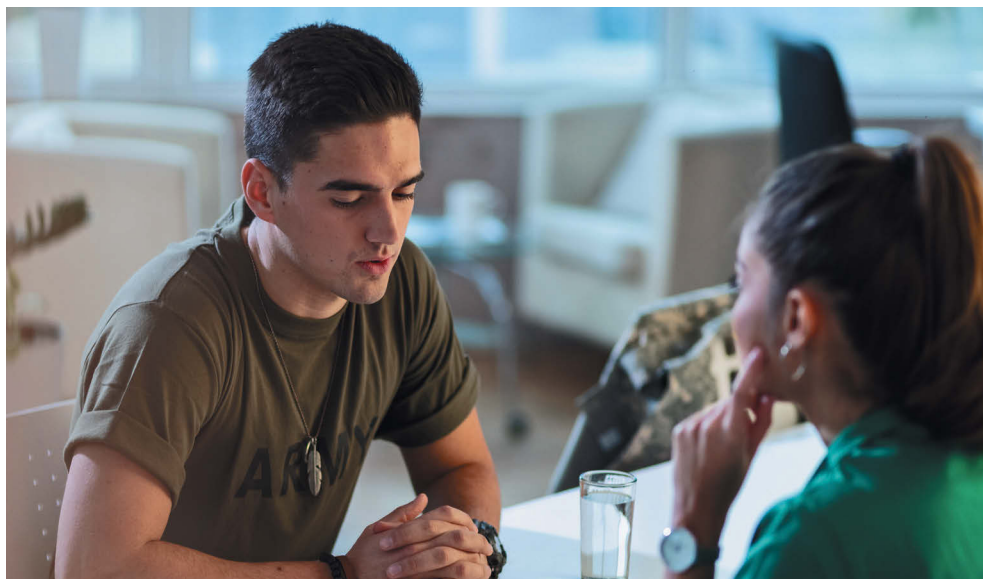


The Veterans Coalition:

A Force Multiplier



San Diego County is committed to ensuring military, veterans, their dependents and survivors obtain benefits that they earned and deserve.



Set an Appointment Today!

The biggest obstacle to missing out on life-changing benefits? Not knowing they exist

By the Numbers

No. 1

“We are the No. 1 advocate for veterans and their families in San Diego County,” says Timothy Mathues, Veteran Outreach Coordinator for the County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs (OMVA).

Which, given the numbers of active and veteran military and their families and survivors in the county, is remarkable.

1.2 million

OMVA’s role is to be the advocate for and counselor to San Diego County’s military-connected population, their families and survivors, who number more than 1.2 million. That’s out of a general population of 3.2 million citizens.

826,000

Counting their families and survivors, the military population includes 826,000 veterans, 33,000 of whom are women—“the largest concentration in the U.S.,” says Mathues—and 403,000 active duty personnel.

641,000

OMVA touches 641,000 veterans and their families annually.

The County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs is on a mission: to help active-duty and retired armed services members, as well as their dependents and survivors, navigate the broad menu of benefits and services to which they are entitled. As one of OMVA’s mantras so accurately puts it, “If you served, you deserve.”

“Our primary function is comprehensive benefits counseling, and preparing, submitting and following up on disability claims and appeals,” says Timothy Mathues, OMVA Veteran Outreach Coordinator. “We make sure our veterans and their family members get the benefits due to them, both federal and state.”

“I talk with veterans and their family members every day, and it surprises me how much they’re not aware of their benefits.”

TIMOTHY MATHUES, VETERAN OUTREACH COORDINATOR

County of San Diego, Office of Military & Veteran Affairs

Mathues, who served as a Combat Marine in the Vietnam War, is in fact on a quest to inform people about their eligibility.

“I talk with veterans and their family members every day, and it surprises me how much they’re not aware of their benefits,” he says. “We have about 29,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans in San Diego, more than anywhere in the U.S. But most of those who are

not aware of their veteran benefits come from the Korean War and Vietnam War eras. The biggest challenge they have is they truly need those benefits, but they’re not aware of them.”

Mathues is very clear about his role at OMVA: “My position is to get the word out, and I do that through many channels,” he says.

For instance, he goes into the field to deliver presentations on benefits and services to “major companies that employ veterans, including defense contractors, U.S. Customs and Border Protection and the Bureau of Prisons,” he says.

He also attends an exhaustive list of resource fairs and special events, which he finds through his membership on the military committees of multiple chambers of commerce.

“I make sure we have resource tents on-site, with information officers and outreach materials,” he says. “We cover employment, housing, health care benefits and collaborations with other service-providing groups.”

One recent event was National Night Out, a collaboration between counties and law enforcement. “We handed out hundreds of resource guides to let our veteran community know we’re here,” he says.

Mathues also reaches out to homeless veterans, “a group we focus on,” he says. “We’ll sign them up.”

Bottom-line question: What is the first step military personnel should take toward finding out what benefits they’re entitled to?

“Regardless of what service-connected benefits you think you may have, the biggest step is contacting one of our four service offices and setting up an appointment,” he says.

FIND A SERVICE OFFICE AT:

https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/hhsa/programs/ssp/veterans_services.html



Veterans Benefits Administration

This agency serves those who served

BY GAIL ALLYN SHORT

Even the toughest veteran needs a helping hand sometimes.

The VA's Veterans Benefits Administration in San Diego exists to help make veterans aware of and apply for the compensation and services they deserve.

The VBA assists veterans in San Diego County, Riverside County, Orange County, Imperial County and three zip code areas in San Bernardino County.

And the benefits that veterans can take advantage of are many. They range from health care and home loans to survivors benefits for spouses and children.

"One of the things that we do is to make sure we educate veterans to let them know that this is not a handout," says Beth Juachon, a VA military services coordinator. "VA benefits

are programs that assist former prisoners of war and others that help veterans who are incarcerated, newly released from prison or struggling with addiction.

VA Military Services Coordinator Kadell Felton says that when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, many veterans were even left in danger of homelessness.

In such cases, the VBA connects veterans to various housing solutions offered through federal, state and local agencies and nonprofits, he says.

"One of the difficulties with COVID," says Felton, "was that we couldn't meet with individuals in person to get the documents we needed right away. So we relied on shelters and social workers from the Veteran's Health Administration to feed us the names of individuals who needed our assistance for benefits that might help them increase their income or gain some initial income to help them take care of their rent or get assisted housing under the homeless programs through the VA."

While some veterans are reluctant to seek aid, Juachon says, "Don't be afraid to ask questions, and ask for help."

And Felton adds that by not applying for VA benefits, not only will a veteran miss out on the money and assistance they earned through their military service, their spouse and children will miss out as well.

And for those who worry about being turned down for benefits, Felton says this: "When in doubt, apply."

"If the law allows it, and we have the evidence, we'll grant it," he says. "If it's not there, we won't. It's just that simple. But you always have a right to appeal and come up with evidence later, and you have until the day you die to apply for benefits. So don't give up."

To contact San Diego Regional Office of the VBA, visit <https://www.benefits.va.gov/sandiego/>



**"When in doubt, apply.
If the law allows it, and
we have the evidence,
we'll grant it."**

**KADELL FELTON, VA MILITARY SERVICES
COORDINATOR**
Veterans Benefits Administration

are something that they've earned. However, they're not handed out automatically. Everything that we have to offer they have to apply for."

But the office also manages several outreach programs that connect veterans to social service agencies. There

Ready to Serve

The Veterans Administration provides a range of benefits and programs to help those who served our country. VA Benefits include:

Health Care: Clinical care and hospitalization through the Veterans Health Administration.

Burial Benefits: Allowances for burial and plot or interment.

Disability Compensation: Tax-free money for disabilities that occurred or were made worse during active military service.

Dependency and Indemnity Compensation: A monthly benefit for a veteran's eligible survivors.

Home Loans: Guaranty benefits and housing programs to help veterans purchase, retain or repair their homes.

G.I. Bill for Education: The post-911 G.I. Bill pays for school and job training, tuition, fees, books and supplies for those who served after Sept. 10, 2001.

The VA also provides Special Emphasis and Outreach Programs, including:

- Casualty Assistance (Active Duty Death)
- Elderly Veterans
- Former Prisoners of Wars
- Homeless Veterans
- Justice Involved Veterans
- Minority Veterans
- Women Veterans
- Military Sexual Trauma
- Rural Veterans
- Faith-Based Outreach to Veterans
- LGBT Veterans
- Indigent Veteran Program
- Transitioning Service Members





Making Connections

Finding the right resources can be a maze—
or it can be a one-stop shop

BY KRYSTA SCRIPTER

Need Help? There's an Organization For That.

The San Diego Veterans Coalition can help with a variety of issues, including:

- Create community connections for veterans and their families
- Spouse transition services
- Volunteer opportunities
- Legal assistance
- Medical assistance
- Suicide prevention
- Counseling
- Fitness services
- Animal support
- Community arts
- Education assistance
- Connecting veterans with career opportunities
- Job search assistance
- Veteran-friendly job opportunities
- Family Affairs: spouse/caregiver support, family resources
- Assist in transferring veterans' and their spouse's certifications when moving to California
- Professional VA assistance for benefits

The San Diego Veterans Coalition connects veterans with over 150 different organizations that provide services and assistance to veterans coming back to civilian life.

"Too many times, what we see with veterans and their families is that they activate on crisis," Ron Stark, president of the San Diego Veterans Coalition, and a Vietnam veteran himself says.

Stark likens it to running out of gas and looking for money. "Well, that's the wrong time to get money. If you have money, and you get gas before you run out and have those things in place before the crisis... the more likely you're going to have tether lines that are going to keep you from falling off the trapeze."

Those tether lines are at the heart of what the coalition does. They connect veterans with education, housing, employment and health care services that they may not know about or have access to.

"We've become just a collective of basically anyone who's operating in the military-veteran-and-family arena," Stark says. "Our ultimate goal is to make San Diego County a well-coordinated landing zone for them to go."

Examples include The Elizabeth Dole Foundation, which provides support to military families and caregivers for veterans. There's also the Navy Federal Credit Union, a bank just for veterans and military members. The coalition puts all of them in one place.

"What we do is we collaborate," Stark says. "So, we help organizations go from standalone, where they're just operating: they've got this good idea, this good thing they're

going to do, and they're out there doing it... to get them to collaborating with other organizations and coordinating with other organizations to do complementary work."

Without resources like financial help, family support or other issues, Stark says, it's all too common for veterans and their families to fall through the cracks.

"We end up in a situation where the family is crumbling, their finances are gone. I mean, we have story after story of it going wrong, not nearly as many as we have it going right."

Between combat trauma, domestic problems or just difficulty getting back to civilian life after being in the military, Stark says many veterans feel disconnected from the community back home. "So there's a safety net, but it's a safety net that the veteran gets to be part of. Because they're going to see someone that... will be a trusted messenger and say 'hey, these are some good folks and you can trust them.'"

**"So there's a safety net, but
it's a safety net that the
veteran gets to be part of."**

RON STARK

President of the San Diego Veterans Coalition



*For more information, see
<https://sdvetscoalition.org/>*

Vets' Community Resources

A local service is a bridge from military to civilian life

BY GAIL ALLYN SHORT



For military families and veterans, being reassigned to a new base or transitioning from active duty poses many challenges.

The questions can range from where can I secure housing or find a job to where can my children sign up for youth sports?

"I understand the plight of a military family when you move to a new place," says Amy Richards, a military spouse herself. "When you move, you ask, 'What can I do for my family that would give us the best opportunities to enjoy our time here?'"

Richards is program manager of Vets Community Connections, a service that helps military, veterans and their families connect with the resources they need to integrate into their new communities.

"We make them aware of all of the resources as well as all the individuals, businesses and programs that want to say to them, 'Thank you for your service,' and give back," she says.

For veterans and spouses hoping to transition to a new career, VCC's Careers in the Community program keeps them

abreast of job opportunities and introduces them to local hiring managers and career coaches who can advise them on how to translate their skills for the civilian workforce.

"We seek out companies that have excellent track records in relation to hiring veterans and retaining them," she says.

Participants also get to hear and get advice from local veterans who have succeeded in their own post-military careers.

Moreover, the VCC connects veterans with college and university counselors who can help them use their G.I. Bill benefits to pay for school or training.

But besides career and education assistance, the VCC also maintains a list of local nonprofits that are seeking volunteers.

"Volunteering is an amazing way to build a network, or to just stay active if you're in between jobs, or not sure of what you'd like to do," Richards says.

Military, veterans and their families can also find help for everyday challenges through the VCC's database, which contains the names of local businesses willing to offer special discounts on products and services, from car repair to dental care. Parents can even consult the database for scholarships for their children to participate in recreational activities like youth sports.

While some veterans and military members may be reluctant to accept VCC's help,

Richards says this:

"This isn't a hand out. It's a hand up. Let us do the work for you and make it easier for you."

To learn more about VCC, visit <https://www.vetscommunityconnections.org/>



"We make them aware of all of the resources as well as all the individuals, businesses and programs that want to say to them, 'Thank you for your service,' and give back."

AMY RICHARDS, PROGRAM MANAGER
Vets Community Connections

Military Discounts...and More

Vets Community Connections introduces veterans, active duty military and their families to all of what San Diego County has to offer.

Resource Database: Lists people and businesses willing to offer specials discounts, scholarships and their services free of charge to veterans, military and their families.

Operation Ally: Local businesses partner with the Veterans Administration to meet the immediate needs of veterans and their families, from free car repairs to discounts on products and services.

Connections Assistance: For military families relocating to San Diego County, VCC can answer questions about temporary lodging, neighborhoods, local youth and family activities and more.

Careers in the Community: Informs participants about job opportunities, career options and training and certification programs. It also sponsors workshops and videos featuring professionals and other veterans offering their advice and success stories.

Volunteer in the Community: Lists the local nonprofits where participants can volunteer and give back.



Your Local Library

Vets find help in a familiar place near their homes

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

Area Libraries

The following San Diego County libraries have the VET-CONNECT program:

Borrego Springs

2580 Country Club Road, Borrego Springs, CA 92004
760-767-5761

Bonita-Sunnyside Branch

4375 Bonita Road, Bonita, CA 91902
619-475-4642

Imperial Beach Branch

810 Imperial Beach Blvd., Imperial Beach, CA 91932
619-424-6981

Valley Center Branch

29200 Cole Grade Road, Valley Center, CA 92082
760-749-1305

Julian Branch

1850 CA-78, Julian, CA 92036
760-765-0370

Alpine Branch

1752 Alpine Blvd., Alpine, CA 91901
619-445-4221

Poway Branch

13137 Poway Road, Poway, CA 92064
858-513-2900

For most American soldiers, it's become a ritual: Before separating from the military, they attend briefings detailing the many benefits that await them for serving their nation.

Unfortunately, after transitioning to civilian life, many ex-soldiers seem unaware of valuable veterans' resources ranging from health care and zero-down payment home loans to education assistance, according to Adonis Relieve, Program Coordinator for San Diego County's Office of Military & Veterans Affairs.

"A lot of times, veterans...don't pay enough attention about how to make use of their benefits—until they need them badly," Relieve says recently, noting that some of these benefits are also meant for family members. "That's the only time some veterans will try to get information."

Now, a new effort is connecting former service people with necessary assistance.

In 2015, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors and OMVA made it easier for the county's estimated 255,000 vets to learn about their benefits and to apply for them: at public libraries. What began at the Julian Library that year expanded to 12 other San Diego city/county libraries.

Until COVID-19 hit in March 2020, veterans could meet face-to-face at seven of those libraries with OMVA benefits counselors to learn about veterans' benefits and fill out

on-the-spot applications through VET-CONNECT computers. At six other libraries, veterans met in person at least once a month with benefits counselors, who helped them complete veteran benefits applications.

Vets in rural areas had requested an amplified, full-service outreach. VET-CONNECT's rollout—in private library rooms or in a corner, by book aisles—meant these needy vets no longer had to drive long distances to visit OMVA's San Diego headquarters; all it took was a trip to the local library.

Through this program, "veterans have been given the chance to enjoy the benefits they were afforded," Relieve says, and, subsequently, to "improve their lives and increase their net income, which helps them thrive."

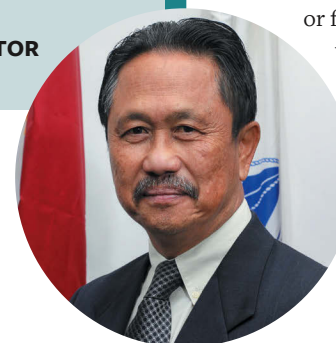
Amid COVID, in-person VET-CONNECT meetings have been suspended. For now, they occur virtually by appointment between OMVA benefits counselors in San Diego and veterans at home explaining their needs.

"If a veteran has a computer at home, the meeting is via computer," Relieve says. "If the veteran has no computer, the meeting is by phone."

Veterans e-mail the applications, submit them through the U.S. mail, or fax them. "It's slower, but it works," Relieve says.

"A lot of times, veterans ... don't pay enough attention about how to make use of their benefits—until they need them badly."

ADONIS RELIEVE, PROGRAM COORDINATOR
County of San Diego OMVA



For more details, dial 858-694-3222 or visit https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/hhsa/programs/ais/documents/Appointment_Checklist.pdf.

Mobile Support

The OMVA is finding new ways to bring services to vets

BY ELISSA EINHORN



Seven years ago, Tim Mathues' supervisor asked him to develop outreach programs for San Diego County's veterans. When he asked what the role entailed, he was told, "We have no job description."

Fast forward to 2018. The Veteran Outreach Coordinator fielded more than 25,000 inquiries from the veteran community and the county's four active military bases (three Marine Corps and one Navy). This is indicative of the robust portfolio of programs and services Mathues has built to serve active and retired military—including vets who are homeless—as well as military spouses and families.

"When I started working for the county, I was going out into communities and I was noticing a lot of homeless," Mathues recalls. "I thought, 'We could use a mobile unit.'"

These days, the "Live Well Mobile Office Vehicle," provided by the county's Health & Human Services Agency, is the realization of Mathues' idea and one of two main ways that he brings services to veterans, particularly those without access to transportation and technology.

The vehicle is equipped with laptops, printers and secured internet—allowing staff to conduct on-site, one-stop, immediate enrollment in essential programs like CalFresh, public assistance and veterans benefits. In conjunction with the Department of Public Health, Live Well also provides testing, vaccinations, immunizations and other important

medical care.

Created to help multiple vulnerable populations, the mobile van sets up shop in a parking lot near the county's homeless encampments and libraries. Reps help between 100-200 veterans monthly with various services.

A vet himself—Mathues served in the Marine Corps from 1969-1971, including 13 months in Vietnam—said of the next stage of his life after he left the military, "I knew I didn't want to go back to war."

After spending 40+ years in the human resources field that eventually brought him to San Diego, he happened upon a VA Hospital in La Jolla that needed volunteers. He recalls sitting in the cafeteria on the first day of his volunteer service: "I looked around and it felt like I knew every single person in that room and every person in that hospital."

Years later, Mathues is still committed to his fellow veterans and is clear about why the services he provides are critical. "My position as outreach coordinator is to get the word out about the benefits and services they're not aware of but are entitled to," he says.

"When I started working for the county, I was going out into communities and I was noticing a lot of homeless. I thought, 'We could use a mobile unit.'"

TIM MATHUES, VETERAN OUTREACH COORDINATOR
County of San Diego Office of Military & Veteran Affairs



About Live Well San Diego

Live Well San Diego is a partnership made up of health care providers, community and faith-based organizations, businesses, school districts, city and tribal governments, and military or veterans organizations.

The purpose is to improve the overall well-being of residents in the San Diego region. It does this by focusing on **five key areas**:

Health (including life expectancy and quality of life/ability to live independently)

Knowledge (adults with at least a high school diploma)

Standard of living (being employed and spending less than one-third of income on housing)

Community (living in a clean and safe environment, which includes reduced crime, improved air quality and access to parks and other outdoor recreation)

Social (which tracks vulnerable populations who are experiencing poverty or food-insecurity, as well as the percentage of the population that volunteers)

To participate as an individual or as a partner organization, see www.livewellsd.org.



Finding Your Way Home

Despite challenges in an expensive housing market, there are resources available—just for vets

BY RAUL CLEMENT

2-1-1: Help is Just a Call Away

Much like the 9-1-1 phone number offers emergency services and 4-1-1 offers directory assistance, **2-1-1** is a national phone number for those seeking **social services**. 2-1-1 encompasses more than 200 agencies across the United States, serving over 20 million people a year. Your local agency can help you find food, housing, health care and other basic needs.

For veterans, 2-1-1 is yet another resource to **ease their transition back to civilian life**. 2-1-1 can direct veterans to the appropriate agency to help them receive benefits or emergency help.

If you don't wish to or are unable to use the phone number, you can **visit the website at 211.org for an email contact**. In San Diego County, visit 211sandiego.org. There you will find information on Rental and Utilities Assistance Programs, Food Assistance, Emergency Services, COVID-19 Vaccines, COVID-19 Testing and Community Information Exchange.

The hearing impaired should call 7-1-1.



Veterans can face many obstacles when re-entering civilian life, but among the largest is finding affordable housing. Stable housing can lay the foundation for other transitional steps, such as seeking employment, establishing health care, exploring higher education opportunities and receiving disability benefits.

As Nicholas Martinez, Assistant Director of San Diego Housing and Community Development Services, puts it, "That's really the basis for a lot of things in a person's life, that safe place to call home."

HCDS helps veterans find their "safe place" in numerous ways. The largest is the Housing

Choice Voucher and Section 8 Program. Qualified candidates receive a voucher that can be used at participating rental units within the area. These vouchers cover all rent above 30% of the renter's income.

Because waitlists can be long for participating units, and because veterans are often most at need, affordable housing has been designated to prioritize veterans. Through San Diego County's Innovative Trust Fund, \$2.8 million has been provided to developers to build affordable housing.

"These properties provide preferences to serve up to 180 veterans and have on-site services for those veterans," Martinez explains.

In addition to financing new affordable housing, the county encourages landlords to make housing available to low-income

renters through the Landlord Incentive Program. This program provides bonuses to participating landlords, as well as assurances in the form of damage claim reimbursement funds and security deposit assistance.

"It eliminates the barrier from the veteran's side, and encourages participation from the landlord's side," Martinez says.

Programs such as these have had a positive impact not just at the local level but on the national level. Between 2015 and 2019, veteran homelessness was reduced by 50%. But even with such improvements, veterans are still more likely to be homeless than the general population. It is important that veterans are aware of the rental assistance available to them.

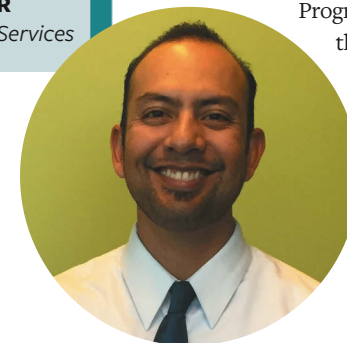
To that end, Housing and Urban Development has partnered nationally with Veterans Affairs to create the HUD/VASH Program. This partnership combines the Housing Choice Voucher

Program with case management through the VA. Case workers at VA medical centers and community-based outreach clinics can steer homeless veterans to affordable housing opportunities while addressing other transitional needs.

"It's all connected,"

Martinez says. "But if we're

helping you with the rent, that means you don't have to worry about that part of the bills and can be successful in other areas of your life."



"These properties provide preferences to serve up to 180 veterans and have onsite services for those veterans."

NICHOLAS MARTINEZ, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
San Diego Housing and Community Development Services

For more information, visit <https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/sdhcd/veterans-services/>

A New Direction

Learn how UC San Diego helps veterans translate military experience into business degrees

BY KRYSTA SCRIPTER

The UCSD Rady School of Management offers degree programs specifically tailored for veterans to help them thrive once they return from active duty.

"I think that people who go through those experiences bring a really special set of skills," says On Amir, professor of marketing at the Rady School of Management. He's been working with veterans for years.

The Rady School offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in business, including MBAs and masters' in accounting, business and finance. They didn't start out as a veteran-specific university program, but Amir says things began to change when the school noticed a significant need in the community. "So about 10 years ago, we formed various processes and allocated resources to make sure that we do offer veterans everything they need and everything we can."

Support for vets looks different for each student, Amir says. Some may need financial assistance or are only looking to go to school part-time. Rady often covers tuition costs that the GI Bill might not, and a part-time degree program can be done at home on weekends or in the evenings.

The key to success, Amir says, is understanding the unique

skills that veterans bring to the table.

"In San Diego, we have a population that (has a lot of) advanced degrees, science, engineering. We have various people from business in and we have people who come from military backgrounds. That mix of populations where everyone brings to the table their own unique experience is hard to compete with," Amir says. "It's a phenomenal team, and the richness that they can bring to the table of ideas and thinking is quite unique. We find a lot of complementarity between these different populations."

Part of this is the program itself: Rady offers a "labs market" course that gets students hands-on experience in the work field before they graduate. "And so they already have actual experiences doing this, whether it's starting a new business or working with existing organizations doing consulting projects with them and helping them bring new ventures, and new value to market," Amir says.

Ted Pease, a Navy veteran and current underwriter for AIG's Defense Base Act division in Philadelphia, says the Rady School provided a "fantastic" education for himself and other veterans. "They built a curriculum that showed us how to discover our 'why,' learn key business skills, and how to communicate our value to the business world," he says.

For more information on the UCSD Rady School of Management, visit <https://rady.ucsd.edu/>



Student Organizations and Campuses Near You

There are several local options when it comes to veterans' affairs and organizations on campuses around San Diego. Here are just a few:

Student Veterans Organization, UCSD: connect with other student veterans for campus activities and networking opportunities. <https://svrc.ucsd.edu/organizations/index.html>

US San Diego: <https://admissions.ucsd.edu/military-connected/index.html>

Rady Veterans Association: part of the Rady School of Management's veteran alumni outreach to connect and mentor student veterans. <https://rady.ucsd.edu/people/students/clubs/rva/>

San Diego State University: veterans@sdsu.edu

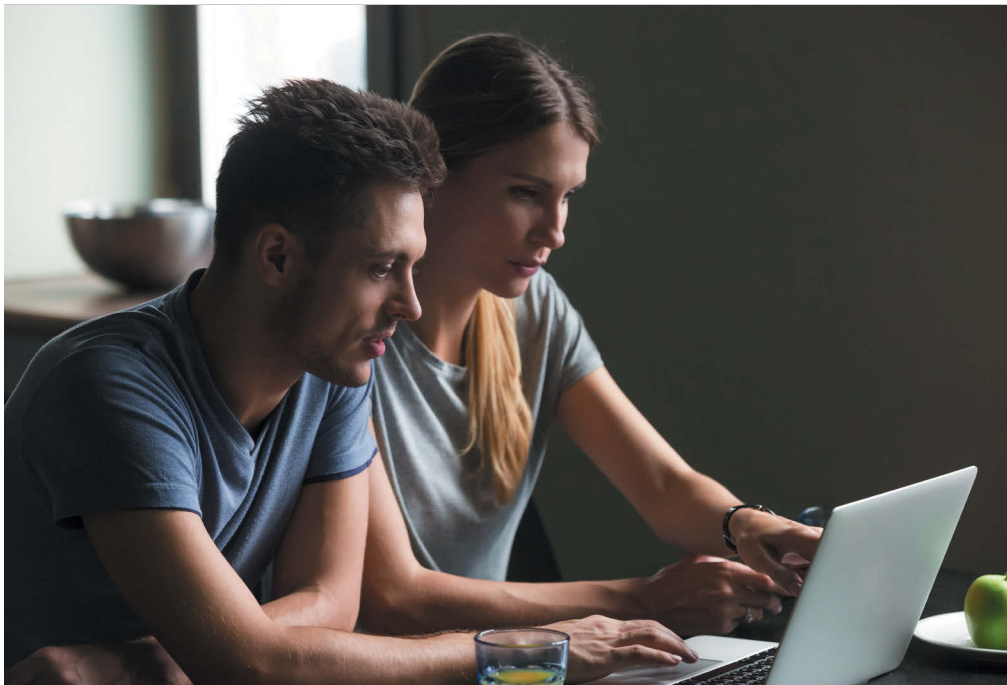
National University: <https://www.nu.edu/student-services/sasveteranstudentsuccess/>

San Diego City College: <https://www.sdcity.edu/students/military/index.aspx>

San Diego Mesa College: <https://www.sdmesa.edu/student-services/veterans-services/veterans-affairs-office.shtml>

University of San Diego: <https://www.sandiego.edu/military/>





Planting Seeds

Transition assistance is important—and one program strives to educate all veterans

BY RAUL CLEMENT

CalTAP Webinars: Where and How to Access

The California Transition Assistance Program (CalTAP) educates veterans and active duty personnel on benefits available to them and their families. These statewide benefits may be used in conjunction with national benefits through the VA.

To find out more visit <https://www.calvet.ca.gov/VetServices/Pages/California-Transition-Assistance-Program.aspx>. There you can find information on upcoming webinars as well as archives of previous webinars. These free webinars are divided by subject matter, including but not limited to:

- **Financial Literacy**
- **Elder Care Services**
- **Resume Writing**
- **Resources for Minority Veterans**
- **Filing a Disability Claim**

Veterans may also sign up for myCalVet to receive information on custom benefits and services, as well as information on upcoming webinars, in-person classes and other events.

Lance Iunker takes his job personally. After he was wounded in combat in 2007, he returned to California looking to move on with his life. At the time, veteran outreach wasn't as expansive as it is now. And so, he neither sought out his benefits nor was aware they existed in the first place.

Now, he works for CalVet as a Local Interagency Network Coordinator, known as a LINC, and Iunker manages veteran outreach in San Diego and Imperial counties.

"I went the better part of a decade without taking advantage of many benefits," Iunker says. "I want to make sure that none of these veterans or active duty that are transitioning out make the same mistakes—even if I'm just planting seeds and they're not listening fully."

In recent years, CalVet has expanded their outreach even further with a program called CalTAP (or the California Transition Assistance Program). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, this program took a boots-on-the-ground approach to informing veterans about their benefits. They would visit military installations around California to inform active duty personnel about the benefits available to them upon their return to civilian life. They would also travel to veteran events, and to libraries and colleges, hoping to reach veterans who were pursuing education through the GI Bill. Iunker's position as a regional coordinator was very useful here.

"The LINC's were really the bridge, because we already had the contacts at the bases, we had those lines of communication set up."

With COVID-19, in-person classes temporarily ceased. But rather than being a setback, this allowed CalTAP to reach even more people. Iunker estimates that participation is 10 times what it was with just in-person classes. Veterans and their families who were unable to attend in-person events can now watch webinars at their own convenience. These webinars are

archived on the CalVet website. Furthermore, rather than being broadly focused on all veteran benefits, the webinars focus on specific subjects (GI Bill best practices, Disabled Veterans Business Enterprise, CalVet Home Loan, etc.).

Iunker wants veterans to know there's no moral high ground in avoiding benefits.

"That's a point of pride that I'll hear often. 'I don't want to take benefits from someone who needs them more than I do.' And you have to educate and say, 'Look, the way government funding work is, if there's a greater need they budget more money.' You make the pie bigger for everyone else."

"I went the better part of a decade without taking advantage of many benefits. I want to make sure that none of these veterans or active duty that are transitioning out make the same mistakes."

LANCE IUNKER, LOCAL INTERAGENCY NETWORK COORDINATOR
CalVet, San Diego and Imperial counties

A Benefits Guide

Veteran service representatives can help navigate the VA system

BY ANNE STOKES



The VA provides benefits that help millions of veterans and their families, but navigating the federal bureaucracy can be daunting. At the San Diego Office of Military & Veteran Affairs, experienced veteran service representatives know how the system works and what it takes to get veterans and their families the benefits they've earned.

Many veterans just don't know about the help that's available to them. VSRs can determine what you're eligible for, what documentation you need and how to get that documentation to the right place.

And it's not just veterans: Dependents can be eligible for educational **benefits, such as the Cal-Vet tuition fee waiver and Chapter 35 assistance. Surviving spouses may be eligible for Dependent and Indemnity Compensation.** VSRs can also make referrals to other service providers and connect veterans and their families with county services, housing, job training and more.

★ Where to find help

County of San Diego Office of Military and Veterans Affairs

5560 Overland Ave., Ste. 310, San Diego
858-694-3222
Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/hhsa/programs/ssp/veterans_services.html

Military Veterans Resource Centers

Offers a one-stop-shop where veterans can get help with VA benefits and connect with other community resources.

North Inland Military and Veterans Resource Center

649 W. Mission Ave., Escondido
760-740-5604
Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

South Region Military & Veterans Affairs Resource Center

401 Mile of Cars Way, Ste. 300, National City
619-731-3345
Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

North County Coastal Military & Veterans Resource Center

1701 Mission Avenue, Ste. 110, Oceanside
442-262-2701
Monday-Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

San Diego County libraries

Veterans can connect with VSRs for help with paperwork and filing claims. Certain locations offer VET-CONNECT video conferencing and monthly in-person assistance.

Julian Branch

1850 CA-78, Julian
Vet Connect appointments: Thursdays (858-694-3222)

Alpine Branch

1752 Alpine Blvd., Alpine
Vet Connect appointments: Thursdays (858-694-3222)

Poway Branch

13137 Poway Road, Poway
Vet Connect appointments: Wednesdays (858-694-3222)

Borrego Springs Branch

2580 Country Club Road, Borrego Springs
VSR walk-in appointments: Wednesdays, 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Vet Connect appointments (858-694-3222)

Valley Center Branch

29200 Cole Grade Rd., Valley Center
Vet Connect appointments (760-749-1305)

Imperial Beach Branch

810 Imperial Beach Blvd., Imperial Beach
Vet Connect appointments (619-424-6981)

Ramona Branch

1275 Main St., Ramona
VSR walk-in appointments: 4th Wednesdays of the month, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Rancho San Diego Branch

11555 Via Rancho, El Cajon
VSR walk-in appointments: 2nd Thursdays of the month, 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.

El Cajon Branch

201 East Douglas, El Cajon
VSR walk-in appointments: 2nd & 4th Mondays of the month, 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Pine Valley Branch

28804 Old Highway 80, Pine Valley
VSR walk-in appointments: 3rd Thursday of the month, 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Chula Vista Public Library

365 F St., Chula Vista
VSR walk-in appointments: 3rd Wednesdays of the month, 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.

San Diego Central Library

330 Park Blvd., San Diego
VSR walk-in appointments: 3rd Tuesdays of the month, 1 to 4 p.m.

★ Forms and documentation to have

Having the right documentation can help get your claim process started quickly. However, even if you don't have complete records, VSRs can help you obtain them. When working with a VSR, it's helpful to have:

- ✓ **DD 214**
- ✓ **Marriage certificate**
- ✓ **Birth certificates**
- ✓ **Available medical records**
- ✓ **Military records**
- ✓ **Bank information** (some programs may require direct deposit)



Claim Your Benefits

If you are a veteran, you and your family are eligible for housing, education, health care and other life-changing benefits. The Office of Military & Veterans Affairs is an important resource in San Diego County. To receive benefits counseling, follow up with a claim, or to determine what benefits you are owed and how to acquire them, give OMVA a call at 858-694-3222.



RECEIVE **SUPPORT** FROM YOUR PEERS

Military veterans, active service members and their loved ones can receive even more support from 2-1-1 San Diego. Upon contacting the 24/7 confidential helpline, callers reach a Peer Support Specialist who is dedicated to making their very first call productive and fulfilling. Find solace in the staff of veterans that are able to empathize and assist from direct experience.

CALL 2-1-1 FOR SUPPORT
OR EMAIL SUPPORT@211SANDIEGO.ORG
FOR MORE INFORMATION.