

Here to Serve



San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office

A Special Advertising Supplement

THE HISTORY OF THE CVSO

The core mission of the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office (CVSO) is to provide professional services to our military veterans as well as their dependents and survivors who are entitled to benefits from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, the State of California, and other agencies as applicable. Courtesy, respect and sensitivity will be afforded to every veteran and eligible dependent whom the CVSO serves.



The Board of Supervisors (BOS) established our San Joaquin CVSO in 1944 to provide advocacy, information and referral services to the growing veteran population of San Joaquin County. The BOS appointed the first CVSO in the same year to lead the county's veteran advocacy efforts and to assist every peace- or war-time veteran, and the dependents of every deceased veteran, in presenting and pursuing any claim the veteran may have against the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, as well as establishing the veteran's right to any privilege, preference, care or compensation provided by the laws of the United States or the State of California.

If you are unsure of where to find help, need support in getting started, or are just unsure of your entitled benefits, you can obtain assistance by calling the CVSO and an accredited veterans service representative will support you or direct you to the appropriate resource. The CVSO also provides outreach services to veterans, their dependents, survivors, and other organizations upon request.



**Greg Diederich,
Director,
San Joaquin
County Health
Care Services
Agency**



The staff at the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office (from left): Veterans Service Officer Virginia Wimmer, VSR Jerry Jolly, VSR Chris Thompson, VSR Edwin Lazo, VSR Candy Walker and Esther Robinson.
PHOTO BY GLENN KAHL

Helping Heroes

San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office
serves those who have served our nation



by Anne Stokes

As a system designed to care for more than 20 million veterans across the United States, the VA can be an intimidating federal bureaucracy. At the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office, veterans and their families can get expert, local help navigating that system.

"The objective is to make it more convenient for veterans to get assistance in filing for their benefits or understand what benefits they're entitled to," says Candy Walker, an accredited veterans service representative (VSR). She is one of four VSRs staffed at the office, which is led by County Veteran Service Officer Virginia Wimmer. Walker recognizes that the VA can be overwhelming. She says that in order to better advocate on behalf of veterans and their families, VSRs receive ongoing training to keep abreast of changes with the VA.

For some veterans, service-connected issues like PTSD can lead to drug and alcohol problems, which may result in criminal court cases. Veterans Treatment Court, a joint program of the County Veterans Service Office and the county court, gives veterans a second chance with treatment in lieu of fines or jail time.

"Instead of letting them go back into the court system, if we can actually solve the problem we can actually help our vets to become

functioning members of society and keep them out of the criminal justice system," Walker says. "We're setting them up for success."

VSR Domonique McDaniels' father, an Army veteran, is just one such example. The assistance he received through the VA not only helped him readjust to civilian life, but helped his family as well — McDaniels was able to get an education thanks to his benefits. Today, she says veterans come in and thank her for helping with their claims.

"That's mostly why I do it," she says, "because I hope they have a child like me somewhere and I hope they're getting their benefits, too."

While some veterans are hesitant to reach out for help, VSR and Air Force veteran Jerry Jolly encourages them to see what the Veterans Service Office can do for them.

"Come see us and sit down and talk with us," he says. "We don't work for the VA, we're here as an advocate for the veteran."

Keep reading for more information on how veteran service representatives can help you get the benefits you've earned.

**"We're setting
them up for
success."**

**Candy Walker
Veterans Service Representative**

A Life of Service

Veteran Susan Feighery (pictured with her mobility alert service dog Annabelle) works with the Salvation Army serving homeless veterans through a transitional housing program. PHOTO BY MORGAN TAYLOR



Veteran gets help navigating VA system for herself and others

by Anne Stokes



Susan Feighery likens her nearly 20-year career with the U.S. Army Reserves to that of any other veteran: full of travel, adventure and in the service of others. Her deployments took her all over the world — the Persian Gulf, Central America and Thailand, to name a few — first as a combat medic and later as an environmental science officer. Feighery is a mustang: the rare commissioned officer who began as an enlisted service member.

“They’re a one-stop shop for all the different challenges veterans encounter.”

Susan Feighery
U.S. Army Reserve Veteran

“I really had a fun, amazing career,” she says. But her service took its toll.

She has an 80 percent service-connected disability rating with the VA as a result of hearing loss, PTSD, and mobility issues (she has torn ligaments and tendons from a broken ankle). Even for Feighery, who worked for the federal Veterans Healthcare Administration as a therapeutic recreation specialist for more than 14 years, navigating the VA’s benefit system is exhausting.

“I’m someone with a master’s degree and when I get information back from the VA, I still cannot understand some of it,” she says. “Even for me, a veteran who’s been serving veterans for the last 20 years, it’s difficult for me to keep up with all the changes. The County Veterans Service Office is such a source of education and updates for many things.”

Veterans service representatives (VSRs) at the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office (VSO) helped Feighery determine what benefits she was eligible for, including disability compensation, health care, educational assistance and even home loan services. VSRs assist her in filing claims, navigating the systems and handling appeals.

“The County VSO serves a really important role as a conduit for people to understand county, state and federal benefits,” she says. “They’re a one-stop-shop for all the different challenges that veterans encounter as well as understanding their benefits.”

After leaving her position at the VA, Feighery went back to school to become a substance abuse counselor. Her VA educational benefits helped cover tuition and enabled her to update her professional skills. Currently, Feighery works with the Salvation Army in Lodi as a program coordinator for the Veterans Grant & Per Diem program, a transitional housing program that provides wraparound services for homeless veterans. She says the Veterans Service Office helps her keep abreast of new regulations and programs, which helps her better serve her fellow veterans.

“There’s an awning at Salvation Army that says ‘Center of Hope,’” she says. “That’s the connection I feel also with the County Veterans Service Office. I think they are a center of hope for us as veterans.”

SERVICE-CONNECTED DISABILITY COMPENSATION

Veterans injured in the line of duty may be eligible for disability compensation. This monthly, tax-free benefit is available for those with a disability rating of at least 10 percent due to diseases or injuries — both physical and mental conditions such as PTSD — that started or were aggravated during active duty or training. Service-related disabilities that arise after separation may also be eligible.

To file a fully developed claim, be sure to have:

- Your DD214 form
- Any medical records that can establish a relationship between your disability, injury or disease to military service

“We want the VA to look at the application and make a decision quickly,” says VSR Jerry Jolly. “Normally a fully developed claim takes less than six months for a decision to come back.”

Not having your documentation shouldn’t discourage you from starting your disability claim process. Your VSR will be able to guide you through the process of obtaining them.

Callen Reyes is pursuing an engineering degree at Las Positas College with education benefits he gained from service in the U.S. Army.
PHOTO BY MORGAN TAYLOR



“If I had known it was going to be this easy, I would have been there the day I got out.”

Callen Reyes
U.S. Army Veteran

Serving to Learn

Veteran discovered a college degree was well within reach

by Matt Jocks



Before he could move into a bright future, Callen Reyes needed an education. An education about education. Like many veterans, Reyes didn't know the full extent of the educational benefits available to him. And the process was more than a little intimidating.

That changed when he was pointed to the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office.

“If I had known it was going to be this easy, I would have been there the day I got out,” Reyes says.

After high school, Reyes joined the workforce, but after a few years he wanted something else. His search led him to the Army as an all-wheel vehicle mechanic.

“Initially, I signed up for four years, but I would have stayed for the full 20,” he says. “I fell in love with service life, the camaraderie. It was like no other job.”

While Reyes loved the job, it was hard on his body. A bulging disc in his back, as well as problems with both ankles and his shoulders, led to a medical discharge.

Settling in California with his wife, Reyes tried to map out a future while his Army retirement status was being finalized.

His interest was engineering, where he could still focus on designing and fixing things without doing the heavy labor his body would no longer tolerate. After looking at the VA website and contacting a college, Reyes ultimately found himself at the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office, across the desk from Veterans Service Representative Jerry Jolly.

“I really didn't know what to expect, but the whole process took maybe 20-25 minutes. Working with him was so easy and he made it so smooth,” Reyes says. “My attitude and feelings going in there were definitely not the same as when I left.”

Under the GI Bill, Reyes got his tuition and major expenses taken care of. (“I think I had to do my parking pass. That was about it.”) He also received a monthly stipend. Reyes is currently attending Las Positas College in pursuit of an engineering degree.

Reyes also was set up in a work-study program at the very same place that put him on the path to education: the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office. The job helps him earn money while he's in school, but the chance to help veterans like him has value well beyond the paycheck.

“This gives me the chance to give back,” he says. “When I got out of the Army, I really missed it, the things I achieved, the things I gained from it. Now I'm able to reach out to veterans with problems. Even when I'm out in the community, I try to implore them to come in and see us.”

EDUCATION FOR VETS AND THEIR FAMILIES

For veterans who want to pursue an education or help family members do so, a number of programs and benefits are available.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill covers those who served on active duty after Sept. 10, 2001. Eligibility begins at 90 days of active service

and reaches 100 percent of benefits at 36 months. Those who served at least 30 days and have a service-connected disability qualify for 100 percent. Benefits include tuition and fee payment at in-state colleges and universities, as well as a housing allowance. Also covered are a variety of job-

training, apprenticeship and flight training programs.

In California, the tuition fee waiver allows the children of veterans with service-connected disabilities to have their tuition and fees covered for state colleges, universities and community colleges, subject

to income limitations. This program offers other benefits to families of veterans rated fully disabled or whose death was rated as service-connected

U.S. Army veteran Bob Appler was initially denied his disability claim for Agent Orange exposure during the Vietnam War. Decades later, he got his claim approved with help from the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office.
PHOTO BY MORGAN TAYLOR

COMBATING AGENT ORANGE

Federal law and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs presumes that veterans were exposed to Agent Orange if they served in Vietnam between Jan. 9, 1962, and May 7, 1975 or in the Korean demilitarized zone between April 1, 1968, and Aug. 31, 1971.

There also is a legal assumption that, for those veterans who were exposed and were then diagnosed with any of the following 14 diseases and conditions, the condition was caused by Agent Orange.

This allows the veterans to receive the benefits associated with a service-connected disability without proving exposure or the link to the disease.

The 14 presumptive diseases and conditions:

- AL Amyloidosis
- Chronic B-cell Leukemias
- Chloracne
- Diabetes Mellitus Type 2
- Hodgkin's Disease
- Ischemic Heart Disease
- Multiple Myeloma
- Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma
- Parkinson's Disease
- Early Onset Peripheral Neuropathy
- Porphyria Cutanea Tarda
- Prostate Cancer
- Respiratory Cancers (including lung cancer)
- Soft-tissue Sarcomas

The Unseen Enemy



Man exposed to Agent Orange gets his life back

by Matt Jocks

When Bob Appler was on the battlefield in Vietnam, the identity of the enemy seemed clear. And when the war ended, it seemed his fighting days were through.

Neither turned out to be true.

Appler was unaware that a chemical agent called Agent Orange was attacking him while he was serving on the ground in the U.S. Army. It would continue to do its damage when he came home.

However, Appler would have a new team of comrades ready to fight alongside him. With the help of the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office, Appler was able to regain a quality of life that had eluded him for decades.

"What a relief it has been," he says. "Everything that I was trying to get came true."

For Appler, the first effect of Agent Orange exposure was the shaking. A carpenter by trade, he sometimes couldn't hold a nail. Later, he developed breathing difficulties.

"It was rough at times," Appler says. "I'd have to apologize to people because I couldn't go out and do things. I couldn't go anywhere because of the shakes."

When Appler first applied for a service-connected disability in the 1970s, he was turned down because the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs wasn't acknowledging Agent Orange as the cause of these medical conditions.

Without financial assistance to help pay for medications to

ease his symptoms, Appler simply did without.

"I was working as an independent contractor, so I had no insurance," he says. "And the money I made would go toward my family before a doctor."

It wasn't until 2011, when Appler joined the Veterans of Foreign Wars as a service officer, that he began to learn about filing for claims. His first claim was denied, but when Virginia Wimmer of the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office took over the case, things changed quickly.

"She laid out specific steps ... to file a completed claim that the VA would recognize," Appler says.

Within five months, Appler's claim was approved and he finally had full access to the medication he needed.

"It's like day and night," he says. "I can do a lot more things."

Those things include giving back to veterans like himself: He collects donated furniture to give to veterans who were previously homeless.

"It's about helping the next guy," he says. "We've been doing it for five years and we have helped 215 families. It's a team effort."

Appler has also made it a priority to educate other veterans about receiving the benefits they are owed. Even the reluctant ones.

"If they don't want to do it for themselves," he says, "they should do it for their families."

**"Everything
that I was
trying to get
came true."**

Bob Appler
U.S. Army Veteran, Vietnam

Networking for Veterans

Veterans Benefits Fair serves as one-stop-shop



by Anne Stokes

At the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office, veterans service representatives strive to bridge any gaps between veterans' needs and the service providers that can help them. Whether they're in need of health care, a home loan or employment, the Veterans Service Office knows how to get veterans on the right path.

In 2017, the second annual Veterans Benefits Fair was held at the Robert Cabral Agricultural Center in Stockton. Not only was the event a chance for veterans and their families to access health and mental health care, financial services, employment, housing and many other resources, but it was also an opportunity for service providers to connect with one another and strengthen San Joaquin County's veteran advocacy network.

"All the veterans advocates, anybody who provides any sort of services, any sort of advocacy or benefits to veterans and their families – it's an opportunity for them to be in one space and at the same time," says Virginia Wimmer, San Joaquin County Veterans Service Officer. "We are actually helping to connect those service providers with one another so they can continue to network and so that veterans have a smooth continuum of care."

Representatives from approximately 50 federal, state, county and city agencies attended the event, including the VA, HUD-VASH, CalVet, EDD, San Joaquin County Human Services Agency and Public Health Services. Many agencies and other organizations were there to provide services and fill open employment positions.

Wimmer says that although it's held in the city of Stockton, the fair is open to anyone in San Joaquin County.

"We want to get the word out through the entire county, and the surrounding counties,

**"It's an opportunity
for them to be in
one space and at
the same time."**

Virginia Wimmer
San Joaquin County Veterans Service Officer

that there are people here who are helping. Sometimes veterans are very reluctant to reach out themselves, but maybe a friend might do that for them and we want to invite those people in as well."

Approximately 180 veterans and their families attended the Veterans Benefits Fair, where they were able to get information on available resources. Veterans service representatives were even able to help some veterans file benefit claims on the spot.

"It seemed to work very well," says Esther Robinson with San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office. "We got all the veterans in one place with their families, and each year it seems to grow. Everybody seemed to be pretty pleased with it. ... Some of them didn't know about a lot of the resources out there, so they were thankful for that."

For information on attending or participating in next year's event, veterans and service providers can visit www.sjgov.org/veterans/ or call 209-468-2916.



PHOTOS BY CRAIG SANDERS

A Better Future

Veteran got a degree and a career path thanks to program



by Matt Jocks



John Porter was stuck in grueling, physically demanding jobs that barely paid the bills. With some prodding from the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office, he went back to school to get a better-paying, more meaningful career.

PHOTO COURTESY JOHN PORTER

As John Porter neared graduation, he reflected on the long road to earning a college degree. After nine years in U.S. Air Force special forces and a series of physically demanding jobs in the private sector, Porter's body was steadily wearing down. He also didn't feel like he had a successful career.

"You know, the way things were, education was not the priority," he says. "Having a paycheck was the priority."

"To be put in a position where I can affect lives in a positive way, I'm just so thankful."

John Porter
U.S. Air Force Veteran

But then he met a man who had benefited from the vocational rehabilitation programs offered through the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office. One visit to the office changed his outlook.

Porter recalls: "Basically, they said, 'You're killing yourself. You're nuts if you keep doing this. You should go back to college.'"

Easier said than done, right? Well, not exactly.

At first, Porter saw it as a pipe dream. He couldn't afford the time away from work, he couldn't afford the incidental expenses, he hadn't sat in a classroom in ages.

However, the Veterans Service Office kept snatching all the reasons to say "no" out of his hands and replacing them with reasons to say "yes."

Once he applied for and received his service-connected disability, Porter saw the opportunities open up with programs he never imagined were available to him.

Help covering his bills? Check. Assistance in getting needed materials, like a laptop and printer? Check. Work-study for income? Got it. A tutor? Covered.

"I was petrified," Porter says of returning to school. "But as they explained everything, there was no reason not to do it. I dove in 100 percent. It seems like you're never going to get through it. But here I am, and it feels fantastic."

Porter graduated in September 2017 with a degree in technical management. The next step is the master's program in social work at USC, with an eye on helping veterans who are "exactly in the same position I was in."

Working with the Veterans Service Office left a deep impression on Porter.

"They are incredibly caring people," he says. "They find out what you want, what your skills are. Whatever the vet wishes, then they pair them with the right resources."

When it's done, the result is a life transformed.

"To be put in a position where I can affect lives in a positive way, I'm just so thankful," he says. "I finally understand where I am supposed to be."

HELPING PUT VETERANS TO WORK

Veterans with a service-connected disability are eligible for employment services. After meeting with a San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office veterans service representative, they will be put on one of five tracks: re-employment (returning to a previous career), rapid employment in a new career, self-employment, long-term career rehabilitation (through education and training) or independent living.

In partnership with the Employment Development Department, the Veterans Service Office can also assist transitioning veterans with skills such as résumé writing and interview skills.

Candy Walker, an accredited veterans service representative, said it is imperative for veterans to work with a veterans counselor to map out a plan and take full advantage of the benefits they have earned.

The benefits are felt not just by the veterans, but employers, too.

"People need to see work skills in a broader perspective," she said. "In addition to the individual skills veterans have, they bring leadership skills, teamwork, and the ability to adapt and change on the fly."

We're Here to Serve



San Joaquin County Veterans Service Officer Virginia Wimmer and her staff can help you with your claim. Call today!

★ Contact the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office (VSO):

105 South San Joaquin St. (first floor)
Stockton, CA 95202

www.sjgov.org/veterans

209-468-2916

Veterans Crisis Line (24/7):

1-800-273-TALK (8255) and press option 1 or text 838255

★ Get your CA driver's license veteran designation — it's as easy as 1, 2, 3!



1. Get Records. Find an original or certified copy of your military discharge certificate (DD214). If you need assistance obtaining your military records, the VSO will assist you.

2. Visit VSO. Bring your DD214 and government identification to the VSO to obtain your Veteran Status Verification Form.

3. Visit Any DMV. Go online or call any DMV for an appointment. Then take your Veteran Status Verification Form to DMV. Complete your application; pay any application fees in addition to a \$5 veteran designation fee. You must complete all applicable application and testing requirements.

TOP 4 REASONS TO VISIT THE VETERANS SERVICE OFFICE

1. Service-connected disability

Veterans with at least a 10 percent service-connected disability rating may qualify for monthly, tax-free disability compensation. Veterans service representatives can help determine eligibility, gather supporting evidence, submit claims and manage any appeals.

2. Health care

Veterans service representatives can help veterans enroll in the VA health care as well as help navigate the system, including assistance in scheduling appointments and enrolling dependents in the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the VA (CHAMPVA).

3. Pension

Disabled veterans and those older than 65 who served during wartime may be eligible for a pension. Benefits are income-based and intended to help supplement income or offset medical expenses.

4. Burial benefits

Veterans are eligible to be buried in a national cemetery free of charge. They may also be eligible for a headstone, plaque or marker, and flag, as well as possible burial reimbursement for any funeral or mortuary costs.