



You Served Your Country. **Now Let Us Serve You.**



**Riverside County Department
of Veterans' Services**



A LETTER FROM DIRECTOR GRANT GAUTSCHE

At Riverside County Department of Veterans' Services, our mission statement is: "To promote and honor all veterans, and enhance their quality of life and that of their dependents and survivors through counseling, claims assistance, education, advocacy, and special projects."

We help veterans and their families by developing and submitting claims for local, state and federal veterans benefits. We also link veterans and their dependents to local county resources and community partners for services and assistance.

Many veterans are not aware of the many benefits they may be entitled to, and we encourage all veterans to stop by and visit us at any of our three locations or field offices. There, you can speak to an accredited Veterans Representative who will provide benefits counseling and assist in applying for all the benefits you have earned.

For us, every day is Veterans Day, and it is always an honor to serve our veterans and their families.



The Riverside County Department of Veterans' Services staff includes members who are veterans themselves.
PHOTO BY ERIC REED

Veterans Helping Veterans

by Matt Jocks

Riverside County Department of Veterans' Services is an advocate helping veterans to receive benefits they have earned

It is a motto that means more than words to those serving their country through military service: "We take care of our own."

The meaning of those words doesn't stop at the time of discharge. Veterans' Service Representatives at the three Riverside County offices are there to serve as advocates and guides for veterans and their families as they seek to obtain the benefits they have earned.

"We are here to serve those who have served," said Grant Gautsche, director of the Riverside County Department of Veterans' Services. "Because the Veterans' Representatives are veterans themselves, they have skin in the game."

The department's mission statement details the service provided: counseling, assistance and follow-up in filing claims, education and advocacy. The Veterans' Service Representatives are navigators through the sea of red tape that comes with large agencies such as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

"We simplify the claims process," Gautsche said. "We're good at what we do."

The office obtained more than \$30 million in new

benefits last year. It served about 21,000 veterans and filed 7,000 claims.

Much of what the office does involves education. Many veterans are unaware of the benefits they have earned. Those can range from basic benefits to more obscure ones, such as those related to exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam, or contaminated water at Camp Lejeune, or depleted uranium in Iraq, or asbestos on ships.

The Riverside County Veterans' Service Office has stepped outside its doors into the community. Working with local government, the county became the first large county in the nation to achieve "functional zero" veteran homelessness. That is defined by the Department of Veterans Affairs as establishing a community system that assures that homelessness is rare, brief and non-recurring, and that no veteran is

forced to live on the street.

These missions are ones that the service officers take personally.

"If we let them leave this office without being informed of all the things they are entitled to," said Gautsche, "then we haven't done our job."

**"We are
here to
serve those
who have
served."**

Grant Gautsche
*Director of the Riverside County
Department of Veterans' Services*

From Homeless to Healthy

by Matt Jocks

Veteran obtains the compensation he needed to focus on a healthier life



Vietnam veteran R. Thomas Hinck receives regular disability compensation payments from the VA that have helped him get housing and lead a healthier life in Bishop, where he enjoys hiking.

PHOTO COURTESY THOMAS HINCK

“My life has totally changed. They’re basically paying me to stay healthy.”

R. Thomas Hinck
Veteran

From the jungles of Vietnam to a steamship in Africa to an RV he called home in the middle of the California desert, R. Thomas Hinck has seen plenty. Today, he is happy to be alive with an actual roof over his head. But to get there, Hinck needed more than a path. He needed the help of the Riverside County Department of Veterans’ Services.

Like so many veterans, Hinck carried the effects of his service in Vietnam. In his case, post traumatic stress related anger issues, as well as other physical maladies.

His path lead to him living in an RV on desolate land near the Colorado River. Alone with his anger and his drinking issues, he realized his health was failing. “I didn’t expect to make it through another winter in my vehicle out in the desert,” he said.

What Hinck didn’t know was that there was a route to getting help, and it was Riverside County Senior Veterans’ Service Representative Ralph Duarte who showed him the way.

Duarte helped Hinck navigate a lengthy claims process to claim years of backpay he was owed due to his disabilities that arose from military service.

His claim was settled in 2016 and he now receives regular payments from the Veterans Benefits Administration that have helped him get his life back on track.

He now lives in Bishop, where he has rented a place to live and is able to work on his health. He can be found in the nearby mountains doing “hiking therapy.” He documents his hikes with an old-school disposable camera and posts them on his own site, hinkhike.com.

Hinck also volunteers with a community group, helping distribute food to those in need. He is happy that description no longer applies to him.

“My life has totally changed,” he said. “They’re basically paying me to stay healthy.”

Aside from his volunteer work, Hinck still lives largely in solitude. His house is in a commercial district with no neighbors and he says the trails are usually empty.

But it’s a solitude of his choosing, not the unhealthy one he was living in the desert.

“I have no problem sleeping these days,” he said.

COMPENSATION INFORMATION

★ WHAT IS COMPENSATION?

- A monthly benefit paid, tax-free, to veterans who are at least 10 percent disabled because of injuries or other conditions incurred or aggravated during active duty or training.
- The condition can be either a physical injury or condition or a mental health condition.

★ HOW DOES IT WORK?

- Level of compensation is based on a percentage rating (in increments of 10 percentage points), based on medical documentation. The rating is generally related to ability to work.
- Veterans with ratings of 30 percent or higher may receive additional compensation if they have dependents.
- The relation of some conditions to military service must be proven. Other conditions are presumed to be due to service.

★ WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

- Former military personnel who served on active duty.
- Personnel who served in active duty for training.
- Personnel who served in inactive duty training (limited to injury, heart attack or stroke).
- Those who were discharged with a designation other than dishonorable.

HELPING WITH TUITION

★ WHAT IS THE COLLEGE TUITION FEE WAIVER?

- Benefit waives tuition and fees at all University of California, California State University and California community colleges for eligible veteran dependents.

★ HOW DOES IT WORK?

- There are four plans, addressing specific circumstances with differing eligibility standards.
- Waiver covers tuition only, not other expenses.

★ WHO IS ELIGIBLE

- **Plan A:** Unmarried children aged 14-27, or spouse of veteran whose total disability or death was service-connected. No income limit.
- **Plan B:** Children of veterans with service-connected disability. Income limit for child applies. No age limit.
- **Plan C:** Child or a spouse who has not remarried or member of California National Guard who died or is permanently disabled as a result of an event on active duty.
- **Plan D:** Medal of Honor recipients or their children under 27. Limited to undergraduate programs and subject to income limit.

Achieving Her Dreams

by Matt Jocks

Tuition fee waiver allows child of veteran to attend college without going into debt

When Frances Hernandez was a child, she would sometimes accompany her father, Juan, to events at the National Guard center in Riverside.

She had no way of knowing at the time how Juan's service would benefit her years later.

Juan spent about 20 years in the Guard, causing him to spend periods of time away from the family. During his service, Juan suffered a 10 percent hearing loss.

That loss made his family eligible for one of the most valuable — and underused — veterans benefits. The college tuition fee waiver covers tuition and fees for children of veterans with service-connected disabilities.

Like so many other veteran families, they were unaware of the benefit until finding out about it online — just in the nick of time.

"Because my parents said they would be able to cover the first year, I guess I wasn't thinking too much ahead," Frances said. "I knew about student debt, but I didn't realize the severity of it until some of the [older students]



San Jose State graduate Frances Hernandez says she doesn't know how she would have paid for college if it weren't for the college tuition fee waiver her father earned through his National Guard service.

PHOTO BY CARLOS PUMA

who were friends of mine started talking about how much debt they had."

Frances was accepted to San Jose State. As a state school, it was less expensive than a University of California school or a private school.

Still, the numbers can add up quickly.

"Honestly, I think I would freak out [without the waiver]," Frances said. "I don't even know what I would do."

Frances graduated from San Jose State and is taking this year off school, having applied to four universities for grad school programs. Three of those are Cal State schools, where the waiver would still apply.

"I'm working toward becoming a speech therapist," she said. "I would love to be able to give back, to contribute something to the community, and I think that would help me do that."

Has the waiver contributed to her life?

"It has made such a huge difference," she said. "It's amazing. I appreciate it so much when I see how other people are struggling [with debt]."

"It has made such a huge difference. It's amazing. I appreciate it so much when I see how other people are struggling [with debt]."

Frances Hernandez
College Graduate

The Long Fight

by Matt Jocks

Veteran dealing with PTSD obtains full disability rating thanks to Veterans' Service Representative

For those living with post-traumatic stress disorder, there are victories and setbacks that come on almost a daily basis. Sometimes, they sneak up on you.

Russell Uthe has lived it for 50 years. And he counts as one of the biggest victories the day he was pointed to the Riverside County Department of Veterans' Services.

The process of understanding his condition and then obtaining compensation for it was lengthy and difficult. For Uthe, Senior Veterans' Service Representative Ralph Duarte was the difference.

"My vocabulary isn't big enough to adequately express my gratitude for what he did," Uthe said. "He was my savior."

As Uthe's life demonstrates, PTSD can have many causes. Although he is a veteran and spent a brief period in Vietnam, his condition was not the product of a battle.

The trigger was a night on a base in Okinawa when, as a corpsman, he was suddenly called upon to try to save the life of a Marine who had been stabbed in a fight. Uthe was able to keep the Marine alive long enough to reach a hospital, but the Marine died soon after arrival.

Complicating matters, Uthe was then the subject of an inquiry in which he was initially held responsible.

Upon his return to the U.S. and to college, the first indication of PTSD was, oddly, his handwriting. It had gotten much messier, the result of tremors, which can be a symptom.

The accompanying symptoms for Uthe included the inability to control his crying in emotional situations and the inability to emotionally handle any kind of emergency situations. There were also flashes of uncontrolled anger.

It took four years for Duarte and Uthe to obtain a 70 percent disability rating, which was later increased to a 100 percent rating with full benefits.

"It gave me so much satisfaction that I was finally treated appropriately," he said. "I got into my car and I cried."

"The thing I always say about Ralph is that I wish there was more than one of him."



Russell Uthe lives with the effects of PTSD.
PHOTO BY MARTIN GONZALEZ

"It gave me so much satisfaction that I was finally treated appropriately. I got into my car and I cried."

Russell Uthe
Veteran

FAST FACTS ON PTSD

★ WHAT IS POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

- A long-term chronic reaction to a traumatic physical or emotional event.
- A condition that impairs the ability to function or enjoy normal activities.

★ WHAT ARE THE SIGNS?

- Disturbing dreams or thoughts that may be related to the incident.
- Avoidance of situations that may trigger cues (such as sounds, crowds).
- Persistent negative feelings (fear, anger, sadness, irritability).
- Emotional responses that appear disproportionate to circumstance.

What Goes Around

by Matt Jocks



Jeannette Phillips was inspired by her own experiences being helped by a Veterans' Service Officer to become one herself.
PHOTO BY ERIC REED

After receiving help from a Veterans' Service Officer, Jeannette Phillips now helps others

Jeannette Phillips' route to service in the Riverside County Veterans' Services Department started on the other side of the desk. It was her experience seeking benefits as a widow of a veteran and a veteran herself that led her to seek this as a career path.

Now a Senior Veterans' Service Representative in the Hemet office, Phillips spoke about the challenges and rewards of serving veterans.

★ HOW DID BEING ON THE OTHER SIDE INSPIRE YOU TO TAKE THIS PATH?

After seeing the way the service officer was able to help me, I thought, 'This is something I could do.' I have a military history. I think I'm pretty good with people and I can learn the programs.

★ IN WORKING WITH VETERANS, DOES IT MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE THAT YOU AND THE OTHER SERVICE OFFICERS ARE ALSO VETERANS?

That's a recurring theme. It's funny. Some of the older veterans, because I am female, they see all the military stuff and pictures in my office and they ask if it's for my dad or husband. I show them my business card [which shows that she is a Marine veteran]. They're glad you're a veteran because you've had similar experiences. But I try to tell them that everyone's experiences are individual.

★ ARE THERE CASES YOU HAVE WORKED ON THAT STAND OUT?

Because I am a widow myself, I guess, there are a couple of cases involving widows. One came in with her husband's death certificate and I said, 'This said he died of lung cancer,' [which is a presumptive condition related to exposure of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War.] That was such an easy one to spot. But the thing is, a lot of people are unaware of things like presumptive conditions.

"After seeing the way the service officer was able to help me, I thought, 'This is something I could do.'"

Jeannette Phillips
Senior Veterans' Service Representative

Another widow had started working and her benefits stopped. Her son came in and said she had to be eligible for some benefits. He said his dad had died of natural causes six months after discharge. That was a big red flag. We were able to get a retroactive award of about \$300,000. She should have been eligible for DIC (Dependency and Indemnity Compensation). It wasn't her fault.

★ HOW PERSISTENT DO YOU NEED TO BE IN FOLLOWING THESE CLAIMS?

With the first widow, that should have been a slam dunk. But it took about 10 months. I was on the phone so many times.

★ SOME VETERANS ARE UNAWARE OF THEIR BENEFITS. ARE THERE ALSO SOME WHO ARE RELUCTANT TO CLAIM THEM?

I see that with a lot of folks. They look at someone who has lost a limb or something and they want to make sure guys like that get what they need. It's really important they don't feel they are taking something from someone else.

★ ARE THERE SMALL VICTORIES AS WELL AS LARGE ONES?

One veteran was so appreciative [of] me for just explaining a form. He said it all looked like Greek to him, and I said that's how it was for me with my own claim at first. He said, 'Now that you've explained it, it all makes sense.' That was very gratifying.

★ AND THOSE VICTORIES ARE WHAT MAKE THE JOB REWARDING.

I've been doing this for 13 years and I still say to the director, 'Have I told you today how much I love my job?' A little while ago, there was a parade and I saw the old director and I yelled out to him, 'I still love my job!'

BENEFITS AND SERVICES AVAILABLE FOR VETERANS

by Matt Jocks

The Riverside County Department of Veterans' Services assists veterans and their families with obtaining the following common benefits and programs:

★ DISABILITY COMPENSATION

A tax-free monetary benefit paid to veterans with disabilities that are the result of a disease or injury incurred or aggravated during active military service. Compensation may also be paid for post-service disabilities that are considered related or secondary to disabilities occurring in service and for disabilities presumed to be related to circumstances of military service, even though they may arise after service. This includes conditions presumed to be caused by specific circumstances, such as conditions related to exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam or depleted uranium in Iraq.

★ EDUCATION BENEFITS

Among the education programs is the Forever GI Bill, which covers up to 100 percent of tuition and fees, in addition to assistance with housing and expenses for those who served at least 90 days after Sept. 10, 2001.

Additionally, the tuition fee waiver offers eligible dependents full coverage of tuition and fees for University of California, California State universities and California community colleges.

★ PENSION FOR VETERANS WITHOUT SERVICE-CONNECTED DISABILITIES

Available to those who served at least 90 days, with at least one being during wartime (but not necessarily in a war zone). If the veteran is 65 or older or permanently disabled and has income below the yearly limit set by law, he or she may be eligible.

★ HEALTH CARE AT VA FACILITIES

County offices can provide eligibility information and help with application for free or low-cost health care at VA facilities. The facilities cover general health care as well as offering specific programs for issues such as Agent Orange exposure, traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder.

★ HOME LOAN BENEFITS

The VA mortgage loan program offers low (or no) down payment and low interest rate loans for building or buying a home. The loans also come without Private Mortgage Insurance.

★ GOVERNMENT LIFE INSURANCE

The Veterans Group Life Insurance program offers lifetime renewable term coverage.

★ BURIAL BENEFITS

Reimbursements vary based on whether the death was due to a service-connected cause or if the veteran was hospitalized in a VA facility.

★ MILITARY SURVIVOR BENEFIT PLAN

A tax-free benefit paid to low-income spouses who have not remarried or unmarried children of a deceased veteran with wartime service.

★ PAWZ FOR WOUNDED VETERANS

Provides service dogs to enhance independence and provide support. Veterans with verified disabilities may receive a dog at no cost.

★ VETERANS DRIVERS LICENSE OR ID DESIGNATION

Helps ease access to certain benefits, as well as accessing discounts at places of business.





Get the Benefits You've Earned

Those who serve are trained to leave no man or woman behind. That doesn't change for veterans when their active duty service is through.

At the Riverside County Department of Veterans' Services offices, veterans will find other veterans ready and able to assist them in obtaining the benefits they have earned.

★ RIVERSIDE OFFICE

4360 Orange St.
951-955-3060
Office Hours: 8 a.m. – 4 p.m.
Monday – Thursday
(Closed Friday)

★ HEMET OFFICE

749 N. State St.
951-955-3060
Office Hours: 8 a.m. – noon &
1 – 4 p.m. Monday – Thursday
(Closed Friday)

★ INDIO OFFICE

44-199B Monroe St.
760-863-8266
Office Hours: 8 a.m. – noon &
1 – 4 p.m. Monday – Thursday
(Closed Friday)

Clients are seen on a 'first come, first served' basis — scheduled appointments not available.

WHAT TO BRING

Bringing the proper documents to the Riverside County Department of Veterans' Services will help your Veterans' Service Representative file a more successful application and could reduce how long it will take to get compensation.

One document common to almost all claims is the DD214 (discharge). If you do not have this document, your veteran service officer can help you get it. For all potential monetary awards, information for bank deposit (such as a voided blank check) is helpful. Other documents vary by type of claim (see below).

DISABILITY COMPENSATION

- ☐ Medical evidence of disabilities being claimed
- ☐ Name, address, phone and dates of treatment for all civilian providers
- ☐ Copy of service treatment records
- ☐ Personnel records, if available

PENSION CLAIM FOR VETERAN

- ☐ Proof of monthly income
- ☐ Proof of net worth
- ☐ Proof of current monthly medical expenses
- ☐ For clients under 65, the award letter from Social Security, to support non-service connected disabilities

SURVIVOR'S BENEFITS

- ☐ Death certificate
- ☐ Marriage certificate
- ☐ VA disability rating decision, if veteran was receiving disability compensation at the time of death

VETERAN WITH SERVICE-CONNECTED DISABILITY WISHING TO ADD DEPENDENTS

- ☐ Marriage certificate
- ☐ Social Security cards for all dependents
- ☐ Birth certificates for all dependents
- ☐ If clients have been married more than once, complete marriage history and documents for both spouses