



After serving in the military, Hannah Williamson has devoted herself to helping veterans get their proper benefits by working as Butte County's Veterans Service Officer.

PHOTO BY EMILY TEAGUE

ASKED AT THE CHICO FARMERS MARKET
BY PAULA SCHULTZ

What's a VSO?



"Very Smart Officer."

Cathy Webster
retired/volunteer activist, 70ish



"Very Serious Organization – [it] takes problems and solves them in an effective and timely manner."

John Cochran
computers, 41



"A car part that helps with emissions?"

Taylor Wetzel
student, 21



"Very Small Object."

Michael Taylor
juggler and balloon man, 61

ANSWER: A VSO is a Veterans Service Officer. Read the story at right for more information on what a VSO does.



SERVING THOSE WHO HAVE SERVED

Veterans Service Officer helps veterans secure the benefits they deserve

The year after WWII ended, Veterans Services Offices were established across the country as free sources of support to help veterans get the benefits they have earned. Each office was mandated to have a Veterans Service Officer, a fellow vet who can help navigate the many federal, state and local resources available.

"It's very difficult for a person not trained or experienced with the Department of Veterans Affairs to obtain their own benefits," says Hannah Williamson, Butte County's Veterans Service Officer. "They might not even be sure what to ask for, or how to ask for it."

Williamson has helped scores of veterans get life-altering support, but her biggest obstacle is convincing former servicemen and servicewomen to ask for what is rightfully theirs.

"Especially [with] women, many [people] who have served do not realize they're a veteran because they weren't injured, they weren't in combat [or] they didn't finish their term of enlistment for whatever reason, perhaps injury," she says. "There's a number of reasons that a person who served may not consider themselves a veteran."

But anyone who served his or her country, in any military capacity, anywhere, may be entitled to a wide range of benefits. Williamson hopes to soothe any feelings of unease by bonding with her clients over their common service. Williamson's service was in the Army, where she reached the rank of Staff Sergeant (E6).

"Welcome home and thank you for your selfless service to our nation."

Hannah Williamson
Butte County Veterans Service Officer

"We are veterans ourselves," she says of the VSO staff. "And we've been through the gamut of the difficulties and hurdles of filing for disabilities or filing for health care. We are their advocates. We act strictly 100 percent on their behalf with their permission. We're not working for the VA. We're working for them."

Williamson can relate with the emotions of devoting your life to your country and feeling discomfort upon a return from service. She has a mission to help those veterans, and a message for them.

"Welcome home and thank you for your selfless service to our nation," she says. "It's my duty and my honor to use what I've learned to assist you, as well as your dependents, in obtaining any and all benefits that you have earned."

FROM SERVICE TO SUCCESS

Veterans apply lessons learned in military to the workforce

Military service develops qualities that make men and women valuable parts of our workforce and our community. Just ask Will Clark and Sandra McLean.

Clark knew he wanted to be a Navy SEAL once he graduated from high school in Fresno. And he did it, completing the rigorous training and serving for four years, which included overseas deployments.

He brought that same focus to life after the military. Moving with his wife from San Diego to Chico, Clark put himself through law enforcement academy and in 2005 was hired by the Chico Police Department, where he was on the SWAT team. While an officer, he graduated from Chico State University.

Now he's a business owner.

In November 2012, Clark and his business partner created a plan for an indoor gun range, archery range and weapons shop in Chico, which they pitched to banker after banker before finally securing a startup loan. Now, Down Range Chico Indoor Training Center is thriving. As CEO, Clark oversees 30 employees, eight of them veterans.

Clark sees a strong connection between his Navy service and being an

entrepreneur. He attributes his success to "the never-quit attitude [and] the ability to persevere through all these adversities."

"I learned a lot about what it means to have a good work ethic and getting the job done on time and right for the benefit of everyone."

Judge Sandra McLean
Veteran and Superior Court Judge

"The biggest thing is, I wasn't afraid and I wasn't too proud to ask for help," he says. "I could not have done this business without a whole handful of people."

County Judge Sandra McLean joined the Army nursing program as an active

duty officer in 1972. She learned how to take care of people in both emergency situations and at routine health checkups while she was at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

"I learned a lot about what it means to have a good work ethic and getting the job done on time and right for the benefit of everyone," she says.

When her four years in the Army were up, McLean decided she wanted to go to law school. During this time, she also got married and had three children. After she graduated from Georgetown University Law School, she worked in private practice before being appointed as judge for the Superior Court of California in Butte County in 2006.

Today, McLean strives to manage her court room as fairly as possible, regularly hearing hundreds of court cases each day.

"I attribute my success to a variety of things that have coalesced, but I think my experience in the military taught me to hold my head high," McLean says. "I have to make decisions that are sometimes unpopular, and people will be upset. You have to know that what you did in your heart is the right thing to do and not be swayed by public opinion."



Top: County Judge Sandra McLean continues to use lessons learned in military service in her career on the bench.

Bottom: Will Clark is a former Navy SEAL who found that the skills he learned in the service have paved the way to a successful civilian career.

PHOTOS BY EMILY TEAGUE

Skills to get the job

When hiring employees for Down Range Chico, Will Clark likes to hire fellow veterans into his range and weaponry business. Clark finds his veteran-employees (roughly a third of the staff) display many of the same attributes Military.com lists as reasons to hire veterans:

- Accelerated learning curve
- Leadership
- Teamwork
- Diversity and inclusiveness
- Performance under pressure
- Respect for procedures
- Technological and global savvy
- Integrity
- Health and safety consciousness
- Ability to triumph over adversity



Stephen Shy says his stepchildren, including 10-year-old Paige, have the opportunity to go to college for free through a tuition waiver that can be obtained through the Butte County Veterans Services Office.

PHOTO BY EMILY TEAGUE

“This has made [my children] into different people and encouraged them to do something with their lives.”

Stephen Shy
father of children receiving tuition waiver benefit

BUILDING BRIGHT FUTURES

Tuition waiver and GI Bill give dependents and veterans a path to education

As soon as he knew his daughters could get free college tuition because of his military service, Stephen Shy made sure they knew that the door to higher education was open.

Now, Shawni Johnson, 20, and Natalie Hanson, 18, attend Butte College. Shy says free college education was a motivating factor for them to get good grades in high school.

“This has made them into different people and encouraged them to do something with their lives,” he says.

The 64-year-old Paradise resident is disabled from his service in the Air Force, where he worked as a fireman and administrative clerk. Due to his PTSD, Shy was unable to keep gainful employment, and in 2006, he received his 100 percent disability from the VA.

Raising six stepchildren with his wife, Lorraine, Shy was concerned about being able to afford a college education for each of them.

Luckily, Shy was aware of college fee waivers, which are available to dependents of veterans with service-connected disabilities that meet certain income requirements. Fee waivers cover tuition at University of California, California State University and community colleges. Shy worked with a veterans service officer at Butte College to apply.

“We’re very pleased and grateful to the Veterans Administration,” he says. “There’s no way with my being disabled [that] I could have sent them through college.”

Now, Shy’s youngest child, 10-year-old Paige, looks up to her sisters and knows she can go to school, too.

“And I encourage her,” Shy says. “I’m a stickler on education.”

While the tuition waiver is only for dependents, many returning veterans have found a path to furthering their own education through the Post-9/11 GI Bill.

Frankie Kelly experienced a lot in the U.S. Marine Corps. He served four years in the infantry, including seven-month combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. He lost friends during those 14 months of desert heat and gunfire between 2009 and 2010.

Yet, the period after his honorable discharge in 2011 now strikes him as a bad time. Grappling with personal issues, Kelly says he went down “a dark path” that included heavy drinking. He realized something needed to change. He decided he wanted to go back to school and sought help at the Butte County Veterans Services Office. He says Veterans Service Officer Hannah Williamson made it very clear what steps needed to be taken to apply for educational benefits through the GI Bill.

“She was basically the encyclopedia of everything I needed to do,” he says.

Kelly received his benefit and enrolled at Butte College in the fall of 2014. Starting college as a 24-year-old freshman was different. However, he credits “great teachers” with aiding him in acclimating and putting him on a path to a college degree.

Reflecting on where he was — and is — he has a message for veterans at a crossroads:

“This is an opportunity to take a break from life and try just moving forward,” Kelly says. “It doesn’t matter how long it takes you to get there — life is not a sprint to the finish line.”



Iraq and Afghanistan veteran Frankie Kelly

PHOTO BY EMILY TEAGUE

Support for Education

Enrolling in college presents many challenges — a new environment, the cost of tuition and academic pressures. Veterans face these challenges as well, but they have extra support to help them succeed.

The **Post-9/11 GI Bill** is an education benefit that helps active duty military pay for all or part of their education. This benefit is paid to the veteran and the college on the veteran’s behalf and is only available through the Veterans Administration (www.va.gov).

Student-veterans entering college for the first time can struggle in an academic environment. While military life is structured and team-oriented, academic life is geared toward individual exploration. **College resource centers** can help smooth the transition. Chico State Office of Veterans’ Affairs assists veterans, as well as their dependents, receive their educational benefits. Chico State has a Student Veterans Organization as well as a student-veteran lounge. Butte College’s

center is a one-stop shop where student-veterans can study, socialize and consult with a team of specialists.

We all know college can be expensive. For children of veterans with a service-connected disability, the **tuition waiver benefit** gives dependents a free education.

The Butte County VSO is the place for veterans to start their application for this benefit. Call 530-891-2759 for more information.

THE UNKNOWN THREAT

Veterans exposed to dangerous chemical receive help

When Carl “Butch” Frederickson enlisted in the Navy in 1967, he knew he was heading into a dangerous situation. The Vietnam War was ramping up, bolstered by a heavy American military presence in South Vietnam. But Frederickson and other veterans didn’t know about another danger — Agent Orange — and the health issues it would cause.

Agent Orange was a chemical mixture of two herbicides used to flush out the enemy by clearing dense jungle foliage. Frederickson remembers the orange barrels that contained the chemical being rinsed out and used for drinking water.

When he returned to the United States in 1971, Frederickson showed no symptoms of exposure. Through the next two decades, he began to experience health issues that he couldn’t explain. He had abnormal skin growths that had to be removed by doctors. His teeth became brittle and easily broken. His first wife had multiple miscarriages. Frederickson believes it was all because of Agent Orange.

“At the time, we didn’t know about Agent Orange,” Frederickson says. “Now I know it was because of me that we weren’t able to have children.”

Frederickson wasn’t alone. Other veterans were suffering from the effects of Agent Orange, too. Fellow Navy veteran Stephen “Tank” Konstenius spent four-and-a-half years in Vietnam. Among the things he brought back with him: post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, such as anxiety and night terrors, and various health issues including Type 2 diabetes, which he attributes to exposure to the deadly herbicide.

Guilt nags at Konstenius. Guilt for the innocent killed in the war and guilt for the serious health issues he passed to his son due to his exposure to Agent Orange long ago in Quang Nam province.

“I look at him ...,” Konstenius says of his son. “The sins of the father are visited upon the sons ...”

His sentence trails off, barely audible.

*“At the time,
we didn’t know
about Agent
Orange.”*

Carl “Butch” Frederickson
Vietnam War veteran

After thousands of veterans made similar health claims, Congress enacted the Agent Orange Act in 1991, which allowed the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to assume certain conditions were a result of exposure. Finally, Vietnam veterans experiencing the effects of Agent Orange had access to disability benefits.

Once Frederickson filed his claim, he went back and forth with the VA for a couple of years. He then decided to seek help from an expert from the Butte County Veterans Services Office, who finally helped him receive disability benefits.

After he received assistance from the Butte VSO, Konstenius became involved in raising money for veterans through the local chapter of a Vietnam veterans group. His deep involvement with the vets is his way to atone for his past, including his wartime duties, he says.

Today, Frederickson is retired and spends his time working to help less fortunate veterans get back on their feet. Frederickson says he is thankful for the help of the Butte County Veterans Services Office.

“They want what is best for veterans,” he says.



Top: Carl “Butch” Frederickson served three tours in Vietnam where he was exposed to the dangerous chemical herbicide Agent Orange.

Bottom: Stephen “Tank” Konstenius developed Type 2 diabetes, presumably from his exposure to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War.

PHOTOS BY EMILY TEAGUE

How Agent Orange disability works

If you served in Vietnam between Jan. 9, 1962 and May 7, 1975, or near the Korean demilitarized zone anytime between April 1, 1968 and Aug. 31, 1971, it is assumed you were exposed to Agent Orange as part of military operations. The Department of Veterans Affairs has determined that some illnesses, including certain types of cancer, are presumably caused by Agent Orange even if the illnesses occur years after leaving the service.

LIST OF ILLNESSES ASSOCIATED WITH AGENT ORANGE EXPOSURE:

- AL amyloidosis
- Chloracne or other acneform disease
- Porphyria cutanea tarda
- Some forms of soft-tissue sarcoma
- Hodgkin’s disease
- Multiple myeloma
- Respiratory cancers (lung, bronchus, larynx, trachea)
- Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma
- Prostate cancer
- Acute and sub-acute peripheral neuropathy
- Diabetes mellitus (Type 2)
- All chronic B-cell leukemias
- Parkinson’s disease
- Ischemic heart disease

If you think you may qualify for service-connected disability benefits due to Agent Orange exposure, contact Butte County VSO at (530) 891-2759.

FAQs

Angela Kleeman provides administrative support for veterans' claims at the Butte County Veterans Services Office.

PHOTO BY EMILY TEAGUE

VISITING THE BUTTE COUNTY VSO

Office Specialist Senior Angela Kleeman answers some commonly asked questions to help you get the most out of your visit.

What am I eligible for?

We need to take a look at your DD-214 form, which is the Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty. A lot of times veterans who call don't have their DD-214. We can help them get it, or they can request it themselves, or they can set up an eBenefits.va.gov account. The DD-214 helps us determine what benefits you may be eligible for.

I'm a dependent of a disabled veteran. How can I get my college tuition covered?

You need to bring in the California College Tuition Fee Waiver application for Veteran Dependents signed by both the veteran and the dependent. The waiver is for commu-

nity colleges, the University of California or California State University systems only. In addition, you need to bring in proof of income — you must meet certain requirements — and the veteran's VA disability verification.

How can the Butte VSO help an aging veteran or surviving spouse?

There is a pension program; and if they need more help, such as day-to-day aid, there is veterans aid and attendance. We start by applying for the pension. We usually go over basic eligibility. If it looks like eligibility is met, either the aging veteran or surviving spouse is asked to sign up in advance for one of the applicable seminars.

How can I get help in person?

To assure that there will be someone available to assist you, it is best to call for an appointment or for available walk-in times. When a veteran is in crisis, homeless, terminally ill, grieving over a recently lost veteran spouse, etc., we triage them immediately. We do our best to accommodate people based on their needs.



New programs are changing lives

VETERAN DESIGNATION ON THE CALIFORNIA DRIVER LICENSE/ID

Beginning Veterans Day 2015, recently signed legislation will allow a veteran to apply for a California driver license or identification card with a designation that clearly identifies the individual as a veteran. Nearly two million veterans call California home, making it the state with the greatest number of veterans. This designation is critical for improving access to veteran resources. Veterans must apply for a veteran designation through their County Veterans Services Office.

BUTTE COUNTY SHERIFF'S CANINES FOR VETERANS

A shelter dog's life is saved, a veteran's quality of life is improved, and an inmate develops skills to improve their chances for success as part of this program facilitated through the Sheriff's Alternative Custody Unit. Under the supervision of a certified trainer, inmates train a dog to be a companion animal for a veteran. Sheriff Kory Honea says the veterans get the benefits of canine companionship and the inmates learn to be responsible for another life, the dog's. "They will experience the rewarding feeling of doing a selfless act which benefits others," he says.

BUTTE COUNTY VETERANS TREATMENT COURT

The Butte County Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) is a voluntary, court-supervised program designed to offer justice-involved veterans an opportunity to participate in a treatment-based model as an alternative to traditional court processing. The VTC is a collaboration of numerous agencies including the Butte County Superior Court, Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), Butte County District Attorney, Butte County Public Defenders' Consortium, Butte County Probation Department, Butte County Veterans Services Office as well as other community partners.

FILLING IN THE GAPS

Veteran's widow grateful to Butte County VSO for personal care

When World War II broke out, Rosemary Gregory was in elementary school. But her future husband Wallace was fighting in the Pacific theater in critical spots including Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima. In 1953, after Rosemary got her teaching degree from Chico State, and Wallace returned from reserve service in Korea, the two of them got married.

Rosemary would teach grades between kindergarten and sixth grade for decades, then assist as a mentor to younger teachers. Wallace, on the other hand, had his back and hearing damaged during his service, which prevented him from working. He also suffered from after-effects of frostbite caused by insufficient gear he used in the brutally cold Korean winter. Wallace would end up getting 100 percent disability benefits that helped support his family as his two daughters worked their way through college.

Rosemary's husband always told her that if something should happen to him, she should get to the VA immediately. And after her husband's death, that is exactly what she did.

Veterans Services Representative Matt McCoy remembers when the grieving widow came into the Butte VSO office. McCoy went through Rosemary's paperwork and initiated

the claim for Dependent Indemnity Compensation (DIC), a benefit for the dependents of a veteran who passed away due to their service-connected disabilities, and the surviving spouse of a veteran who was 100 percent service-connected disabled for more than 10 years.

"Our aim is to make it as quick and easy as possible," he says.

McCoy spends the vast majority of his time assisting veterans and family members like Rosemary with new VA benefits claims. He says there's also a lot of case management — following up on claims and making sure they are moving along. For McCoy, a veteran of the U.S. Army who served a combat tour in Somalia, the bond between himself and the people he helps is obvious.

"We really see ourselves in our customers," he says. "It's incredibly rewarding to assist fellow veterans and their family members get the benefits they deserve."

Rosemary was impressed with the service.

"They were people people. They had the feel of people who knew about loss, very sympathetic," she says. "I was very surprised that I was eligible."

The benefit helped "fill in the gaps" of Rosemary's retirement package, and now she's financially secure as she moves from the now-empty four-bedroom family house to a senior citizen complex that is nearer to her working daughters. She's grateful to Butte County VSO for handling her needs with personal care.

"They treated me absolutely fantastic," she says.

The Butte County VSO helped get survivor benefits for Rosemary Gregory after her husband, a veteran, passed away. The support helped "fill in the gaps" in her retirement package, so she can still enjoy life, including frequent hikes.

PHOTO COURTESY ROSEMARY GREGORY



Connecting veterans to vital benefits

Veterans navigating the VA claims process don't have to go it alone. Veterans Services Representatives Matt McCoy and John Zepeda work with veterans to file their claim right the first time, saving time and getting the maximum benefit veterans deserve.

"County Veteran Service Officers and Representatives are certified, skilled professionals trained in developing veterans' claims for benefits by reviewing and applying relevant legislation, current law, protocols and important medical evidence," Zepeda says.

Zepeda, who is a disabled veteran, says he personally understands the process eligible claimants are going through.

"This fuels my passion for my job," he says. "I am an advocate for veterans and eligible claimants because I am a veteran."

Here are the benefits McCoy and Zepeda can help veterans with:

DISABILITY COMPENSATION

This is a tax-free monetary benefit paid to veterans with disabilities resulting from a disease or injury incurred or aggravated during active military service. Compensation may also be paid for disabilities presumed to be related to circumstances of military service, even though they may arise after service. Generally, the degrees of disability are designed to compensate for considerable loss of working time.

DEPENDENCY AND INDEMNITY COMPENSATION

This is a tax-free monetary benefit generally payable to a surviving spouse, child, or parent of service members who died while on active duty, during training or after being discharged from service-connected disabilities.

PENSION

This is a benefit paid to wartime veterans or veteran spouses who are disabled and/or age 65 or older who also meet the income requirements.

SPECIAL MONTHLY COMPENSATION (SMC)

This is an additional tax-free benefit that can be paid to veterans, their spouses, surviving



MATT MCCOY



JOHN ZEPEDA

spouses and parents. For veterans, SMC is a higher rate of compensation paid due to special circumstances such as a specific disability, including the loss of use of one hand or leg.

AID AND ATTENDANCE

Veterans and survivors who are eligible for a VA pension and are housebound or require the aid and attendance of another person for personal needs may be eligible for additional monetary payment. These benefits are paid in addition to a monthly pension.

BURIAL AND PLOT-INTERMENT ALLOWANCES
Partial reimbursement of an eligible veteran's funeral and burial costs.

HEALTH CARE COVERAGE

This is available for those who served active military duty, were discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable, and meet other eligibility requirements.

COLLEGE FEE WAIVERS

These are available for eligible dependents of veterans with service-connected disabilities. Waivers cover systemwide fees for in-state dependents who meet certain income criteria at any campus of the University of California, California State University or California community colleges.

VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

These are vocational rehabilitation and employment services for service-connected disabled veterans to help with training, employment accommodations, résumé development and other job seeking skills. Other services may be provided to assist veterans in starting their own businesses or those who are severely disabled and unable to work in traditional employment.



SERVING THOSE WHO SERVED

The Butte County Veterans Services Office is there for YOU

Are you a veteran or the spouse or dependent of a vet? Do you wonder what benefits are out there for you and what you need to file a claim?

You're not alone if you're not sure how to file for disability compensation, pension or veterans aid and attendance. Maybe you aren't familiar with presumptive disability benefits for Agent Orange exposure during the Vietnam War or want to know more about getting help to pay for college.

The Butte County Veterans Services Office offers support and guidance via dozens of services and programs to help you get the benefits you deserve.

Don't delay — contact them today!

GET HELP WITH:

- Comprehensive benefit counseling
- Claim preparation, submission and tracking
- Requesting DD-214 discharge documents
- California College Tuition Fee Waiver
- Information and referral for employment, public assistance, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical care, benefits, education and housing
- Butte County veteran identification card program

WHAT SHOULD I BRING TO MY APPOINTMENT?

Be prepared for your visit to the Butte County VSO

Bringing in supporting documentation and corresponding paperwork can facilitate pension and/or other benefit claims.

A SUCCESSFUL DISABILITY CLAIM MUST HAVE THE FOLLOWING COMPONENTS:

- A verifiable exposure, injury, or illness sustained while on active duty or training for active duty.
- A current diagnosis of permanent disability being claimed
- A "nexus," evidence or explanation of how in-service exposure/incident lead to current diagnosed permanent disability.

NOTE: Dependents of deceased veterans may be eligible for benefits even if the veteran hadn't filed a claim or was being compensated. This is called benefits granted posthumously.

GENERAL CHECKLIST OF NEEDED SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

- ☐ Form DD-214 or Discharge Certificate, original or certified copy
- ☐ Current marriage certificate
- ☐ Birth certificate for children under 18
- ☐ Social Security documents for all dependents
- ☐ Names and addresses of all doctors not VA-related
- ☐ Medical history
- ☐ Death certificate
- ☐ Medical records verifying disability
- ☐ Social Security award letter for non-service-connected claims
- ☐ Divorce decrees for all marriages of veteran and current spouse
- ☐ Medical report (veteran must be totally disabled for pension purposes)
- ☐ A voided blank check to allow the Department of Veterans Affairs to deposit funds, if your claim is approved

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION NEEDED FOR PENSION/VETERANS AID AND ATTENDANCE APPLICANTS:

- ☐ Income statements (Social Security, pension/retirement and annuities, need to show all income)
- ☐ Net worth statements (examples include bank accounts, IRA, stocks and bonds, properties other than current residence)
- ☐ Regularly recurring medical expenses (for example, medical insurance, assisted care)
- ☐ Marital and dissolution histories of claimant and spouse

HOW TO FIND US:

Butte County Veterans Services Office

Located in the Butte Community Employment Center
2445 Carmichael Drive, Chico, CA 95928

PHONE: 530-891-2759 | FAX: 530-895-6508

