to make sure no needy vet goes without critical help, such as food, monetary assistance, and health care.

When someone walks into a DPSS office seeking services and states they are a veteran, they'll soon be referred to an MVA VSO, namely Gladys Romero, Alfonso Garcia, or Felix, all of whom keep desks at the DPSS office in El Monte.

The VSOs first doublecheck whether the vet is already receiving any VA benefits. If they are not, the VSOs look into the status of the vet's discharge from service. If their discharge status is good, the VSOs begin the process of applying for VA benefits. If their discharge status is found to be designated anything but "honorable," then the VSOs will refer them back to a DPSS eligibility worker to explore the possibility of county support.

Before referring the vet, Felix is always happy to share information about county services that may apply to their situation.

"I'll ask the vet, are they working?" she explains. "Let's say they're not working — then I'll ask, have you applied for any type of monetary benefit, such as CalFresh, which is food stamps, or GR — that's general relief." For these benefits, she'll encourage them to talk to a DPSS staff member.

Even if an applicant has a job, they still may be eligible for benefits if their income is insufficient, particularly when a recipient has dependents.

"You may be eligible for health care, too," she says. "So let's say you have a mental health issue, then we want to try to get you health care under the DPSS umbrella — that's Medi-Cal." DPSS colleagues can help arrange these benefits and may also refer the vet for services with the Department of Mental Health or the L.A. Homeless Services Authority.

Felix may refer vets to VPAN, the Veteran Peer Access Network (which will migrate to MVA from the Department of Mental Health effective Oct. 1), that helps veterans and military family members connect to supportive services, including peer support, non-urgent mental health care, and housing.

She takes time to educate vets — and occasionally fellow VSOs, too — on a variety of other services available to county residents in immediate need of assistance.

When someone needs shelter, Felix refers them to various non-profits, some working in partnership with the county or city of Los Angeles, that provide emergency relief. Depending on where a veteran is in the county, Felix can refer them to agencies, including LAHSA and the VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF). She can also call nongovernmental organizations that provide shelter, such as U.S. Vets and Volunteers of America, who can place vets in group housing, family housing, and possibly offer vouchers for independent housing.

Vets in immediate need of food can be referred to a number of food banks run by churches and not-for-profits throughout the county.

When vets tell her they're looking for work, Felix can refer them to organizations such as (AJCC) America's

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DOD's Skillbridge leverages military service for civilian careers

Second in a two-part series about veterans reintegrating into civilian life.

When Drew Hutcheon chose to join the Marines, he wanted the challenge of military service to his country. Eleven years later while considering leaving the Marine Corps, he faced a different kind of challenge — how to support a wife and two small children.

“Transitioning out is a very stressful time,” says Hutcheon, looking back at his situation and that of other Marines he’s seen go through the same process. “There are so many unknowns, and the pressure intensifies when you have a family to support.”

His family had supported him through a rich and challenging career that included an overseas deployment and several big family moves. “I wanted a job with a work-life balance,” he says.

Recently promoted to the rank of major, he now had master’s degrees in business and information systems and was managing a staff and contractors at the Marine Corps Cyber Command at Fort Meade, Md. He wasn’t as unsure he’d find a good job as he was about whether it would be a good fit for him and his family. They liked living in the Maryland suburbs, his wife had already postponed career choices, was going into teaching, and his kids were starting school.

He already had a company in mind, in fact. He’d kept in touch with a contractor who landed happily at a start-up cyber security firm. The place sounded like a good fit for Hutcheon, too. “I wanted something that would put me out of my DOD [Department of Defense] comfort zone,” he says. “I also wanted a smaller organization that could be more agile and aggressive in execution.”

He contacted them and found out that they were getting involved in something called Skillbridge, a DOD program set up to allow service members near the end of their term of service to train and try out with potential employers.



USMC Maj. Drew Hutcheon when he was on active duty in 2022.



Drew Hutcheon in his civilian life today.

Qualified service members receive their full DOD pay and benefits with no cost or obligation to the employer. Participating employers commit to providing job training by internship, mentorship, or an educational program, not with an obligation—but with the intention—of offering a job by the end.

To apply Hutcheon needed to time the process so that he could complete a three-month internship within the 180 days leading up to his end-of-active-service date. This required a well-timed request of temporary away duty and permission from the Marine Corps and, most critically, his commanding officer.

Without that command approval a service member cannot participate in Skillbridge. According to Lorena Villa, who guides Skillbridge applicants through the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) for all service branches in Southern California, “Participation is solely dependent on the circumstances of the command.”

A recent Marine Corps memorandum on Skillbridge draws a line that holds true with all branches of service: “Skillbridge authorization is at the commander’s discretion; it is not a service member’s entitlement ... Impact on the command and needs of the service must be considered and prioritized, and readiness to the force remains paramount.”

Hutcheon says his desk job at the Marine Forces Cyber Command could be covered by colleagues, so his commanding officer (CO) felt able to grant that permission. “I think you see Skillbridge leveraged a lot more when folks are in the supporting establishment or the headquarters-type units,” he says. “It’s a lot harder if you’re in the operating forces.”

According to Villa, deployment close to or even up to an end-of-service date sadly would preclude participation in the mandated TAP process, which is a requirement for Skillbridge participation.

She says, “Another obstacle is that the higher the rank people are, the less time they’d have available to step away from their current jobs because there’d be no backfill.”

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Addressing the Unique Needs of Women Veterans: Key Findings and New Initiatives

The County of Los Angeles Department of Military and Veterans Affairs recently held its first annual Veteran Women's Summit to shine a light on the specific challenges faced by women who have served in the armed forces. After a detailed four-month analysis, MVA identified several key areas where veteran women need more support and has outlined new initiatives to address these needs.

From the department's research, which included focus groups with veteran women and community stakeholders, six main challenges have emerged. First, healthcare remains a significant issue as veteran women frequently encounter difficulties accessing culturally competent medical care due to systemic biases, deterring them from seeking help. Secondly, the identification process for benefits is challenging, inconsistent methods for recognizing veteran status and a lack of proactive outreach leave many veteran women struggling to prove their veteran status. Third, family support is affected by challenges such as finding affordable childcare and navigating constraints related to disability pay.

Housing also poses a challenge, as veteran women face shortages and long wait times, exacerbated by limited employment opportunities. Employment issues are marked by fewer targeted job opportunities and less representation at job fairs. Finally, advocacy for disability pay often negatively impacts eligibility for other support services, proving the need for policy adjustments.

To address these challenges, MVA is launching several key initiatives. The department will improve resources by collaborating with county departments to create and share veteran-friendly information online. In terms of housing

support, MVA plans to partner with community groups to develop dedicated shelters and housing resources specifically for veteran women. Outreach efforts will focus on increasing awareness and encouraging self-identification among veteran women through targeted programs. Additionally, MVA aims to advocate for policy changes to ensure that disability income does not hinder access to other support services, including working with legislators to address the high cost of living and its impact on veterans.

Veteran women are the fastest-growing group in the veteran community, making up over 18% of the active-duty workforce.

With nearly 18,000 veteran women living in Los Angeles County, it is crucial that we address their unique needs effectively. They face higher rates of trauma and require specialized support and resources to thrive. By implementing these new initiatives, MVA aims to make a significant difference in the lives of veteran women, ensuring they receive the support and recognition they deserve.



Hutcheon

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Commanders considering whether to grant someone time away for Skillbridge are asked to weigh how greatly a member would benefit from the opportunity to train and transition into a new career, and so the process tends to favor those who are younger and in the enlisted ranks.

Hutcheon says he thinks COs support Skillbridge, despite the loss it means to their command, because they've seen the success of the program since its establishment in 2011: A Marine who successfully transitions out benefits society, and that speaks well of the Corps.

"It's a loss for that commander to take," says Hutcheon, because the absent member is not likely to be replaced. "A CO's goodwill and ability to see the bigger picture are what get these applications approved."

Participating employers are increasingly partnering with Skillbridge because it's a great deal. They get to vet skilled and highly motivated recruits without obligation and at no financial cost.

Employers of all kinds use the program to find all kinds of candidates with any manner of experience and education and for a broad variety of fields, including construction, transportation, local government, engineering, and tech.

A service member can use the DOD Skillbridge website to search for employers by field and by geographical location. In the Los Angeles area alone some 40 different positions are listed. California has hundreds. One employer, Builders FirstSource, explains the reasons for its participation:

"BFS values the strength, loyalty, and qualifications each veteran brings to the civilian workforce. These skills are transferable as positive assets to any organization, which is why we are active in our veteran recruitment."

It's a great deal for the service members, says Hutcheon. "When do you get three months to show the value you can provide to a company, where usually you'd get a few rounds of interviews at best, where you have to come up with a bunch of canned, scripted, smart goals and describe how you were in this circumstance and how you prevailed," he says. "Skillbridge allowed me to do a three-month job interview to prove my worth."

And so he did. The growing, hands-on company assigned him responsibilities as soon as he arrived in April of 2022. They offered him a job three months later and have promoted him twice since.

Hutcheon recommends the program "one hundred percent."

"It's a really good, low-risk opportunity to get into the real world and see what it's like," he says. "Even if you confirm that you maybe don't like some industry or company that you thought you might have liked, that's a positive too."

Hutcheon was his company's first Skillbridge intern, and his success led to several others coming on board. An Army captain is the latest new recruit.

"Any program that supports the transition period should be valued," he says. "I think this is one that's proven its merit over time."

Felix

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Job Center of California and JVS (Jobs. Value. Service.) These provide vocational services that provide job search and job readiness training, including resume writing, interview coaching, and job skill acquisition. Felix may also direct them to the state's Employment Development Department for similar services and possibly GED help.

In addition, when a vet qualifies for general relief payments, then DPSS can connect them to various welfare-to-work opportunities that also help with job preparedness and acquisition.

Having MVA VSOs at DPSS offices helps streamline services for vets and prevents confusion and duplication of government services. VSOs and DPSS agents often need to confer regarding what services and disbursements a client might already be receiving. A VSO well-versed in county services can help simplify and expedite this communication.

For this same reason, a DPSS representative keeps weekly office hours at MVA headquarters in Bob Hope Patriotic Hall to meet with VSOs and their clients. "He comes on Wednesdays, and we love it," says Felix.

Working at DPSS allows Felix to meet vets who might never think to walk into an MVA office. "You've got to find them where they are," she says.

At the El Monte office and elsewhere, she and her DPSS colleagues are looking out for vets who could walk in seeking county help only to discover they might be eligible for substantial VA benefits. "I like to call it 'going fishing'," she says, "because at DPSS it's like they're coming through this big net, and you'll always find a few veterans in there."

"It's an opportunity to maximize the benefits for veterans," she says, regardless of whether they receive services from the county or the VA. "It's all about benefiting the veterans."

WHAT'S GOING ON AT PATRIOTIC HALL?



LOS ANGELES VETERANS ORIENTATION: Thank you to everyone who joined us on Sept. 5 for a memorable evening dedicated to supporting our service members as they reintegrate back into civilian life. Attendees learned about resources and services available to them and their families and networked with potential employers in a casual & fun environment. LAVO is held every quarter at Patriotic Hall. Please join us for the next one on Dec. 5!



AWARD WINNERS: On Sept. 11, the quarterly recipients of the County Veteran Service Awards were recognized at the Los Angeles Veterans Collaborative meeting in Patriotic Hall. These awards are open to anyone in the veteran community to nominate and vote for county employees, community partners & volunteers working with veterans & their families. To get involved contact pio@mva.lacounty.gov. Below are the Supervisorial District of the Quarter winners VPAN JVS-SD5.



CLOTHING THE INSIDE: Vets in need of a new professional wardrobe might try Patriotic Hall before their local department store, the selection is high quality and free! Pat Springer and her husband Hank (veteran of both the Navy AND Marines) have opened a boutique in the basement. Shoppers receive not only interview clothes but also coaching. As Pat says: "We dress them from the inside out because if they feel confident on the inside it will show on the outside." (Shown here are MVA volunteer & USAF vet John Oppenheim checking out the men's suits, while Pat displays a formal gown.)

Zenner

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recorder to have a more robust internal outreach effort with other departments. There are 38 county departments and the goal is for each of them to ask every citizen who comes in for services if they've ever served, which would then create a referral mechanism back to MVA. For the 11-15% of L.A. vets not eligible for VA health care, this would help them get connected to the Department of Social Services and subsequent health care.

As we continue to evolve as a department, I am constantly reminded that none of this progress is possible without our employees, partners and supporters. If you're free the morning of Friday, Oct. 4, I hope you'll join us for our 3rd annual Patriotic Hall Open House.

Meet the Editorial Staff

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L.A. COUNTY VETERAN SERVICE AWARDS FOR AUGUST 2024

Veterans Service Officer: Simone Bent (MVA)

MVA Support Service Staff: No Nominees

Battle Buddy: Eric Friend (JVS-SD5)

VPAN Support Line Agent: Julie McGuire

VPAN Support Service Staff: Sergio Lopez

Community Partner: Peter She (JVS-SoCal)

Creative Solution: Wayne Hansen (DMH VPAN)

Volunteer: No Nominees



KEEP UP WITH MVA!
@LACMVA

The County of Los Angeles Department of
Military & Veterans Affairs and the
Department of Mental Health invite you to
an

Open House

**OCTOBER 4, 2024
9:00AM - 2:00PM**

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

Please join the Department of Military and
Veterans Affairs, Mental Health & the Sheriff's
Department as well as County Veterans Service
Officers from across the state for discussions
about the latest in services & benefits affecting
the veteran & military community

TO REGISTER



Scan the
QR Code

SEND US
YOUR QUESTIONS



Lunch and Parking will be provided

COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES DEPARTMENT OF
MILITARY AND VETERANS AFFAIRS

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



Los Angeles County Supervisor

HILDA L. SOLIS

First District

Present

Veteran Town Hall

SATURDAY
OCTOBER 12,
2024

10:00AM TO 1:00PM



Register today
via Eventbrite



<http://bit.ly/4gvM6RF>

*Let Your Voice Be Heard:
Join Our Veteran Town Hall Meeting*



CAL VET

EAST LOS ANGELES SERVICE CENTER

133 N. SUNOL DR.
LOS ANGELES, CA 90063

Presentations on:

**Employment &
Disability Benefits**

 **Military
Veterans Affairs**
COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES