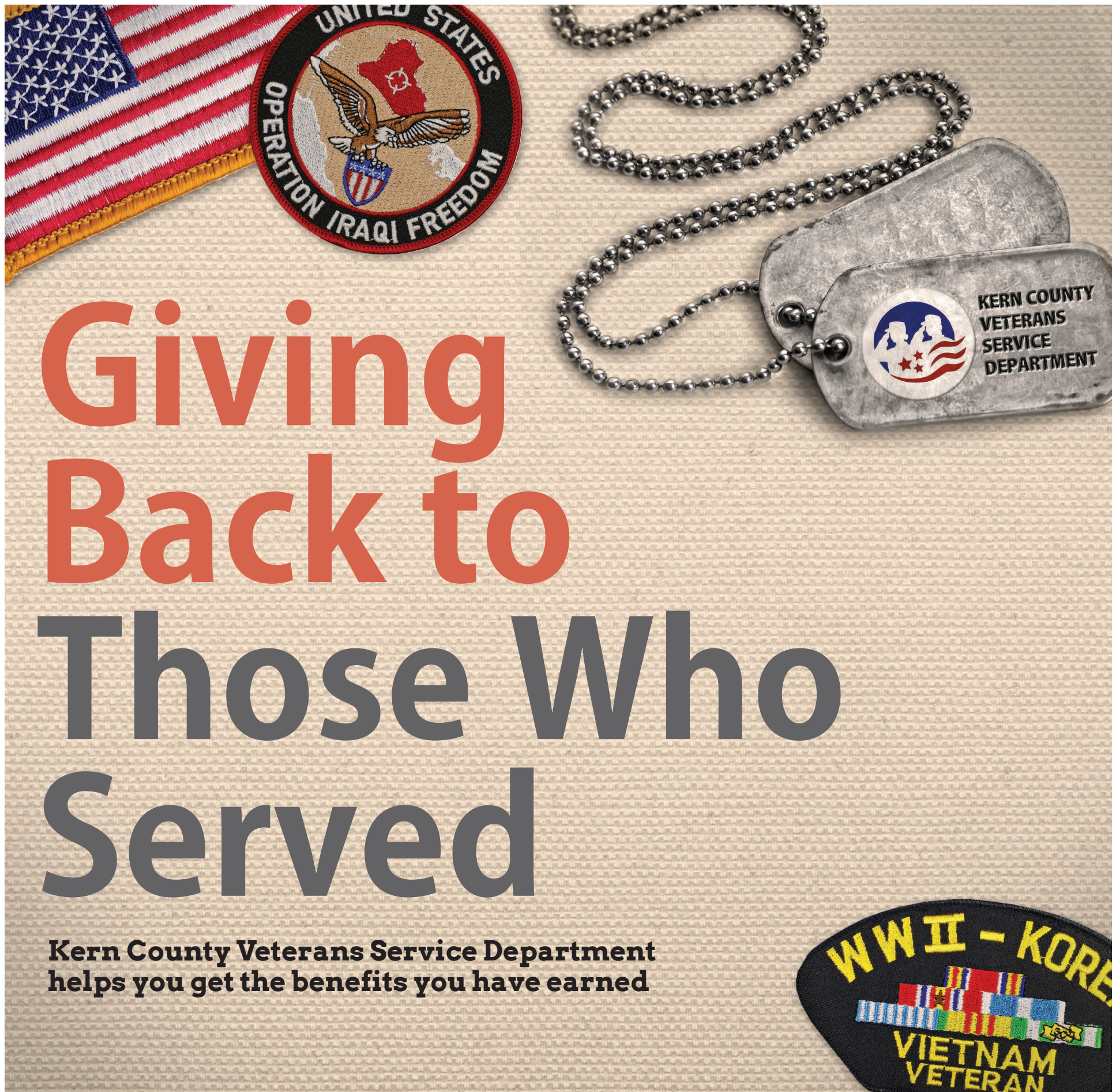




Giving Back to Those Who Served

**Kern County Veterans Service Department
helps you get the benefits you have earned**



A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Hello, Kern County. I would like to take a moment to introduce myself and share my excitement about this publication.

I have been with the Veterans Service Department for six years and was recently appointed the Director. As an Army veteran, I have enjoyed working with my fellow Kern County veterans, and I look forward to many more years of collaborating with local veterans' service organizations, local non-profit groups and other community partners to improve the lives of veterans throughout Kern County.

The Veterans Service Department assists veterans with a variety of services such as filing claims for compensation or pension, processing applications for the California college fee waiver program and applying for other various benefits. In the following pages, you'll learn about other resources available to veterans in our community, including:

- Armed Forces Support Foundation
- Wounded Heroes Fund
- Bakersfield College and CSU Bakersfield
- California Veterans Assistance Foundation
- Kern Patriot Partnership

Please enjoy the following features about some of our partners and the fabulous work being done for veterans throughout our community.

Joshua Dhanens
Director, Kern County
Veterans Service Department



The staff of the Kern County Veterans Service Department, many of them veterans themselves, aim to get veterans the services and benefits they have earned.

PHOTO BY JUAN TOBIAS JR.

A One-Stop Shop for Veterans

Kern County Veterans Service Department makes it their mission to help veterans

BY THEA MARIE ROOD

The Kern County Veterans Service Department is a one-stop shop that serves veterans of all ages and from all branches of the military. The department can help veterans learn about and apply for state and federal benefits, including insurance, medical care, disability payments, home loan guaranties and educational assistance.

But it only happens once you walk through those doors. "My advice: come into our office," said Jose Ramon Lopez, Supervising Veterans Service Representative. "Check us off your list."

In fact, Lopez, who served in the U.S. Army himself until 2009 and did two tours of duty in Iraq, suggests it should be a first priority for everyone separating from the

military and entering civilian life: "I have veterans from WWII and Korea who come in now and say, 'I never knew you were here. I should have come in sooner.' You don't want to wait to the last minute."

Coming in early means financial assistance or medical care can begin before a situation has reached crisis mode. "Quite often, obtaining benefits requires submitting forms, applications, medical evidence," he said. "If you don't seek benefits ahead of time, you won't get them when you need them most, because claims for benefits take time to

process."

Professional guidance also ensures veterans don't overlook important benefits, some of which have eligibility windows (such as veterans' life insurance).

"My advice: come into our office. Check us off your list."

JOSE RAMON LOPEZ
Supervising Veterans Service
Representative, Kern County
Veterans Service
Department

"You can also avoid paying for college by using the G.I. Bill. And it's not just you — your dependents too can have educational benefits, like the CalVet tuition waiver," Lopez said. "The time to find out about these is *not* when you're a few units short of graduation."

Finally, the Veterans Service Department can assist veterans by referring them to community partners. These include the Vet Center next door, local organizations like the Wounded Heroes Fund, the Kern County Veterans Collaborative, and the Armed Forces Support Foundation, as well as Bakersfield College and CSU Bakersfield.

"We also work with the Kern Patriot Partnership whose goal is to help veterans find employment," he said, adding the grant-funded program helps with résumés, dress clothes, interview tips, referrals and follow-up with employers. "We make sure veterans get what they need."

Nonprofit Does Whatever it Takes

Nonprofit profile: Armed Forces Support Foundation

BY THEA MARIE ROOD

The Armed Forces Support Foundation (AFSF) was founded in 2012 by husband-and-wife team Ben and Jenny Patten to provide immediate assistance to vets in need.

“The [Veterans Service Department] and the VA are great, but they take time,” said Ben Patten, who served in the U.S. Army himself from ’75–’78. “If you come in Jan. 1, it’s not March 1 before we get to you — it’s 48–72 hours. If a vet needs something, he needs it now.”

Examples include installing wheelchair ramps for housebound veterans, paying a past-due PG&E bill, and replacing a broken appliance. “We had a family last year, with

little ones, and their stove went out two days before Thanksgiving,” recalled former U.S. Marine Jenny Patten, who found a local store to donate the stove, then found someone to deliver it and someone else to install it. “They got their stove and cooked enchiladas that night — and sent us a photo. Those little kids had Thanksgiving dinner.”

Not only does the foundation have the ability to quickly organize members of the Bakersfield community, but it is also freed from government bureaucracy. “The best thing

“If a vet needs something, he needs it now.”

BEN PATTEN
Founder, Armed Forces Support Foundation



Armed Forces Support Foundation was founded by Jenny and Ben Patten.

PHOTO BY JUAN TOBIAS JR.

about the AFSF is we are small,” Ben said. “And we don’t believe in a lot of red tape.”

In fact, he said, referrals often come from the Kern County Veterans Service Department or Social Security office, where a veteran filling out a claim for benefits may also reveal there is no food at home. “[That office] will call us and

ask, ‘Can you help them out now?’”

As part of the Kern County Veterans Collaborative, Jenny said the AFSF can also refer veterans to other nonprofits for help, and make sure they are aware of and know how to apply for permanent benefits. “Our goal is to fill the gap until the services veterans are entitled to start,” she said.

For more information on AFSF, visit www.armedforcessupportfoundation.org

Making Transitions Easier

Nonprofit profile: Wounded Heroes Fund

The Wounded Heroes Fund (WHF) was founded by Wendy Porter, daughter of a Vietnam veteran, and grew out of what was supposed to be a one-time event in 2009 to raise money for one local veteran and his family.

But it became a whole lot more.

“We started out by providing financial assistance to those veterans who got out of the military and because of a disability, had a hard time adjusting to civilian life,” said Erica Schaubsluger, WHF’s Administrative Assistant and the wife of a U.S. Marine. “With medical appointments, first

and last month’s rent, and bills, if they’re not prepared, they quickly get behind.”

The nonprofit now works closely with the Kern County Veterans Service Department, sending veterans over to apply for state and federal benefits, or — conversely — helping veterans bridge the gap until those benefits kick in. “Our goal is to help them get back to a healthy lifestyle,” she said.

For example, the group has expanded to focus on other critical components of easing back into civilian life. “We have social events, because suicide rates for veterans are so high,”

“Our goal is to help them get back to a healthy lifestyle.”

ERICA SCHAUBSLUGER
Administrative Assistant,
Wounded Heroes Fund

BY THEA MARIE ROOD

Schaubsluger said. “We have four date nights a year, where we invite 20 couples. Our hope is for veterans to make a connection with one another to prevent isolation.”

In addition to date nights, the program provides service dogs, equine therapy, wilderness courses, and grants to cover anything from rent to groceries to a laptop for school. “As long as it’s keeping them off the streets and from being hungry, getting them to work or school, we are willing to help,” she said.

WHF is also the conduit to connect veterans to resources in Kern County, said Schaubsluger. “And it’s a warm hand-off — we call the organization and set up the appointment to get their issues resolved.”

For more information on WHF, visit www.thewoundedheroesfund.org



Wounded Heroes Fund helps veterans like David Sanchez have more successful transitions to civilian life by offering help including small grants and service dogs, like Sanchez’s dog Zuma.

PHOTO BY JUAN TOBIAS JR.

Setting Vets on the Road to Success

Kern County colleges support students with veteran-specific resources

BY ANNE STOKES

ON-CAMPUS RESOURCES

California State University, Bakersfield

Veteran Success Center

661-654-3557

www.csub.edu/veterans

veterans@csb.edu

Hours: Monday – Friday,
8 a.m. – 5 p.m.

Student veterans can access the center's lounge, computer lab (including free printing), tutoring and workshops.

Veteran faculty advisor

661-654-2336

Certifying official

661-654-3390

Bakersfield College

Veterans Resource Center

661-395-4312

www.bakersfieldcollege.edu/veterans

veterans@bakersfieldcollege.edu

Hours: Monday – Thursday,
7:30 a.m. – 5:30 p.m. and
Fridays, 8 a.m. – 12 p.m.

Student veterans can access the center's lounge, study area and computer lab (including free printing).

Veterans education advisor

Levinson Hall-39

661-395-4312

VA certifying official

Administration Building windows
6 and 8

661-395-4760

Paul Beckworth knows firsthand how important support is for student veterans, both in and out of the classroom. Fresh out of the Navy, he enrolled in college in 1995 and sought help with his G.I. Bill from the school's certifying official, the only veteran-specific office on campus. Although she answered his G.I. Bill questions, the woman warned him not to ask about other veteran benefits or programs — that wasn't her job. Instead, he found support from his fellow veterans and their shared experiences.

"For the student veterans, you're dealing with a very specific population with very specific needs — it's not just the educational aspect," said Beckworth, who serves as the Faculty Director of Veterans Services at Bakersfield College's Veteran Resource Center. "To go from Iraq or Afghanistan to a classroom with 18-year-olds is really no easy task."

He graduated and went on to become a history professor at Bakersfield College in 2010. But even then, the school lacked formal support for student-veterans. Beckworth said he helped out when he could on campus.

"Teachers, would call me and say, 'Hey Paul, I'm having a problem with a veteran in class,' or 'A veteran wrote a really disturbing paper,'" he said, noting he wasn't professionally equipped to handle issues like PTSD.

"Since then, we've been able to hire people and institutionalize a lot of this."

Bakersfield College opened its Veterans Center in 2011, giving students a place to connect with other veterans and share their



Paul Beckworth, Navy veteran and Bakersfield College's Faculty Director of Veterans Services, has seen an increase in the available services that help student-veterans transition from the military to higher education.

PHOTO BY JUAN TOBIAS JR.

frustrations and successes. By 2014, the center officially employed a veterans educational advisor. Currently under construction and slated for completion by November 2019,

Bakersfield College's new, larger Vernon Valenzuela Veterans

Resource Center will be a 4,700-square-foot one-stop-shop for student-veterans looking for academic advising, assistance with financial aid, VA educational benefits and other services.

Beckworth points to a rise in student-veteran transfer, retention and graduation rates to show just how effective such measures really are.

"Our veterans graduate at a much faster rate than the general population does," he said. "The numbers don't lie, it's been fantastic."

**"Our
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PAUL BECKWORTH
Bakersfield College's Faculty
Director of Veterans Services

Many Bakersfield College student veterans transfer to California State University, Bakersfield, where they find the same kind of veteran-specific support.

Jamie Pacheco remembers how little help there was for her husband after he left the Air Force in 2007 and went back to school. Her husband wasn't alone. Many veterans had to deal with two complicated bureaucracies — the VA and college — on their own.

"They were frustrated with the process. Financial aid itself is very confusing, their benefits were confusing," she said. "I saw time and time again veterans getting frustrated and giving up and missing out on that opportunity."

Today, she's the Veterans Success Center Coordinator at CSUB, where she helps veterans plan for and achieve their educational goals through academic counseling, assistance with applying for G.I. Bill benefits, financial aid and scholarships. She's also able to connect them with off-campus services and referrals if they need help with housing assistance, disability claims or counseling.

Aim Higher

G.I. Bill helps Marine get on track for career in finance

BY THEA MARIE ROOD

Without the G.I. Bill, former Marine Ulyses Rodriguez would not be able to attend CSU Bakersfield as a full-time student.

"It's one thing if you're 18 or 19 and you can live in the dorms or in a spare bedroom somewhere," said Rodriguez, who was in his mid-20s when he left the military in 2017. "But if you have a family, you can't do that."

In fact, Rodriguez lives in a home he owns in East Bakersfield, along with his wife, Jessica, and their 5-year-old son, Alexander. He is able to do so because the G.I. Bill pays his tuition and gives him a monthly housing allowance, with a stipend for books and supplies.

This financial support also allows him time to volunteer, leading to important connections,

internships and, most recently, a paid campus job in the Veterans Center on the CSUB campus. "I tell a lot of veterans not to be afraid to volunteer, which is different because you never volunteer for anything in the military — or you get the short end of the stick,"

he said with a laugh. "But in civilian life, it opens so many doors."

His only other option if he didn't have these veterans' benefits? "I would have had to take out crazy student loans," he said, a debt load he knows would hamper him financially in the future.

Financial planning is actually his field of expertise — after his own run-in with financial trouble. "I enlisted in the Marine Corps at 17, right out of high school," he said, and was deployed twice to Afghanistan, where he was

"I would have had to take out crazy student loans [if not for the G.I. Bill.]"

ULYSES RODRIGUEZ
CSU Bakersfield student
and Marine Corps
veteran



Veteran Ulyses Rodriguez is a full-time student at CSU Bakersfield and pursuing a career in finance thanks to the G.I. Bill.

PHOTO BY JUAN TOBIAS JR.

the youngest in the Afghan theater and Iraq at the time. The teenaged Marine also had his first steady paycheck.

"I was bad with money at first," he admitted, and when he got in over his head, he met with a financial planning office. "They helped me change some habits and then it was like night and day — my finances and my credit became my top priority."

He began to counsel other Marines, defending them against predatory lenders,

negotiating lower interest rates, and teaching them how to save and pay off debt.

Once he graduates, he plans to open his own investment firm, but also run a nonprofit financial planning service for veterans — all of which is possible because of his own debt-free educational opportunity.

"I had a great experience in the military," he said. "And the G.I. Bill has also been great."

MORE VETERANS CAN USE G.I. BILL

In 2017, the "Forever G.I. Bill" was signed into law, creating many changes to veteran education and training benefits. The biggest change: The G.I. Bill is now available to veterans at any point in their lives, as opposed to sunseting 15 years after leaving the military.

For those who discharged after Jan. 1, 2013, the bill also pays for both college education and training programs, as well as housing, books and supplies. These benefits help veterans

support their families while they attend school. They also allow veterans time to volunteer or work unpaid internships, which can lead to better paid employment and more successful careers, without incurring student loan debt.

Educational Benefits

- Tuition and fees paid directly to public, private and foreign universities
- A monthly housing allowance sent to you

- A books and supplies stipend sent to you

Training Benefits

- Costs paid for attending non-college degree granting institutions, vocational flight schools, correspondence or online schools
- Reimbursement for national testing, licensing or certification
- A monthly housing allowance sent to you

KNOWING VETERANS 'BY NAME'

The number of homeless veterans has decreased in Kern County, in part because of a "By-Name List" that is shared between the VA Clinic and the veterans' nonprofit community. "We learn every [veteran] by name and reach out to the people on this list every 14 days to offer them housing intervention," said Deborah Johnson, California Veterans Assistance Foundation's President and CEO.

Housing assistance can include:

- Working with shelter-resistant veterans to find permanent, safe, clean housing that will accommodate pets or families
- Obtaining subsidized housing through the VA or HUD
- Bridge housing that allows the veteran to ultimately take over the lease
- Paying back rent and negotiating with a veteran's landlord to prevent eviction
- Paying security deposits and several months' rent until a veterans' employment or disability checks arrive
- Housing in a soon-to-be-completed Veterans Village, which will welcome active military veterans, as well as Reservists and National Guard

A Home for Every Veteran

California Veterans Assistance Foundation is working to end veteran homelessness in Kern County

BY THEA MARIE ROOD

Many local organizations are working to make sure no one who served our country spends a night on the streets. Thanks to their efforts, the homeless veteran population in Kern County is on its way to being "functional zero," according to housing and veterans officials.

One of these organizations is California Veterans Assistance Foundation (CVAF), which is the only local nonprofit that has a mission to end veteran homelessness. Since its start in 1999, CVAF has been able to identify and help homeless veterans and those at risk of becoming homeless.

"This ranges from street homeless to people in the process of eviction to people who are couch-surfing," said CEO and President Deborah Johnson.

One example is CVAF's own street outreach coordinator, who was formerly homeless himself for 16 years. "I got out of the Navy and lost a job, then started using drugs," said Frank Miller. "It was just a downward spiral."

In 2015, he was referred to the Kern County Veterans Service Department and CVAF, which together set him up with health insurance, disability payments, a rehab facility and — once he was sober — housing and a job.

"It's because of these two entities that I'm where I am today and able to help others," said Miller, adding his experience gives him credibility with other homeless veterans. "Every issue they're having, I've had."

CVAF not only gets people off the streets, it prevents them from ending up there at all. One way is to avoid evictions — which stay on veterans' credit reports and

make future housing harder to obtain — by working with landlords and paying up to six months of back rent. The foundation also pays rent and security deposits forward to help struggling veterans get on their feet.

"We had a single veteran who had a 9-year-old child," Johnson said. "She'd gotten a good job at the U.S. [Postal Service], but she didn't have money for a down payment and rent yet. So we moved her into an apartment, paid six months of rent — time for her to save enough money and then take over the lease."

The foundation owns two apartment buildings and three three-bedroom homes to accommodate both single and married veterans with families. It works with the VA and HUD to obtain subsidized housing for those who qualify, and also plans to unveil Veterans Village this spring, a brand new community-sponsored development of 400-square-foot homes that will come fully furnished.

"It's simple," Johnson said. "We want to provide decent housing for low-income people."



Navy veteran Frank Miller was homeless for 16 years before getting connected with Kern County Veterans Service Department and California Veterans Assistance Foundation, where he now works as a street outreach coordinator.

PHOTO BY JUAN TOBIAS JR.

**"Every issue
they're having,
I've had."**

FRANK MILLER

Formerly homeless Navy veteran
who now does outreach for
California Veterans Assistance
Foundation

A Win-Win Situation

Kern Patriot Partnership connects veterans and civilian employers

BY ANNE STOKES



The Kern Patriot Partnership connects veterans like Antonio Lopez with employers in many different fields.

PHOTO BY JUAN TOBIAS JR.

No matter the industry, employers have the same questions: Is this person a hard worker? Can they work on a team? On their own? Will they show up to work on time?

According to Tracey Keefe, Human Resources Manager for World Wind & Solar, a renewable energy company in Tehachapi, those skills can be hard to come by. But, she noted, those qualities are regularly seen in candidates referred by the Kern Patriot Partnership (KPP).

“If we could get a lot more candidates from KPP, we would!” she said. “The candidates we get from them are really well-qualified, they have great soft skills and they have developed quickly into lead roles.”

In 2015 — thanks in part to a grant from the Chevron Corporation — KPP started connecting Kern County employers with qualified veteran candidates.

“Kern County employers that we work with have pledged to give veterans a first look, not necessarily a job,” said Penny Martinez, KPP Executive Director. “We send them a qualified veteran and it gets their foot in the door.”

While veterans gain valuable skills during their time in the service, many of them have trouble transitioning to civilian employment. KPP helps translate their military experience into job skills HR managers understand on résumés.

“When veterans come in, they’ll say, ‘I’m a truck driver,’ but I can tell you they do much more than drive a truck,” Martinez said. “These young men and women were doing a lot of collateral duties that afforded them skill sets they don’t even think about.”

Army veteran Antonio Lopez’s work with World Wind & Solar has taken him up and

down the East Coast and as far as Hawaii working on solar array sites. He says KPP’s referral was instrumental in him being hired.

“They’ll pretty much vouch for you. They put their program on the line to get you a job,” he said. “They don’t want you to fail, that’s their main goal.”

Since the program began, over 370 veterans have signed up with KPP, 269 of whom have been hired. The program’s 170 partner employers have offered veterans opportunities in a wide range of

fields, including engineering, administration, information technology, agriculture, sales, construction, finance and law enforcement.

“I’ve got tons of those kinds of stories where people really struggle when they get out of the service,” Martinez said. “We give them the confidence, we tell them not to give up. We’re their advocates.”

“They don’t want you to fail, that’s their main goal.”

ANTONIO LOPEZ
Army veteran and World Wind & Solar employee

**NEED HELP?
JOIN THE
KERN PATRIOT
PARTNERSHIP**

Whether you’re a veteran looking for a job or an employer looking to hire, Kern Patriot Partnership (KPP) can help!

Veterans

Transitioning from the military to the civilian job market can be hard. Don’t go it alone! Let KPP help you with:

- Career counseling
- Résumé writing
- Interviewing skills
- Connections with companies hiring in dozens of fields

Employers

KPP only refers qualified applicants. When you interview a candidate, rest assured that KPP has vetted their:

- Educational background
- Work experience
- Language skills
- Any relevant certifications

Visit www.kernpatriot.org or call 661-868-7300 for more information or to participate in the KPP program.

Need Help? Contact Your Local Office!



Kern County
Veterans Service
Department

Main Office (Bakersfield)

1120 Golden State Ave.
661-868-7300

Hours (by appointment):

Monday – Friday 8 a.m. – 12 p.m. and
1 p.m. – 5 p.m.

Ridgecrest

400 No. China Lake Blvd.
661-868-7300

Hours (by appointment):

Wednesdays 10 a.m. – 3 p.m.

Lake Isabella

7050 Lake Isabella Blvd.
661-868-7300

Hours (by appointment):

Alternating Thursdays of each month
from 9 a.m. – 3 p.m.

Tehachapi

414 West Tehachapi Blvd., Suite H
661-868-7300

Hours (by appointment):

Alternating Tuesdays of each month
from 9 a.m. – 3 p.m.

Visit www.kerncounty.com/veterans

Kern County Veterans Stand Down

The California Veterans Assistance Foundation hosts the annual Kern County Veterans Stand Down. This free, one-day event connects veterans to services and support available to them and their dependents, including health screenings, assistance with VA and Social Security benefits, housing, and career services.

One of the most popular services, the Veterans Court, helps veterans clear their record of eligible misdemeanors (pre-registration is required).



When: Second Thursday in October

Where: Stramler Park, 4003 Chester Ave., Bakersfield

Info: www.cavaf.org/annual-stand-down or call 661-873-4768

Q&A WITH VETERANS SERVICE ASSISTANT CHRISTINA HANG

BY ANNE STOKES



How does the Kern County Veterans Service Department help local veterans?

We assist by advising veterans, dependents and other family members of what VA benefits they may be eligible for including veteran service-connected compensation and pension. We also help with applications for VA education, health care, burial benefits and home loan guaranty.

Dealing with the VA can be daunting. How do Veterans Service Representatives help veterans navigate the federal system?

The VA is a big federal entity that provides benefits, but they do not always do a great job explaining what is needed to receive those benefits. That is where we come in. Because we deal with the VA on a daily basis, we know what evidence the VA requires for the different benefits available. Since we know what the VA needs, we can help provide direction on how to acquire those documents if our clients do not already have them.

Are Veterans Service Representatives on top of regulation requirements, changes and updates?

We are always looking to see if there have been changes to federal and state benefits such as additions to the list of presumptive conditions for Agent Orange exposure, changes to the G.I. Bill, or changes to CalVet's tuition waiver for veterans' dependents. Things are always changing and we make it a priority to keep up to date on those changes.

What do you find rewarding about the work you do?

I find it very rewarding in that we can help change the lives of veterans and their dependents. That financial assistance that comes from the VA can have a big effect on their lives.