

Stronger Together



How your San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office works with the community to help you

Stepping Up to Help

San Joaquin County VSO and community partners keep services flowing

★ by Debbie Arrington



Virginia Wimmer and Don Johnston, PHOTOS BY ANNE STOKES

To solve problems and make life better for veterans, it takes a community effort. Like spokes on a wheel, many organizations work together with the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office at its hub.

Stronger together, the VSO and its partners tackle a multitude of issues facing San Joaquin County's veterans and their families. That included how to cope during the pandemic. When COVID-19 impacted veterans' lives, the SJC VSO was there to help – even as pandemic protocols shuttered its Stockton office.

"All services were delivered online or via phone," explains Virginia Wimmer, who served as SJC Veterans Service Officer during the pandemic's height. "We were able to work directly with the VHA (Veterans Health Administration) and VBA (Veterans Benefits Administration) to ensure services were NOT interrupted."

The office quickly pivoted to remote work, Wimmer says. "All employees were equipped with cell phones, mobile wi-fi devices and laptops to continue providing services, support and advocacy from the safety or their homes to the safety of the veterans' homes."

Working with its partners, VSO ensured veterans and their families received boxed meals and signed up for

mail-order prescription services. It also helped hundreds of veterans get vaccinated.

Continuing veterans services is vital. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than 29,000 veterans call San Joaquin County home. Of those, almost 11,000 served during the Vietnam War.

More than 6,000 veterans who live in San Joaquin County have a service-related disability rating, and may have special needs related to that disability. The VA estimates about 30% of veterans who served in combat are dealing with Post Traumatic Stress.

"We couldn't do the work we do without the help of our community partners," says Don Johnston, SJC VSO's interim director. "These organizations step up again and again to serve those who served their country."

Education continues to be a popular benefit. Nationwide, more than 1 million student veterans have

attended college since 9/11. Those educational benefits also extend to their families.

"(During the pandemic), Delta Community College and the University of the Pacific were significant partners in ensuring we were able to continue to ... support our student veterans and their families," Wimmer says.

A 26-year Air Force veteran, Wimmer served as County Veterans Service Officer for seven years before recently starting her new job as CalVet Deputy Secretary of Women Veterans Affairs. She's a strong believer in collaboration.

"Without the support of the community-based organizations, SJC VSO would not be as successful," Wimmer says. "We are grateful that our partners recognize the importance of working together as one collective is the best way to keep veterans safe from COVID-19 and to providing the best care and advocacy that they deserve."

"Without the support of the community-based organizations, SJC VSO would not be as successful."

Virginia Wimmer
CalVet Deputy Secretary of Women
Veterans Affairs

Community partners

Partners help the San Joaquin Veterans Service Office make a big impact. For example, VSO partnered with the Office of Emergency Services and Management to provide two COVID vaccination events in spring 2021. "We were successful in reaching 2,500 veterans and their caregivers," says Virginia Wimmer, the former SJC Veterans Service Officer.

"There are many community partners that have really stepped up to help SJC veterans and all deserve to be recognized and publicly acknowledged," Wimmer says.

ORGANIZATIONS THAT VSO WORKS WITH MOST FREQUENTLY INCLUDE:

- SJC Continuum of Care
- FIX'D Inc.
- Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Stockton
- DAV Charities
- Superior Court of California
- Dignity's Alcove
- Housing Authority of San Joaquin
- Visionary Home Builders
- Berkeley Food and Housing Project
- Delta Community College
- University of the Pacific
- VFW
- American Legion
- DAV
- AMVETS



Victory Gardens: A Place for Homeless Veterans

New complex will offer veterans a home and a hand up

★ by Anne Stokes

According to recent counts, there are 140 homeless veterans sleeping on the streets of San Joaquin County at any one time. Rising housing costs and falling rental vacancy rates make the problem worse.

"There is a direct correlation between rates of homelessness and the costs of housing in any given community," says Adam Cheshire, program administrator for Homeless Initiatives in San Joaquin County. "Because housing prices aren't going down, they're going up, we expect that homelessness is going to continue to be a rising problem until that problem is solved. It's a difficult problem to solve when the solution is to create more units."

While many veterans qualify for help through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) rental voucher program, the tight competition for housing creates additional barriers for veterans who are already struggling.

"We've got plenty of homeless veterans in the county who would qualify for VASH and they simply can't use that rental assistance to get a place because landlords aren't willing to rent to them," Cheshire says. "Rental assistance relies upon landlords and the rental market to rent to folks who are using a voucher and they're refusing to do it because it's too much of a risk. ... How do you solve that problem? One way is to control the real estate."

Controlling the real estate is just what San Joaquin County and several state and federal agencies have joined together to do. With funding from the State of California's Veterans Housing and Homeless Prevention (VHHP) program, the California Department of Housing and Community Development, CalVet, and federal tax

"It's really providing a broad group of services for an individual and wrapping that around a person so that they're getting all the supports they need at every step."

Adam Cheshire
Program administrator for Homeless
Initiatives in San Joaquin County

Built on 4.7 acres in French Camp, the \$30 million complex will offer 49 units in a complex located near the new VA clinic currently under construction. HUD-VASH vouchers will be committed to each of those units, creating affordable housing dedicated solely to veterans and their families. Officials hope to start housing veterans by Fall 2022.

In addition to providing a roof over their heads, Victory Gardens will also connect veterans with a wealth of supports to help them get back on their feet, including case management and on-site social services.

"It's really providing a broad group of services for an individual and wrapping that around a person, so that they're getting all the supports they need at every step," Cheshire says. "It's not something that any one organization is ever expected to provide; it becomes a team effort to provide wraparound services."

Currently under construction, Victory Gardens is the largest permanent supportive housing project in San Joaquin County's history. Slated to open in Fall 2022, it will offer 49 units of affordable housing for veterans and their families.

COURTESY OF ADAM CHESHIRE

credits, San Joaquin County and the Housing Authority of the County of San Joaquin is currently constructing the largest permanent supportive housing project in the county's history: Victory Gardens.



Help with housing

» To qualify for housing at Victory Gardens, veterans must be eligible for rental assistance through HUD-VASH vouchers. Veterans must:

- Be eligible for VA health care benefits.
- Have not received a dishonorable discharge.
- Be experiencing homelessness.
- Be able to complete daily living activities and be able to live independently in the community with the help of case management and supportive services.

» For veterans in need of housing help, but not struggling with homelessness, the VA offers other forms of housing assistance, including:

- VA-backed home loans.
- Housing assistance grants.

» To see if you qualify or for help applying for HUD-VASH and other housing benefits, reach out to the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office by phone at 209-468-2916 or online at www.sjgov.org/departments/hcs/vet.

VSR 1 Domonique McPherson helps connect veterans to comprehensive health care through the VA system.
PHOTO BY ANNE STOKES

Keeping Veterans Healthy

VA health care can be a lifeline for veterans

★ by Anne Stokes



When Domonique McPherson got out of the Army in 2009, he didn't know what supports were out there for veterans. It was a fellow veteran who told him about the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office and how they could help.

"It was exciting and refreshing to understand all the levels of assistance that they have for you, yet at the same time very overwhelming," he says. "I didn't know that people really cared about veterans in that way, to give them the help they may need. Once I experienced that, I wanted to be part of the group that spread the word out to other veterans."

Today, as a veteran service representative 1, McPherson says one of the most common needs he's able to help veterans with is medical care. Depending on income, disability rating and length of service, there is a wealth of services available for veterans through Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities, including:

- Inpatient care such as surgeries
- Outpatient and preventative care such as doctors visits and immunizations
- Prescription drugs
- Emergency and urgent care
- Therapy and rehabilitation services
- Vision
- Dental
- Long-term and assisted living care

- Mental health care
- Women's health care

"The VA has a lot to offer veterans when it comes to health care," McPherson explains. "Every health benefit for veterans is different. It depends on what classification they fall under in regards to disability, if they've recently gotten out of the military or are a senior citizen who happens to be a veteran."

While medical care through the VA can be a lifesaver, it can be a complicated process to apply and receive benefits. VSRs such as McPherson can help navigate the complicated system's rules, regulations and eligibility changes.

One of the valuable benefits offered through the VA addresses more than veterans' physical well-being: Mental health care. It's something McPherson wishes more veterans would take advantage of.

"It's not easy, going from war to home," says McPherson, a wartime vet who served as a combat engineer clearing improvised explosive devices. "PTSD is a big thing for current wartime veterans as well as ... veterans from the Korean or Vietnam wars. The VA provides a great service for those veterans who are in need of those services. ... I would definitely recommend talking to your health care provider through the VA to see if they can get you connected."

"The VA has a lot to offer veterans when it comes to health care."

Domonique McPherson
Veteran Service Representative 1, San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office

Where to get your COVID-19 shot

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit the Central Valley, San Joaquin County veterans could find vaccinations at the VA Stockton clinic in French Camp. For eligible veterans and families, walk-ins and appointments are available for either the Moderna or Johnson & Johnson vaccines.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

- Veterans enrolled in VA care.
- Spouses and surviving spouses of veterans.
- Caregivers of a veterans, including adolescents age 12 to 17.
- Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA) recipients, including adolescents age 12 to 17.
- Vaccine boosters are available to veterans with underlying medical conditions six months after receiving their initial vaccinations.

The VA Stockton clinic is located at 7777 South Freedom Road in French Camp. To request an appointment, call 650-496-2535 or visit www.va.gov/palo-alto-health-care/programs/covid-19-vaccines.

VSR Chris Thompson works to connect veterans and their families with sometimes life-changing benefits like health care, housing, education and more.
PHOTO BY ANNE STOKES

The Benefits of Service

Veterans Service Officers help vets get the support they've earned

★ by Anne Stokes

Even though he was sleeping on the downtown Stockton streets, often right outside the county veterans service office, Tom didn't want help from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). It took Veteran Service Representative Chris Thompson a few years to break through the Vietnam veteran's mistrust.

"I kept talking to him over time and eventually he did get benefits through the VA. Because of that, he was able to get housing and get off the streets," Thompson says. "Vietnam veterans in particular were not treated well when they got out of the military and because of that mistreatment they lost trust in people and the government. It's hard for some of them to trust and agree to seek out benefits."

With five years experience in the Navy, Thompson has a better understanding than most civilians of what veterans go through after their service ends. Through his work at the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office, he's able to connect veterans and their families with a wide range of VA benefits, including:

- Health care
- Housing and home loans
- Education
- Disability
- Pension and other compensations
- Employment readiness
- Life insurance
- Burial benefits

Not only are VSRs like Thompson able to connect veterans with available benefits, they're able to help them navigate the complicated federal VA and state CalVet

programs and ensure they get the full breadth of services they're eligible for through:

- Benefits counseling
- Claims preparation and submission
- Help appealing VA decisions
- Help getting vital and military records (including DD214s)

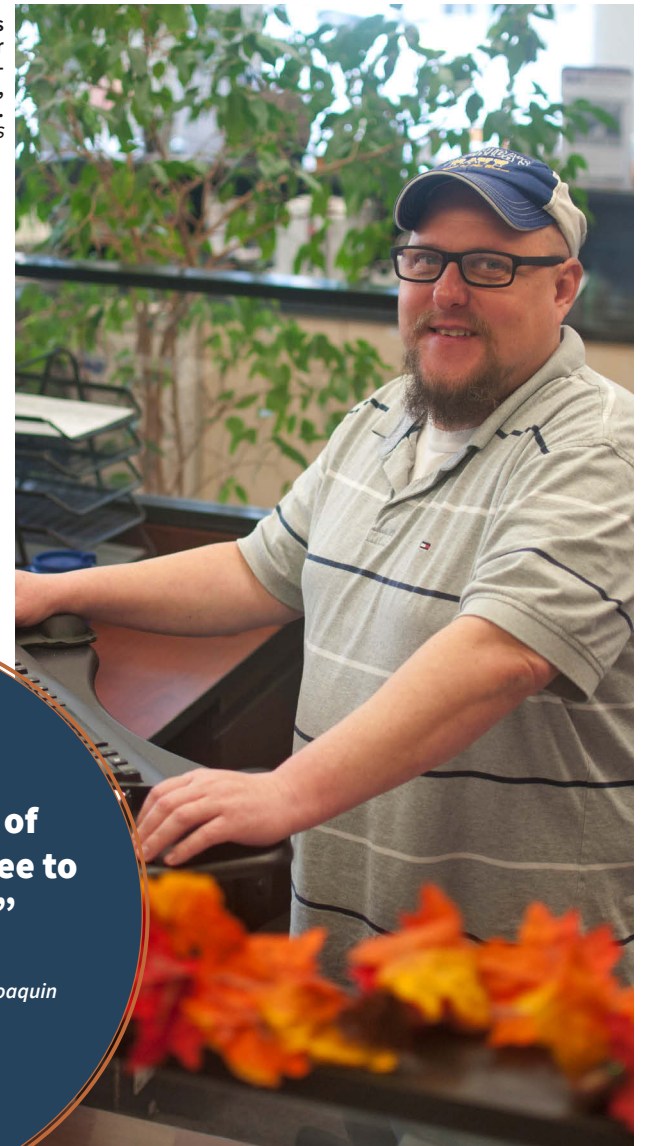
"We know who to call. Through the VA health care system, if a veteran wants hearing aids, and he just calls the VA, he may get transferred to 10 different places and still not get what he wants. We know we need to call the VA clinic and set him up with an appointment, so we have that direct route," Thompson says. "We can help reopen claims that have been denied, that's one of our most common benefits through this office."

For Tom, the first step to getting his life back on track was taking care of his health. From there, Thompson was able to help him with housing and an income through the VA.

"Once he got into the VA health care (system), he understood there are people out there who do care and who do want to help," he says. "That was the catalyst for getting him off the street."

"It's hard for some of them to trust and agree to seek out benefits."

Chris Thompson
Veteran Service Representative, San Joaquin
County Veterans Service Office



How to get help

Whether you've newly returned to civilian life or your military service ended years ago, San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office can help determine what benefits you may be eligible for, get the right documentation and apply for services and programs that can help you and your family.

- All services are by appointment, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Thursday.
- For additional information on programs, services and more, visit online at www.sjgov.org/departments/hcs/vet.
- For further questions and in-person appointments, call 209-468-2916.

Veterans Have a Friend on Campus

Delta College offers guidance, advocacy and a place to go

★ by Yecenia Nevarez-Aragon

Megan Kennedy, the Interim Veterans Resource Center Manager at San Joaquin Delta College, focuses on helping veterans and independent students, and getting them comfortable with Delta College. She explains what Delta College has to offer students:

Q: How does Delta College help students who are veterans or related to veterans?

The very first thing we do, like all schools, we process benefits through Veterans Affairs through the active military branches and through the State of California. Then, the next thing that we offer is our Veterans Center, so that's a place where they can come. They can study. They can lounge. We have a small food pantry here. They can network with each other, and we also advocate for them on campus through our relationship with other campus departments.

Q: Who is eligible to apply for the program?

Any veteran service member or dependent, which means child or spouse of a veteran or service member.

Q: When applying for the program, are there requirements to fulfill?

We have an intake form, so we just want to make sure that they do fall into one of those categories and that they are a student here.

Q: Is the application process difficult?

No, it's just one page.

Q: What are some advantages that the Delta College's Veterans program offers?

The biggest one would be advocacy. If you're a first-generation or low-income college student, it can be difficult to navigate the different programs and services that each college offers because they can be different. We have contacts for the Veterans Resource Center in every department, and we can go directly to a single person and advocate on behalf of the student for help in each department. We also are part of the VA Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program, VRRAP for short, that helps veterans who are unemployed due to COVID get retraining. It's a great program to help those who are unemployed due to the pandemic and try to get some additional training, so they become re-employable.

Q: What would be something you recommend to a student who's trying to apply?

I would recommend that they contact the Veterans Resource Center first. We have a checklist that is super helpful. It takes them step-by-step through everything that they need to do in order to become a student at Delta College, and to stay connected with the Veterans Resource Center here at Delta College.

"If you're a first-generation or low-income college student, it can be difficult to navigate the different programs and services that each college offers."

Megan Kennedy
Interim Veterans Resource Center Manager, San Joaquin Delta College

'Welcoming and safe environment'



Shane Bailey, a 70-year-old Coast Guard Veteran, went back to school after her retirement from social work. She already had her B.A. in psychology, but wanted to learn and do more.

"I consider myself a lifelong learner," she says. "I'm always either taking community courses or at a J.C., taking classes."

At San Joaquin Delta Colleges, Bailey is currently working on a degree in fashion design, with the goal of teaching sewing and crafts to children and seniors. She's also interested in studying Spanish and combining her social work skills with rehabilitative counseling. Bailey shares how Delta College's veterans program helped her:

» What advantages did Delta College's veterans program offer you?

It offered help in registering for the college because that can be such a big hassle. I did that on their computers in their center, which was less stressful, and they had someone walk me through the whole process. They have an area where you can have breakfast or get snacks when you're on campus. They had an actual pantry where they have food available. They have a program where they pay for your books. The center is really peer-connected and staff-connected. In general, it's very supportive and I think it's very needed.

» Was the program difficult to apply for?

No, the main criteria is having an honorable discharge and attending Delta College.

» What did you like about the program?

I like the connection with even the management. All of them were personable. The open-door policy is really good to have. Staff or peers were very readily available to talk to you. ... Everybody seems like they know you on a first-name basis, which makes me very comfortable. It is a welcoming and safe environment.



Q&A

with SJCVS0's Loreen Ferreira

Here to Help Veterans,
With Assist from
Community



by Andrea J. Martinez

Since being established in 1944, the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office has provided services to countless veterans by partnering with local organizations and agencies. Together, they can assist veterans through a variety of services.

Loreen Ferreira, who assists veterans at the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office, is also a mother of two veterans and daughter of one. With both professional and personal experience, she provides information about the different services to which both veterans and their families have access.

Q: What are some of the different organizations and agencies that have partnered with the San Joaquin County Veterans Services Office?

Some of the different agencies that we have partnered with are Visionary Home Builders of California, Rhodes Home Charity, WestCare, HUD-VASH, Dignity's Alcove, and Berkeley Food and Housing. There are many different ones and the list is always growing because the Veterans Service Representatives do a lot of outreach to meet the different needs of each individual.

Q: How does the office know when there are different needs that need to be addressed?

We do outreach once or twice a month. (For example), we have a service representative go to Manteca and they will meet there and learn about any needs that must be addressed and will reach out to other resources as needed.

Q: What are some examples of the services being addressed by the program?

The services offered range from housing to healthcare. We advocate for our veterans and assist them in any way we can. That can be helping them with the paperwork to file a claim or accessing healthcare, disability, and/or pension.

Q: Are the services offered by the office only applicable to veterans or do they extend to the rest of the family as well?

Our office also works with family members of veterans. We can help with accessing survivors' pensions for spouses or dependent children. We also help with the CalVet Fee Waiver, which waives the tuition and fees for the dependents of a veteran.

Q: Are the services only available for veterans residing within San Joaquin County?

No, we are able to assist any veteran that comes into our office. Actually, our Veteran Service Representatives have had the training in order to be able to assist veterans nationwide.

Q: What is the next step for someone wanting to access these services?

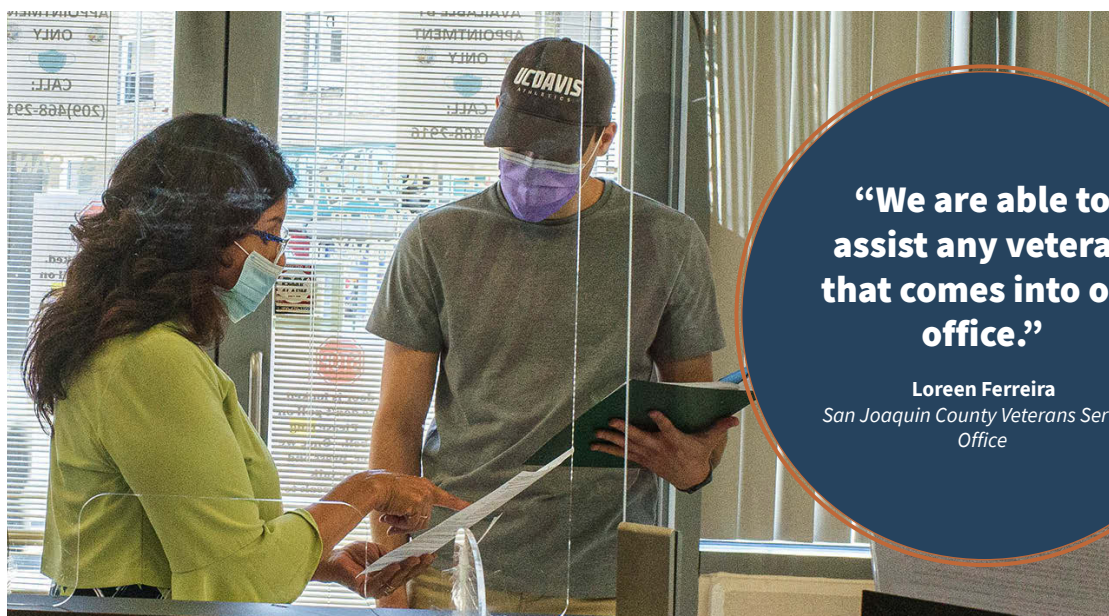
Right now, we are not doing walk-ins and are only appointment based. However, we can schedule the appointment to be over the phone or in person depending on the individual's preference. So, if they call us at 209-468-2916, we can schedule an appointment as soon as possible.

Q: Is there anything that an individual must bring or have present during these appointments?

As long as they bring in their ID, we will be able to serve them. In the case that they do not have access to their ID, we can provide them with the proper information to obtain that so we can move forward in assisting them.

Besides helping veterans as part of her job, Loreen Ferreira has personal experience as a mother of veterans and as a daughter of a veteran.

PHOTO BY KARLOS AYALA



“We are able to assist any veteran that comes into our office.”

Loreen Ferreira
San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office



We're Here to Serve You



PHOTO BY ANNE STOKES

★ Meet our team at the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office

Online or in person, the San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office is ready to help veterans and their families.

» **In-person services are available by appointment only from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays. We can assist you with:**

- Benefits
- Health care
- Employment
- Career training
- Education
- And more!



San Joaquin County Veterans Service Office
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**A salute to our community partners.
We're stronger together – thanks to you!**

- Berkeley Food and Housing
- California Department of Housing and Community Development
- CalVet
- Dignity's Alcove
- Homeless Initiatives of San Joaquin County
- HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing
- Housing Authority of the County of San Joaquin
- Rhodes Home Charity
- San Joaquin Delta College
- State of California's Veterans Housing and Homeless Prevention (VHHP)
- Visionary Home Builders of California
- WestCare