



Here to Help

Kern County Veterans Service Department

A special advertising supplement

Getting Veterans What They've Earned

Kern County helps its former servicemembers receive proper benefits

by Evan Tuchinsky

Kern County is a great place to be a veteran. Some 50,000 veterans call this county home, settling down amid 8,000 square miles of distinctive landscape.

Many honorably discharged members of the military know that benefits are available, but they don't know what these benefits are or where to begin to access them. Others think they don't qualify for or don't deserve benefits.

The Kern County Veterans Service Department is here to help, with knowledgeable staff who can help veterans get every penny of every benefit they have earned.

"Because we see about 1,500 clients a month, we know what strategies work and what strategies don't work when it comes to helping a veteran, a dependent or a survivor file for a claim," says Dick Taylor, the county's Veterans Service Officer, who serves as Director for the department.

Taylor, a Bakersfield native who served in the U.S. Marine Corps, adds that with the help of his department, veterans can reduce their likelihood of having to redo a claim. However, he understands the temptation to forgo assistance.

"I'm probably in the same boat as many vets, because I'm a DIY — do it yourself — kind of guy," he says. "But like anything in life, if you haven't done it already, you might as well use somebody who will advocate for you; and we don't charge for our service."

The Kern County Board of Supervisors established the Veterans Service Department in 1944, during World War II. Its goal remains the same today: assist veterans, their dependents and their survivors in obtaining the federal, state and local benefits that they have earned as a result of their military service.

"The American public and taxpayers have spoken and said these are the benefits we want our returning service members to be eligible for when they exit the military," Taylor points out. "For whatever reason, a lot of times people don't think in their own mind that they qualify, because maybe they didn't serve in combat or their job didn't involve a high level of danger, so they just don't pursue it."

Kern County Veterans Service Department recognizes the sacrifice of all military members and works hard to secure their benefits. Veter-



Kern County Veterans Service Officer Dick Taylor says his department's Veterans Service Representatives use their expertise to help veterans access a wide range of benefits.

PHOTO CREDIT JUAN TOBIAS, JR.

ans Service Representatives may be contacted through the department website (www.co.kern.ca.us/veterans), but they also are available to meet with veterans who walk into the office on a first-come, first-served basis.

"The track record of our office versus someone doing it on their own — we have a much higher success rate," Taylor says, "and we have a direct relationship with the VA."

BENEFITS VETERANS DESERVE

Kern County Veterans Service Department can help veterans, survivors and dependents get access to numerous benefits. Here is a sampling of areas where the department provides assistance:

- » Disability compensation claims
- » Pensions for war-era veterans
- » Pensions with aid and attendance (for veterans and spouses needing in-home support or assisted living)
- » State veterans homes
- » Educational benefits
- » College Fee Waivers (for veterans' children)
- » Enrollment with the Veterans Health Administration
- » Referral to the National Cemetery Administration
- » Other burial benefits
- » Veterans' ID cards
- » Information about veterans' license plates
- » Copies of form DD214 (separation document)

For a more comprehensive list of services, please visit the department's website, www.co.kern.ca.us/veterans.

Serving After Service

Former Marine helps others get the benefits they need

by Matt Jocks

Michael Williams is a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps who hasn't stopped serving his country. Less than a year after completing five years of active duty, including combat missions, he joined the reserve force known as Third ANGLICO — Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company — and has continued to participate in overseas operations.

In the meantime, he's pursued a college degree in occupational health and safety while working in the Kern County Probation Department and as a reserve firefighter in Bakersfield. But it's his work-study job that's shaped his immediate future.

After returning from a Third ANGLICO deployment to Afghanistan in March, Williams was hired by the Kern County Veterans Service Department. Greeting fellow veterans and assisting Veterans Service Representatives with clerical tasks proved eye-opening.

"There are tons of benefits that even I wasn't aware of, and I didn't think I was ignorant at all because I'd been through separation classes," he says. "But there's literally tons of information that the Veterans Service Representatives have; they're just so well-versed in all of it."

This knowledge helped Williams secure disability benefits after the Department of Veterans Affairs denied his initial claim, citing a lack of evidence. But Kern County Veterans Service Department succeeded when they reopened his claim with the supporting documentation required.

"The biggest way they helped me was they handled all the forms, which can be confusing in itself," Williams says. "But they also know the lingo of the VA, which the regular vet doesn't. They know [the process] from the point of view of the VA."

There are several differences between the expectations of the VA and the Marines. After service, veterans might have to fight their ingrained training to get the help they need.

There's literally tons of information that the Veterans Service Representatives have; they're just so well-versed in all of it.

Michael Williams
Veteran

After many years serving the Marines, Michael Williams assists and has benefited from the programs offered by Kern County Veterans Service Department.

PHOTO BY JUAN TOBIAS, JR.

"In the culture of the Marine Corps Infantry, you don't necessarily say that you're hurt," he says. "But if the VA is doing testing, if (you're) hurt, you have to tell the doctor."

Williams, 29, is a Bakersfield native whose family has been in the area since settlers first came to Lake Isabella. Even so, he faced challenges transitioning back to civilian life following his honorable discharge from the Marines.

But his return from the most recent deployment has gone much smoother. He currently works as Outreach Coordinator with the Kern Patriot Partnership.

"I see it as a great opportunity to help vets with something real and tangible, to get careers, because I know how tough it is," Williams says. "To have a program that's actually [working] — I'm happy to be a part of that right now."

GUIDING VETERANS TO THEIR BENEFITS

Looking at the Department of Veterans Affairs bureaucracy as a foreign land, veterans have two choices: they can venture out alone or use a guide, who can lead the way, free of charge.

Joshua Dhanens, Veterans Service Representative for the Kern County Veterans Service Department, has the map.

"Our advantage is that we do this stuff every day," Dhanens says. "We have the knowledge base of what works and what doesn't."

In dealing with the paperwork involved in filing disability and pension claims, even a sharp explorer can take a false step. And it can be costly in time and money.

"The VA is averaging six to nine months for claims," Dhanens says. "But if you have an error in your filing, it can cost up to a year."

In addition to helping avoid costly mistakes, the Veterans Service Department also opens doors. Many veterans are unaware of benefits available to them or their eligibility for specific benefits.

"The biggest benefit to coming in is that we can address each individual case instead of just going through a one-size-fits-all website," Dhanens says.

Paving the Way for Bright Futures

Air Force dad can afford four-year college for his three kids

by Matt Jocks

For many parents with children approaching college age, it can be difficult to look at those children and not see dollar signs. For Mike McCoy, it is a relief to see nothing but pride when he looks at his twins Mike and Nick and daughter Kaitlyn.

Using the California College Fee Waiver for Veterans Dependents has meant freedom for the McCoy's. Freedom from figuring out how to finance three college educations at a time when tuition, even at public institutions, can be prohibitive. Freedom to make decisions based on

education priorities instead of money. And, for the children, freedom from the prospect of long years of debt.

"I don't have an exact figure, but it's probably about \$15,000 a year," McCoy says. "It makes a big difference."

The twins are headed to Chico State University this year, while Kaitlyn is at Bakersfield College. All three are covered by the tuition waiver, leaving the McCoy's to cover housing and other expenses.

The younger Mike, who plans to major in agricultural business, says he doesn't have to look far to realize how fortunate he is.

It's such a blessing that my father, through his hard work, was able to provide this.

Nick McCoy
Beneficiary of California
College Fee Waiver



Mike McCoy's service allowed him to access benefits that could pay for the college education of his three children, Mike, Nick and Kaitlyn.

PHOTO BY JUAN TOBIAS, JR.

"I have many friends who got [accepted] to colleges," he says. "Some to Cal State colleges. But they're staying home because they can't afford to go."

Mike's father, who served four years in the Air Force and was discharged in 1984, is a rare veteran who was aware of the tuition benefit.

"I've known about it since before the boys were born," he says. He became aware of his own eligibility, through a service-connected disability, after discharge.

He says he and his wife would have found a way to get the children through, but some choices would have been difficult.

"Talking to other parents, I know a lot of them are deciding to keep their children for two years at community college," McCoy says. "My wife and I are big believers in the four-

year college experience, so I'm glad we have that freedom."

Nick, who will major in construction management with an eye toward opening his own business, says he is happy not to be forced to make some tough decisions.

"You almost start to wonder if it's worth it to be spending \$4,000 a year for four or five years, and then be done and be looking at this huge number (of a loan) that you're going to be living with the rest of your life," he says.

Nick says he might have taken a different path to get a degree (like community college) if it weren't for this benefit.

"It's such a blessing that my father, through his hard work, was able to provide this," he says.

PLANNING FOR EDUCATION

PLAN A

(Veterans whose death or total disability was service-connected)

- » Children 14-27, spouses and registered domestic partners eligible
- » No income limit
- » War-time service or campaign/ expeditionary medal required

PLAN B

(Veterans with any service-connected disability)

- » Children are the only dependents eligible
- » No age limit
- » Income of child not to exceed National Poverty Level (currently \$12,316)

PLAN C

(California National Guard who died from service-related injury or disability or suffered total disability)

- » Children and surviving spouses or registered domestic partners who have not remarried

PLAN D

(Medal of Honor recipients)

- » Recipients and children up to age 27 eligible
- » Income limits

Many veterans are unaware that they can use the tuition waiver to send their children, and sometimes their spouses, to college. There are four plans for veterans with different disabilities, service and income levels:

You're Hired

Kern Patriot Partnership connects veterans with employers

by Matt Jocks

Penny Martinez has a goal. It is to get so many veterans into jobs that she works her way out of her own.

Martinez's job is with Kern Patriot Partnership, a newly launched program designed to bring together superior local employers with veterans looking for jobs. Martinez and Special Projects Manager Neil Cadwallader are the engines behind this new program.

Working with Chevron, USA, the partnership will focus on a vital aspect of a veteran's post-service life: employment.

"Dick Taylor (Director of Kern County Veterans Service Department) saw that the department was fully loaded with the day-to-day service needs," Cadwallader says.

Taylor brought in Cadwallader, a fellow Marine with business experience, and Martinez, an Air Force veteran who had worked at Stanford University helping students and graduates with the hiring process.

Cadwallader's focus has been on the employers. Although there have been group

presentations and a website that enables online sign-ups for employers, he says he has emphasized one-on-one contact to avoid the "fire and forget" syndrome where there is only generalized information with no follow-up.

"We try to emphasize the qualities [employers] are getting when they hire veterans," he says. "These are people who have a sense of mission and a sense of accomplishment. They want to see their projects through. They also are used to working in a chain of command. They understand that they can voice their opinion, but in the end, there is a job to be done."

We try to emphasize the qualities [employers] are getting when they hire veterans.

Neil Cadwallader
Special Projects Manager,
Kern Patriot Partnership



Penny Martinez helps employers see the value of hiring veterans and helps veterans market their valuable skills as part of the Kern Patriot Partnership.

PHOTO BY JUAN TOBIAS, JR.

Martinez works mostly on the veterans' end. While the veterans have obtained varied and valuable skills, job-seeking often isn't one of them.

Many of the veterans went straight from school to service.

There are basic skills, such as putting together an effective résumé, dressing for success, interview skills and follow-ups, like a thank-you note. There is also something larger.

"The biggest challenge I have

is to draw out of them what their skills are," Martinez says. "The way they are trained to think is so process-oriented, sometimes they don't realize the skills they have that are marketable."

Kern Patriot Partnership recently placed its first employee, an airplane mechanic. More employers are signing up, their logos beginning to fill the website.

Roofing manufacturer GAF is one of them, and issued a statement: "The GAF Shafter plant is eager to partner in this new endeavor connecting skilled veterans with local job opportunities. We recognize the extraordinary contributions of our nation's veterans and appreciate this opportunity to help successfully transition veterans to the civilian workforce. We look forward to supporting our local veteran community through the Kern Patriot Partnership."

Martinez says the specific skills of veterans, as well as their ability to work in groups and to perform leadership tasks, will reward employers.

"It has been so much fun working with these young people," she says. "But I really want to work myself out of a job. I want to get them to where they will be filling these spots and they won't need my help."

MATCHING VETERANS WITH EMPLOYERS

Something for nothing is an offer that usually gets the interest of businesses, and that is what the Kern Patriot Partnership is offering local companies.

The program that matches veterans with employers looking to hire is still in its early stages. In trying to get businesses on board, Special Projects Manager Neil Cadwallader says one of the things he emphasizes is that there is no obligation for the firms that sign up.

Companies can provide links with their logos on the Kern Patriot Partnership website, allowing potential employees to come to them directly. They also can contact Kern Patriot Partnership about specific openings.

Employers can sign up at kernpatriot.org/Employer (click on Join KPP). They can reach the program by phone at 661-868-7300 or by email at info4vets@co.kern.ca.us.

WHAT IS THE AID AND ATTENDANCE BENEFIT?

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs offers pension benefits to eligible low-income veterans who are 65 or older or permanently and totally disabled and have served during a recognized period of war. The pension benefit may also be available to the widow or widower of a qualified veteran if they have not remarried.

An additional “aid and attendance” payment may be available through the pension program for a veteran or spouse who needs help with daily tasks such as bathing, dressing and eating. A similar “housebound” benefit may be available to those who are confined to their home due to a permanent disability. The funds provided through the benefit may be used to help pay for in-home care or an assisted living facility.

The Kern County Veterans Service Department is available to help with the application process.

For more information, call the department at 661-868-7300 or toll-free at 866-218-5367.

The Care She Needs

Aid and attendance pays for caregiver for ailing spouse of veteran

by Elaine Goodman

Like many families with an aging parent, Eileen Smith and her siblings struggle to take care of their elderly mother.

Eileen’s mom, 82-year-old Vern Smith, suffers from congestive heart failure and has nerve damage that makes it difficult for her to walk. She has a tendency to fall.

And so family members take turns staying overnight with Vern at her home, a converted pool house outside her son’s home. A caregiver visits on some days to handle household tasks and help Vern bathe. The situation is a strain on the family’s finances as well as their schedules.

“We all work and we all have families,” Eileen Smith says.

But since June, the family’s burden has been eased through a Department of Veterans Affairs benefit known as pension with aid and attendance. It’s available to eligible war-time veterans — and surviving spouses — who need help with daily tasks, such as dressing, bathing and eating. The Kern County Veterans Service Department helped Eileen Smith obtain the benefit for her mom.

“It really took some pressure off,” she says.

Now, the family can afford to use the in-home caregiver for Vern on a more regular basis than they could with just her Social Security benefits. The VA benefit increases her income by almost 50 percent.



Vern Smith, front left, is pictured with her daughters, clockwise from top left, Joyce Taylor, Eileen Smith, Karen Bass and Joella King. As a widow of a veteran, Vern is eligible for aid and attendance, which provides her extra funding for a caregiver in the home.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SMITH FAMILY

“**[The aid and attendance benefit] really took some pressure off.**”

Eileen Smith
Daughter of aid and attendance
benefit recipient

Alvin Smith served in the Army toward the end of World War II, guarding prisoners of war in the Philippines. He died of cancer in 1996. His illness wiped out the couple’s retirement savings.

As Vern got older, she began using a walker to get around. Even then, she still fell occasionally, sometimes ending up in the hospital. It has become more and more difficult for her to recover after each round of injury, hospitalization and rehabilitation, her daughter says.

Eileen Smith submitted an application for the pension with aid and attendance benefit in March and received the first check for her mother in June, retroactive to April. She commended the Kern County Veterans Service Department for their expertise in handling the application.

“It was such a quick process,” Eileen Smith says. “It’s been really beneficial to us.”

The additional funds will also help cover the cost of a long-term care facility, which Smith expects will become necessary because her mother will need more support as time goes on.

“These are things we know are coming,” Eileen Smith says. “We try to plan for them the best we can, so she gets the care she needs.”



We Are All Veterans

by Evan Tuchinsky

One of the biggest challenges faced by Kern County Veterans Service Department is getting past misconceptions of what “veteran” really means. Department personnel often hear the phrase “I probably don’t qualify” from veterans who would be eligible for benefits if they’d just apply.

“Many times we speak to former servicemembers who think they aren’t eligible,” says Veterans Service Officer Dick Taylor, a veteran himself. “Bottom line is every man and woman who joined the military raised their right hand and swore an oath.”

In fact, any individual who served in the military on active duty may be eligible for benefits. It’s that simple. To self-sacrificing veterans who may doubt whether they deserve their benefits, Taylor has two responses.

First, servicemembers go where they’re ordered, not where they choose. Second, veterans who file claims aren’t depriving fellow veterans of anything.

“It’s a huge commitment, a huge sacrifice, serving at the will of the Department of Defense,” Taylor says. “People admire those who serve in combat, but there are millions of people who are needed to serve in support roles to put that person on the front line, and these people are certainly deserving of eligibility and they’ve earned [benefits too] because of their service in the military.”

“**Many times we speak to former servicemembers who think they aren’t eligible. Bottom line is every man and woman who joined the military raised their right hand and swore an oath.**

Dick Taylor
Kern County Veterans Service Officer

EVEN IF YOU...

- » never served in combat
- » weren’t injured in combat
- » never left the United States
- » only served a few years
- » worked as a clerk, cook or administrator
- » are a woman
- » were stationed in a country with no conflict
- » only served during peacetime
- » are homosexual/transgender
- » ended your enlistment early
- » never picked up a weapon against an enemy
- » were injured during combat, but no one saw it happen
- » got hurt during your time off or when you weren’t on base

... YOU MAY BE ELIGIBLE FOR BENEFITS.





AN HONOR TO SERVE

Veterans, by nature, grow accustomed to moving through life without complaint. Duty, sacrifice and suffering in silence are all heroic qualities, yet also can keep veterans from receiving support they need, deserve and earn.

Kern County Veterans Service Department reaches out with open arms to the distinguished military members in our area. The department features numerous veterans who make it their mission to assist their fellow veterans.

"Everyone that works in this office truly has a servant's heart and wants to help veterans," Veterans Service Officer Dick Taylor says. "We really love to serve in that capacity; it's really a joy and an honor."

Veterans Service Department personnel often find benefits that veterans, survivors and dependents don't know they qualify for. When that happens, Taylor calls it "a high-five day" because of the special satisfaction for all.

Navigating the Department of Veterans Affairs federal system is difficult enough for trained professionals. No servicemembers need embark on this alone. Kern County Veterans Service Department has every veteran's back. Call or visit today!

Kern County Veterans Service Department

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866-218-5367 - toll free

**[www.co.kern.ca.us/
veterans](http://www.co.kern.ca.us/veterans)**

**Please contact us online or by phone
for additional service locations.**

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ASSISTANCE FOR VETERANS BY VETERANS

A Q&A with former Navy sailor and Veterans Service Representative Cynthia Wilson

Veterans Service Representative Cynthia Wilson has worked almost three years for Kern County. A Los Angeles native, she served in the U.S. Navy before joining family in the area in 1998. Calling her position "the most challenging and rewarding job that I've ever had," Wilson explains her Veterans Service duty.

What do Veterans Service Representatives do?

We assist veterans with completing and assembling their claim packages for submission to the Department of Veterans Affairs for various benefits.

How have you been able to use your knowledge of benefits to ensure veterans get all they deserve?

Having access to VA information and training gives us additional insight and understanding of how the VA uses its regulations and how it interprets the laws that govern its decisions. In turn, this allows us to explain that process to veterans. Also, since Kern County requires that all of its Veterans Service Representatives be veterans, we have an even greater understanding of what the military experience is and personal experience with the VA claims process.



After serving in the Navy, Cynthia Wilson dedicated herself to simplifying the benefits appeal process and helping veterans get what they have earned.

PHOTO BY JUAN TOBIAS, JR.

What should veterans bring with them to Veterans Service Department?

An original or certified copy of their DD214; the routing and account number for direct deposit, and recent diagnosis for any condition that they wish to claim, if at all possible. A reservist with active duty service will need to get their service treatment record from their reserve unit. If the veteran does not have the DD214, we can order a copy free of charge.

Why do you take pride in your work?

It gives me the opportunity to make a positive, and often life-changing, impact in the lives of the heroes who have given so much in the defense of the liberties and ideals that we all enjoy as citizens of the United States.

**I consider it
an honor and a
privilege to listen to
[veterans'] stories and
thank each and every
one of them.**

Cynthia Wilson
Veterans Service
Representative