

WE SALUTE YOU

Veterans risked it all to serve our country.
When they come home, the County of San Diego
Office of Military & Veterans Affairs serves them.





Advocacy When It's Needed Most

San Diego County Veteran Outreach Program Coordinator Timothy Mathues works with veterans to get them the benefits they have earned.

PHOTO BY STEPHEN WHALEN

Helping Veterans Get WHAT THEY EARNED

County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs takes the legwork out of receiving VA benefits

BY MATT JOCKS

The County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs serves as the advocate for veterans who are trying to obtain state and federal benefits. The office provides these services to veterans, active military and their families:

- **Comprehensive benefits counseling:** Get help identifying all of the benefits you qualify for.
- **Claim preparation and submission:** Veteran service representatives are familiar with the application process and can identify and obtain the documentation needed to ensure claims are filed correctly. This avoids errors that can cause needless delays in obtaining benefits.
- **Claim follow-up and appeals:** Should a claim be denied, veteran service representatives can help file appeals.
- **Referrals to service providers:** Veterans are provided access to a network of public service providers. These cover everything from public assistance, VA medical care, homelessness services and disability assistance to help with employment, education, housing and legal services.

Timothy Mathues finds it easy to talk to veterans who are reluctant to seek help.

It's easy because he used to be one of them.

"I used to think, 'I'm fine. Let the VA take care of the guys and gals who really need it,'" says Mathues, the outreach program coordinator at the County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs. "Let the younger guys have those services. But it turned out I wasn't OK."

"IT'S A VERY LARGE BUREAUCRACY, AND IT CAN BE DAUNTING. WE DO ALL THAT LEGWORK AND WE GET THAT PROCESS GOING."

Timothy Mathues
*Veteran Outreach Program Coordinator,
County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs*

With the help of the county office, Mathues got his medical issues taken care of after discovering they were service-related, which opened the door to more comprehensive benefits. Mathues has a passion for seeing that other veterans get what they have earned.

The first step is telling them they have earned it.

Last year, the office participated in 221 outreach events, meeting with 26,000 people. Outreach is all the more important in a county that is home to two of the most iconic military facilities in the country, and where a third of the population is active duty, veterans or members of military families.

Once veterans and families know about the benefits, the second step is making sure they get them.

"It's a very large bureaucracy, and it can be daunting," Mathues says of the VA. "We do all that legwork and we get that process going."

In addition to having the resources, Mathues' office also has the expertise. Where there is bureaucracy, there is paperwork. And where there is paperwork, there are mistakes. One part of a form left blank can lead to delays that have a significant impact on the lives of veterans and their families. It takes experience to figure out how to find and fix the problem.

"We can locate the information and find out the status," Mathues says. "Those applications can be sitting in a pile for a long time. The VA doesn't have the manpower to get back to applicants quickly."

In what may be the most military-centric region in the country, veterans are served by an office that has received numerous national awards and served as a model for other counties.

"We hosted a national training conference in June 2017," he says. "And, from seeing what was being done in other counties, it was very apparent this county is light-years ahead in what is being done for veterans."



A United **MISSION**

BY THEA MARIE ROOD

San Diego Military Family Collaborative leverages community resources to make military families stronger

Military life can seem overwhelming at times: assigned to a new base — often with a deployed spouse — or transitioning to retiree or civilian status. What are your benefits? Are there deadlines to apply? What resources can you access? Who will help if there is a serious issue: financial problems, substance abuse or unemployment?

Fortunately, you're not on your own. The San Diego Military Family Collaborative (SDMFC), a program convened by SAY San Diego, is here to keep active duty, reservist and transitioning families well-informed and linked to services they need. "We work diligently to coordinate resources to support military families and to ensure 'warm handoffs' to other agencies," says Daniel Romero, SAY San Diego's senior program director of SDMFC. "We've also developed programs to address 'gaps in service,' which are known as 'Action Teams.'"

Perhaps the most popular of these is called "Military Transition: The Spouse Edition." "There is a five-day class on base about making the transition," says Maarla Milligan, California assistant director of the U.S. Department of Labor Veterans' Employment Services, and a longtime council member at SDMFC. "But less than 1 percent of spouses attend it — for lots of reasons: you can't take a week off work, no childcare, you're attending to the move. So we provide childcare and lunch and put all the information together in one day for spouses. We may not go so far in-depth, but we do give you a point person you can turn to, no matter where you go."

Spouses are also given reliable information about accessing services and what military benefits they can apply for (including

deadlines). "You need to understand your benefits, but there are so many of them — and sometimes you don't know who to believe," says Milligan.

SDMFC partners with local agencies to avoid duplication of services while streamlining resources, says Romero, making it a priority to refer families to resources in their given geographical area or community. For example, Fleet & Family Support Center or the San Diego Financial Literacy Center offer financial counseling; Armed Services YMCA or Support The Enlisted Project can arrange basic needs for families in crisis (food and financial assistance — rent, car trouble, utilities, etc.); San Diego County Health and Human Services and Families OverComing Under Stress (FOCUS) provide physical/mental health services and resiliency training.

"SDMFC IS SUCH AN AMAZING AND ORGANIC PROJECT BECAUSE WE HAVE ALL THE RESOURCES TO COME IN AND TOUCH ON ALL POINTS OF MILITARY LIFE."

Maarla Milligan

San Diego Military Family Collaborative member with the U.S. Department of Labor

"Statistically, we have the biggest group of veterans who either stayed here or came here," says Milligan, adding there are also three large military bases in the area. "And SDMFC is such an amazing and organic project because we have all the resources to come in and touch on all points of military life."

Maarla Milligan and Daniel Romero are members of the San Diego Military Family Collaborative, which is a coordinated effort to maximize the community resources that enhance military family life.

PHOTO BY STEPHEN WHALEN

Success Stats: Military Family Collaborative

Less than 1 percent of the national population lives in San Diego County, but it is home to:

8% of the U.S. active duty military population

17% of all Navy personnel

30% of all Marine personnel

More than **60,000** military-connected children

SDMFC was formed in the early '90s to coordinate services for military families by Social Advocates for Youth (SAY) San Diego — and included a handful of agencies. Today, there are more than **150 organizations** that participate in SDMFC-related activities.



Since 2015, SDMFC has offered **Military Transition: The Spouse Edition** course to **245 participants**. In a survey, respondents reported that:

Before taking the course

After taking the course

Spouses that felt confident in their ability to make a successful transition:

28%

83%

Spouses that felt knowledgeable about community resources:

33%

89%

A WARM WELCOME for Vets

Vets' Community Connections helps new residents transition to life in San Diego area

BY MATT JOCKS



Shya Ellis-Flint, at right, helps veterans get information on employment, education or even a good place to grab lunch through the Vets' Community Connections program.

PHOTO BY STEPHEN WHALEN

There are many ways that community members can make active and retired military personnel and their families feel welcome in San Diego County. There is information about schools, jobs, nice restaurants to try, and great places to take a hike — just the kinds of things newcomers likely don't know.

Vets' Community Connections provides a place for military members, vets and their families to get this information and more. From careers to education, where to get your car repaired or where to get your kid signed up for soccer, information is supplied by a staff of volunteers who enlist to offer their expertise to newcomers via a phone call.

Military life usually means a series of transitions, constantly being uprooted and often feeling like a stranger in a strange land.

"There is a pretty big gap as far as knowing everything about the community you're moving to," says Shya Ellis-Flint, program manager for VCC. "This is a chance for community members to donate that knowledge with a simple phone call."

The benefits run both ways, Ellis-Flint says. Volunteers report a deep satisfaction in contributing to the quality of life for military members and their families.

"There is a benefit in giving back any way that you can," Ellis-Flint says. "People may not have a lot of time, but they

have some time. And making that human connection has value beyond someone just Googling for information."

The program originally featured mostly people with military backgrounds who were longtime residents. It also centered on more weighty issues, like making career connections.

"THIS IS A CHANCE FOR COMMUNITY MEMBERS TO DONATE [THEIR] KNOWLEDGE WITH A SIMPLE PHONE CALL."

Shya Ellis-Flint

Program manager, Vets' Community Connections

backgrounds, goes beyond the specific information being shared.

"When you have those conversations, you see the commonality," she says. "We want to give that information, but our underlying mission is to reinforce that idea that we are all far more alike than we are not alike."

It has evolved into a source of information covering nearly all aspects of community living. Volunteers list their area of expertise and are entered in a database. The "personal niche" areas of the service are still growing, and VCC is looking to recruit more volunteers.

"It's almost like it's too easy," she says. "People don't realize how simple it is to do. But the reaction we've gotten from the volunteers and veterans has been overwhelmingly positive."

Ellis-Flint says the value of the program, particularly as it expands to include more volunteers without military

**Love San Diego County?
We Need You!**

If you live in San Diego County and want to share your local expertise with military members, veterans and their families, sign up through Vets' Community Connections.

"Basically, the qualification is being willing to share what's great about living in San Diego County," says Shya Ellis-Flint, program manager.

After filling out an online application, volunteers are asked to provide two references who can verify identification and any relevant job experience. Volunteers can then choose their areas of interest.

They will be asked to return contacts promptly. "Volunteers are really kind of amazed this is all we're asking," Ellis-Flint says.

Prospective volunteers can fill out an online application at vetscommunityconnections.org. There is a tab for San Diego County and, after that, tabs for community members and businesses.

Ready for the **NEXT STEP**

Navy veteran uses GI Bill to get advanced degree

BY ANNE STOKES



Jamie Rangel, center, is using her Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to get a degree from Cal State San Marcos. Her step-daughter Gabriela, left, is also attending school at San Diego's Miramar College courtesy of the CalVet College Tuition Fee Waiver for Veteran Dependents program.

PHOTO BY STEPHEN WHALEN

Jamie and Jeff Rangel met in church off the coast of Korea. At the time, both were serving aboard the USS Chancellorsville, a ship with a command so small it didn't warrant a chaplain.

"We had to take turns running church on Sundays," Jamie says. "All the people who attended church — all five of us — were pretty close knit and chose to hang out with each other whenever we had port visit."

They married in 2012, after she left the service. After retiring from the military, Jeff began working for San Diego County Registrar of Voters and works to recruit veterans for ROV at career fairs. Today, Jamie is studying management information systems at Cal State San Marcos while working part-time on-campus at the ONR ESTEP program. She says that the Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit provided by the VA has helped ease her transition into a civilian career and put her in a better position to provide for her family.

Because Jamie wishes to pursue her MBA at CSUSM, Jeff will be exercising his transferability option next year to give her the remainder of his GI Bill benefits.

"I feel that I would have definitely found a way to get back to school, but the struggle would have been much harder without the GI Bill," she says.

Jamie admits that she didn't initially know how to access her education benefits, but the veterans center on campus helped make the process an easy one.

"One of the things I thought was going to be my biggest barrier was figuring out how to use my GI Bill," she says. "I walked over to the veterans center and filled out this really easy

"I WALKED OVER TO THE VETERANS CENTER AND FILLED OUT THIS REALLY EASY PIECE OF PAPER AND THAT AUTOMATICALLY GAVE ME ACCESS TO MY GI BILL BENEFITS."

Jamie Rangel

U.S. Navy veteran and student

piece of paper and that automatically gave me access to my GI Bill benefits. They completely took care of it for me and it was really easy."

Jamie isn't the only one in the family to make use of the VA's educational benefits. Her step-daughter Gabriela gets free tuition at San Diego Miramar College and is planning to do the same at UC San Diego next year through the CalVet College Tuition Fee Waiver for Veteran Dependents, which pays for dependents of disabled veterans to attend college in the UC, CSU and community college systems. Her step-daughter Sophia also plans to use CalVet when she attends college.

"They're incredibly friendly and they are incredibly helpful," Jamie says of the CSUSM Veterans Center staff. "They genuinely look to get people to the next step in their life instead of just doing their work and going home."

Earned benefits

At the County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs, representatives can help determine benefit eligibility, prepare and submit claims as well as handle appeals.

➤ **Disability:** Veterans with service-related injuries, disease or other conditions, as well as their survivors, can be eligible for benefits, depending on their disability rating (0 to 100 percent).

➤ **Education:** The Post-9/11 GI Bill (Chapter 33), Survivors and Dependents' Educational Assistance (Chapter 35) and CalVet Tuition Fee Waiver for Veteran Dependents provide financial assistance for those in degree programs, as well as vocational or technical training.

➤ **Health care:** The VA provides health care benefits, including medical, dental and mental health services, for eligible veterans and their dependents at VA clinics and hospitals as well as certain non-VA facilities.

➤ **Home loans:** Both the VA and CalVet agencies provide home loan programs for qualified veterans.

To see if you qualify for any benefit programs, visit www.sandiegocounty.gov/hhsa/programs/ais/veterans_services/ or call 858-694-3222.

Reflecting on VIETNAM

BY AMANDA CARAWAY

Gina Burke joined the Army as an OR nurse and was deployed during the Vietnam War. She says volunteering with veterans organizations has helped her be more open with sharing her experiences.

PHOTO BY STEPHEN WHALEN



Nurse shares the often untold story of what it was like being a woman during war

Gina Burke was an innocent young girl of 22 when she arrived in Danang, Vietnam, to serve as an army operating room (OR) nurse. The site was very primitive compared to what she was used to, and there were two soldiers undergoing operations for war injuries.

"I don't know what I thought war was going to be like, but I didn't understand the devastation," she says. "Until that moment, it hadn't sunk in that I was truly going off to war."

Gina served in Vietnam for 11 months before returning to the United States. At that time, there were very few women stationed in Danang, and all were nurses and other medical personnel.

"It wasn't like it is today, where women are deployed to work in all different fields," she says. "Honestly, it was very lonely."

Gina was recruited just before her final year of nursing school. She was looking for financial aid to complete her degree, and the recruiter said she could receive aid right away and serve after she had her degree.

"The army paid for tuition and books, and I received a salary," she says. "I had to serve two years for every one year that I received financial support."

After completing her degree, Gina entered an accelerated OR nursing program. Once she graduated, she was stationed at a base in Texas before being deployed to Vietnam.

"They had a great need for OR nurses in Vietnam, so they were willing to pay for anyone who was willing to learn," she says.

When she returned from Vietnam, Gina found she couldn't talk about the war with civilian nurses at the hospital where she worked.

"I had a terrible time coming back to the USA," she says. "People just didn't understand war and what it was like. They made me feel ashamed."

She found that she was most comfortable around other veterans, and began volunteering with several organizations such as the American Legion, Nam Vets, and the Fisher House Foundation.

Today, as the U.S. Department of Defense commemorates the 50th anniversary of the conflict, Gina continues to serve, making meals for families of injured soldiers staying at Fisher Houses and visiting veterans in nursing homes.

"I'VE ONLY RECENTLY STARTED TALKING OPENLY ABOUT MY TIME IN VIETNAM. VOLUNTEERING HAS BEEN REALLY IMPORTANT FOR ME."

Gina Burke
Vietnam War veteran

"I've only recently started talking openly about my time in Vietnam," she says. "Volunteering has been really important for me."

Gina says the Army still has a great nursing program and it's a good way to get an education. But, she does have some advice for women.

"It's important to be strong and speak up for yourself," she says.

Vietnam Vets: By the Numbers



17: Percentage of **veterans in San Diego County** who are Vietnam veterans

38,056: Number of **Vietnam veterans** living in San Diego County

19: Average age of **military personnel** who served in Vietnam

Relying on HERSELF

Navy vet's story shows how women can thrive in the military

BY AMANDA CARAWAY

Sara Krueger grew up in a small town in Wisconsin before joining the Navy to get out and see the world. During her 14 years of service, she was stationed in Japan for six years and was deployed two times to the Persian Gulf (OEF/OIF). She now works as a veteran service representative for the County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs.

"I grew up fast and learned a lot," says Sara. "I think it has been a good path for me. It changed my outlook on everything."

She worked in aviation ordnance, which required her to work the flight deck building bombs and loading aircraft.

"It was a male-dominated job, and it required a lot of heavy lifting," says Sara.

Sara learned to rely on herself and came to believe a woman could do any job just as good as the men, if not better. Another female sailor, who was her LPO, became a great mentor.

"She told me to always take care of myself," she says. "I would advise any woman entering the military to stand up for themselves."

After she completed her service, Sara met

a woman who worked as a veteran service representative in the claims department. She suggested Sara apply. Sara found the work interesting and enjoyed helping other veterans by making the process easier.

"I'VE FOUND THAT THERE IS ALWAYS ROOM TO LEARN AND GROW. GETTING A FREE EDUCATION IS A GREAT BENEFIT."

*Sara Krueger
Veteran service representative,
County of San Diego Office of Military &
Veterans Affairs*

"In the past, I had submitted claims and found the process confusing," she says. "Having a helpful person at the VA can make a huge difference."

Sara likes assisting veterans, and she has had many positive experiences. One of her favorites was being able to help a veteran suffering from diabetes due to Agent Orange exposure. He had applied for benefits in the past and been denied.

"I was able to help him get his claim approved,"

she says. "He received a huge back payment from the VA and was able to retire. That's probably one of my most rewarding experiences."

Sara herself enjoys benefits due to the GI Bill. In 2015, she finished her bachelor's degree in criminal justice and just recently completed a master's degree in business administration.

"I've found that there is always room to learn and grow," she says. "Getting a free education is a great benefit."

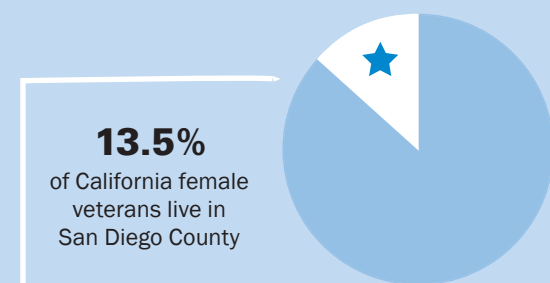


Navy veteran Sara Krueger is proud to have served. Now, she continues serving other veterans as a veteran service representative for the County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs.
PHOTO BY STEPHEN WHALEN

Female Vets: By the Numbers



22,000 female veterans
live in San Diego County



15%
of active-duty
military
are female

17%
of active-duty
officers
are female



The annual Stand Down event hosted by Veterans Village of San Diego, offers assistance with housing, legal and employment issues in hopes of preventing veteran homelessness.
PHOTO COURTESY VETERANS VILLAGE OF SAN DIEGO

“WE ARE WORKING TOGETHER TO END HOMELESSNESS — THAT’S THE KEY THING THAT MAKES SAN DIEGO SO SUCCESSFUL.”

Hanan Scrapper
Program Director, Supportive Services for Veteran Families

Leave **NO ONE BEHIND**

BY THEA MARIE ROOD

Stand Down event aims to serve homeless veterans and those at-risk

The homeless population in San Diego County spiked last year by 5 percent, with North County and Downtown San Diego experiencing the biggest proportions of this overall increase. But officials see one silver lining in these troubling statistics: a 9 percent drop in homelessness among veterans, which translates into a decrease of 29 percent since 2011.

Much of the credit goes to organizations such as the Veterans Village of San Diego, whose motto is “Leave No One Behind.” Since 1988, VVSD has hosted a three-day annual event called Stand Down, where veterans and their families can get the help they need

in one location. Every July, hundreds of at-risk and homeless vets are given respectful assistance with housing, legal or employment issues, as well as access to medical care, mental health treatment and substance abuse rehabilitation.

The emphasis is on a “rapid rehousing effort,” followed by carefully addressing the underlying problems. “We help with rental assistance, deposits and moving costs to get them into housing immediately,” says Hanan Scrapper, program director for Supportive Services for Veteran Families, an organization that participates in Stand Down and also serves veterans year-round. “And then we get

them supportive services, such as medical care, employment training, transportation or childcare.”

This coordination of resources is especially critical in San Diego, a county with a disproportionately large population of veterans. “We have a lot of military bases here, so at some point this has been home to them,” says Scrapper. “And they either stay or end up coming back.”

But it is also one of the most expensive and spread-out counties in the nation, which makes it harder for low-income veterans and their families to keep their heads above water. “The biggest issue is affordable housing,” says Scrapper. “We have lots of resources — both at the federal and local levels — but it’s difficult finding affordable units.” If veterans move out of city center to outlying areas where rents are cheaper, accessing resources then becomes more difficult, which is another reason Stand Down is helpful. “Veterans and their families can come to one site,” she says, “and we can get everyone connected to the services they need.”

Slated to enter its 30th year in 2018, Stand Down now brings together more than 150 agencies and 2,500 volunteers. “It really shows the strength of the community,” says Scrapper. “We are working together to end homelessness — that’s the key thing that makes San Diego so successful.”

Homeless Vets: By the Numbers



1,054

Total number of homeless veterans in San Diego County

11.5

Percentage of overall homeless in San Diego County who are veterans

9

Percentage decrease of homeless veterans in San Diego County from 2016 to 2017

Finding A NEW LIFELINE

Resource Centers are 'one-stop shops' for post-military life

BY JENNIFER BONNETT

Do you need help finding a job, but don't know where to start? Are you looking for somewhere to live? Or, do you have ongoing health care needs?

The Military & Veterans Resource Centers can help.

The County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs has established two resource centers that co-house other nonprofits and serve as a hub of resources and services. They are places where service members and families don't have to go it alone when seeking information.

And at the forefront of it all is Christopher C. Gunn, senior veteran services representative.

"At the Military & Veterans Resource Center, we do all we can to be a 'one-stop shop' for our veterans and their families," he says.

To meet that mission, representatives have brought in organizations that offer county and state benefits, but also

nonprofit organizations, such as Veterans Village of San Diego, Interfaith, PATH, Goodwill, San Diego Financial Literacy, Support The Enlisted Project, Southern Caregiver Resource Center, Elizabeth Hospice, National Association for Black Veterans and Palomar College, to name a few.

The centers have become important as veterans typically spend a lot of time trying to get questions answered or traveling to different locations to get the help they need, according to Gunn.

"I know because a lot of my veterans, including myself, have been there," he says. "It makes a huge difference to get answers and care or services all in one place. It can mean a world of difference to have an ally in complex life for the post-military family."

The network of veterans organizations has the contacts to point recipients in the correct direction, providing not just a trail of breadcrumbs to follow, but real world information.

The centers offer a wide range of benefits to assist post-military families. Those include employment services that help with job placement, résumé writing, job training, interview skills and all things to help the veteran develop even more desirability in the workforce, Gunn says.

They can also help with housing needs including rental vouchers and homeless assistance, as well as clothing vouchers. Mental health therapies, crisis intervention and hospice and palliative care services assistance, financial assistance and education programs that benefit military members and their families are also available.

In most cases, Gunn understands because he's been there. A husband of 28 years, father of two and having served 30 years with the U.S. Marines earning the rank of Sergeant Major, he has led women and men on humanitarian missions and also into battle.

While inside the military there is always someone to turn to for help,

Gunn says. But when the service ends, these "lifelines" go away. "We exist to give the veteran and their families someone to turn to after the military life," he says.

County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs Locations

› County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs (Main office)

5560 Overland Ave., #310,
San Diego, CA 92123
Office: 858-694-3222
Hours: Mon-Fri, 8 a.m.-4 p.m.

› Military & Veterans Resource Center, South Region Live Well Center

401 Mile of Cars Way,
Ste 300
National City, CA 91950
Office: 619-731-3345
Hours: Monday-Friday,
8 a.m.-5 p.m.

› Military & Veterans Resource Center, North Inland Live Well Center

649 W. Mission Ave., #2400,
Escondido, CA 92025
Office: 760-740-5572 or
760-740-5573
Hours: Monday-Friday,
8 a.m.-5 p.m.

**"IT MAKES A HUGE
DIFFERENCE TO GET
ANSWERS AND
CARE OR SERVICES
ALL IN ONE PLACE."**

Christopher C. Gunn
*Senior veteran services representative,
Office of Military & Veterans Affairs,
Military & Veterans Resource Center,
County of San Diego Health & Human
Services Agency*



Christopher C. Gunn is a senior veteran service representative for the Military and Veterans Resource Centers.
PHOTO BY STEPHEN WHALEN

From right, Ashley Moorehead is the full-time caregiver for her husband Kristopher Moorehead. While difficult at times, she has found guidance from the Southern Caregiver Resource Center.
PHOTO BY STEPHEN WHALEN

The Frontlines of SUPPORT

Wife cares for veteran husband with PTSD

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ



In the toughest moments, when the stress becomes unbearable, Ashley Moorehead walks into her bedroom closet and quietly weeps, dabbing her tears with her hands and shirt.

Then, the 32-year-old emerges with a smile and resumes her job as a military/civilian caregiver in her Temecula home.

Ashley is a full-time caregiver for her husband, Kristopher, a Coast Guard vet with PTSD, a bipolar condition and other ailments. She also cares for their children Blaze, 9, who has severe autism, and for Sway, 6, who has mild to moderate autism.

"Being a caregiver is very difficult at times, but I wouldn't have it any other way," Ashley says. "I'll do this until my last breath."

Like many who become military caregivers in their own homes, she had no training for the demanding role she voluntarily assumed when her husband was honorably discharged in 2013 soon after he was diagnosed with PTSD.

She eventually contacted the Southern Caregiver Resource Center, which gave her guidance. For 30 years, the San Diego-based nonprofit has delivered free training and other assistance to spouses and others who care for adult loved ones with critical and/or disabling conditions, whether they are military veterans or have never served.

"I was struggling to care for my veteran and for my kids, when I heard about the center," says Ashley, whose family then lived in Vista.

In 2014, she began attending center-sponsored forums where she learned to be a better caregiver and to take care of herself. The center "opened doors" by connecting her with valuable resources. Through WAVES Project, a

**"BEING A CAREGIVER
IS VERY DIFFICULT
AT TIMES, BUT I
WOULDN'T HAVE IT
ANY OTHER WAY."**

Ashley Moorehead
Wife, mother and caregiver

nonprofit scuba-diving endeavor for wounded vets and their families, both Mooreheads became certified scuba divers, with Kristopher rejoicing as WAVES returned him to open waters off California to dive.

Kristopher, 30, began his active duty in May 2006 in Gulfport, Miss., when the dead of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath still floated in the region's waters, nine months after the killer storm. He had harrowing moments as he aided in search and rescue, and migrant and drug interdiction. He also was devastated by his Coast Guard mentor's suicide.

Ashley thanks the Southern Caregiver Resource Center for its support. Martha Rañón, the center's director of education and outreach and a former caregiver herself, says caregivers ride an emotional roller coaster and require personal respite.

"We tell them not to forget about themselves," she says. "It can be as simple as reading a book while the person they are caring for is taking a nap."

Veterans & Suicide

20

Estimated number of veterans who commit suicide each day

18

Percentage of overall suicide victims in U.S. who were veterans (2014)

2.4
times higher:

Suicide risk of female veterans compared to female adult civilians (2014)

A Mission to **SERVE VETERANS**

Veteran Services Officer's job is to get benefits for those who have earned them

BY EDGAR SANCHEZ

Applying for military benefits can be daunting without the aid of someone like Adonis Relieve. Adonis is the senior veteran services officer for County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs. Last fiscal year, Adonis' office provided services to roughly 31,640 veterans and family members. Adonis, 63, himself a vet, recently spoke about his job.

Who are the applicants?

There are four groups: Active military members, veterans, veteran's families and surviving family members of both veterans and members of the military. We serve as advocates, or representatives, of our clients.

Is it difficult to apply for benefits?

In some cases, it can be difficult to assemble or prepare the applications. Some people try to obtain services on their own. But the chances of getting a favorable decision are much better with the help of a veteran services officer. Statistics from the state Department of Veterans Affairs show that those who get assistance from our office find more success in getting their claims approved, and faster. Up to 50 percent of the claims submitted through our office are getting approved faster and with more monetary benefits than if a veteran applies on their own.

When veterans visit you, what documents should they bring?

They should bring their military discharge documents (DD-214) along with their civilian medical records since their separation from the military. In some cases, we would need more documents. For example, if someone was injured on active duty, his benefits claim should include laboratory-exam records or medical-specialist records that would indicate the severity of the issues.

How do you help clients apply for benefits they never knew existed?

As services officers, we know what benefits a veteran should be able to apply for. We can also do a search of all our sources within the military to determine what other benefits a client may seek.

You've done this job for nine years. Have any cases stood out, ones that brought you special satisfaction?

There are plenty of them. One of them involved a surviving spouse of a deceased Vietnam veteran. She had been denied widow's benefits at least two times. I was able to help and get all the necessary documents, and get her application approved. She received back pay for her entitlement of over \$60,000 after waiting nearly five years to be heard by a VA judge.

"UP TO 50 PERCENT OF THE CLAIMS SUBMITTED THROUGH OUR OFFICE ARE GETTING APPROVED FASTER AND WITH MORE MONETARY BENEFITS THAN IF A VETERAN APPLIES ON THEIR OWN."

Adonis Relieve
*Senior Veteran Services Officer,
County Of San Diego Office of
Military & Veterans Affairs*

When should current military members contact you?

We start servicing the military member six months to a year before they leave the service.

Could you describe a visit to your office?

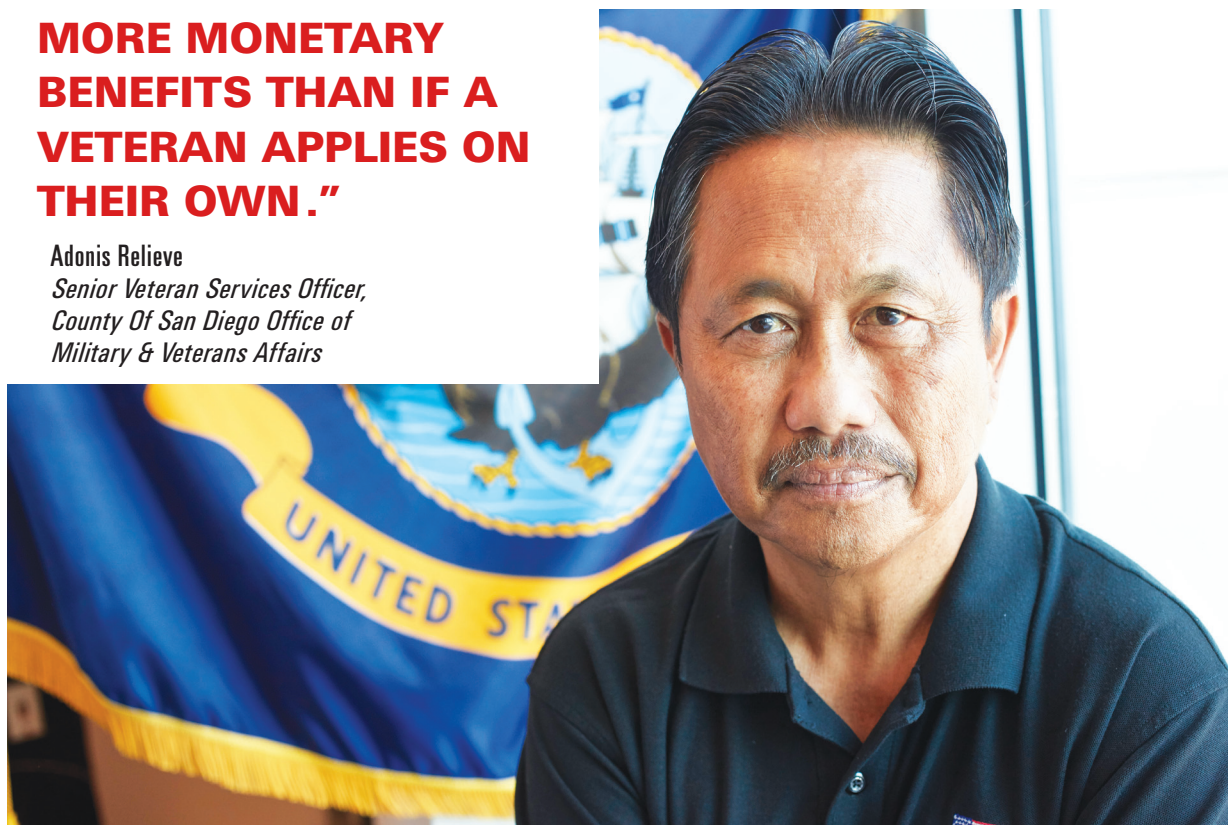
It's a very friendly, relaxed atmosphere. A lot of questions are answered by the counselors/service officers. A typical first meeting lasts 30 minutes to an hour.

Do you like your job?

I love my job. The best part is being able to help veterans and their families get the benefits they are entitled to.

Anything else?

I would recommend that claimants make appointments with us, at 858-694-3222. But we do our best to accommodate walk-ins with urgent needs.



Senior Veteran Services Officer Adonis Relieve recommends veterans make an appointment to visit the office and learn what benefits they may have earned.

PHOTO BY STEPHEN WHALEN

You Don't Have to Do It **ALONE**

The County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs has a mission to help veterans

Those who wear the uniforms of the U.S. military are trained to work and fight as a unit. However, when they come home, many try to fight their battles alone.

The County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs wants veterans to know they still belong to a unit that will not leave their side. The uniform may look different and the unit may be armed with computers, phones and the proper forms, but the dedication to achieving the mission is the same: to get veterans the benefits they have earned.



County of San Diego Office of Military & Veterans Affairs

5560 Overland Ave., #310
San Diego, CA 92123
Office: 858-694-3222
Hours: Monday-Friday, 8 a.m.-4 p.m.

Military & Veterans Resource Center, South Region Live Well Center

401 Mile of Cars Way, Ste 300
National City, CA 91950
Office: 619-731-3345
Hours: Monday-Friday, 8 a.m.-5 p.m.

Military & Veterans Resource Center, North Inland Live Well Center

649 W. Mission Ave., #2400
Escondido, CA 92025
Office: 760-740-5572
or 760-740-5573
Hours: Monday-Friday, 8 a.m.-5 p.m.

Don't know what you qualify for? Call or visit any of these three locations today!



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