



A Mission to Serve Veterans

The County of Santa Cruz Veteran's Services Office



If you or
someone
you know is a
Veteran,
READ THIS!

Veteran's Services Representative Lorena Vazquez says her job helping Veterans apply for benefits is challenging, but worth it.
PHOTO AND COVER PHOTO BY LIPO CHING

Serving Those Who Served

The County of Santa Cruz Veteran's Services Office works to get Veterans what they have earned

by Matt Jocks

One day, a young man walked into the County of Santa Cruz Veteran's Services Office (VSO) with a plastic tub full of paperwork, seeking help in filing a claim. The tub caught Veteran's Services Representative Lorena Vazquez's eye, but his words just about hit her over the head.

"He had been referred to us by another county," Vazquez recalls. "He said they told him that here in Santa Cruz, we do miracles."

Vazquez isn't quite sure that the word "miracle" applies. But after 16 years at the Veteran's Services Office, she knows how vital the Office's services are to veterans and their families.

"I like challenges," she says. "It's stressful. It's hard work. But it's so rewarding."

At the VSO, Vazquez and her co-workers are charged with helping Veterans get the benefits they have earned. Many Veterans don't know what benefits are available or how to begin the process to obtain them.

For many benefits, the process begins by filing a claim with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, a bureaucracy that can be difficult to navigate and frustrating for Veterans who need their benefits. The County of Santa Cruz VSO staff walk alongside Veterans throughout the claims process, ensuring paperwork is complete and claims are filed correctly the first time.

However, sometimes the biggest hurdle is convincing a veteran to ask for help.

"We try to encourage them that this is a benefit they have earned, not a handout," Vazquez says. "Our job is to make them feel comfortable in applying for benefits."

In working with Veterans over the years, Vazquez has come to know how to reach them. Often, discussing the importance of the benefits to family members, as opposed to themselves, helps Veterans see the value of these benefits to spouses and children.

She also knows many Veterans may feel reluctant to discuss the negative parts of their service — but that can work against them.

"You minimize those things, to be able to function," she says. "But when you're in that hearing, that's the time to open up and take those chains off your emotions."

Experience has taught Vazquez how Veterans can present their best case to the VA. And their battles become Vazquez's battles.

"When they call me and say [the claim] was granted, I just go, 'Yes!'" Vazquez says. "The easy ones are good too, but the challenging ones ... hey, they said we do miracles."

"Our job is to make [Veterans] feel comfortable in applying for benefits."

Lorena Vazquez
Veteran's Services Representative,
The County of Santa Cruz Veteran's Services Office



VETERANS BENEFITS

Information, advocacy and assistance are all available at the County of Santa Cruz Veteran's Services Office to Veterans seeking benefits.

Most Requested Benefits:

- 1 Service-connected disability compensation and pensions
- 2 Survivors' pension
- 3 Health care benefits
- 4 State college fee waiver for children (and sometimes spouses)

Other Benefits:

- Driver's license
- Burial benefits
- GI Bill education benefits
- State and federal parks recreation passes

They Made the Call

How the County of Santa Cruz Veteran's Services Office helped change three people's lives

as told to Matt Jocks

Peter Mehrten

AGE: 63
CITY: Santa Cruz
MILITARY BRANCH: Army



What did the County of Santa Cruz VSO do for you?

Like a lot of Vietnam-era Vets, I stayed away from the VA. I had a very independent life. I ran my own

business. But things got untenable because of my medical condition. My condition, angioneurotic edema urticaria, causes my throat, tongue, eyes, ears, hands and feet to swell three to four times normal size. When it's bad, I feel like I can't go out in public because I literally scare children.

How has the VSO impacted your life?

I saw Sheila Challberg. The work they did for me was so good. I got denied by the VA for a disability pension quickly the first time. She worked with me and we reapplied and two months later, I got my award letter. They really know their stuff. It has really changed my life. I have no worries now that I can't handle.



Dr. Cynthia Loubier

AGE: 64
CITY: Lititz, PA
FATHER'S MILITARY BRANCH: Army, Air Force

What did the County of Santa Cruz VSO do for you?

[Following the death of my father], the Santa Cruz VSO assisted me in investigating whether my father's medical conditions, which arose during his service, warranted DIC (Dependency Indemnity Compensation) benefits for my mother.

How has the VSO impacted your life?

The Santa Cruz VSO agent was instrumental in facilitating proper application and petitioning for DIC benefits. The agent who helped us was very knowledgeable about benefits and about the requirements. She was also respectful of my father's service and kind in her work with my mother and me. I could not have asked for a better experience, given the stress of parental end-of-life situations.

Chris Barnard

AGE: 23
CITY: Santa Cruz
FATHER'S MILITARY BRANCH: Navy



What did the County of Santa Cruz VSO do for you?

My dad was in the Navy for more than 20 years and Veteran's Services told us about the California tuition waiver. I went in a couple of times and

they facilitated everything for us and made sure all the forms were filled out properly.

How has the VSO impacted your life?

It's made a huge difference. This is going to allow me to come out of college at UC Santa Cruz without a lot of debt. It's great to have that worry off my shoulders. I've gotten a real passion for what I'm studying (Environmental Studies/ Agricultural Ecology) and now, I am looking at grad schools.



REQUIRED DOCUMENTS

Documentation requirements vary depending on the benefit, but the following items will facilitate all claims processes:

- Valid photo ID
- Bank statements
- DD 214: Certificate of Release or Discharge
- Formal documents (e.g. summary of medical expenses and documents related to assets such as stocks and bonds)
- Death certificate (where applicable)



ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

Disability Compensation

Disability compensation is available to Veterans who the VA determines were disabled by an injury or illness that was incurred or aggravated during active military service.

Pension

Eligibility for pension benefits is connected to wartime eras and does NOT require service in combat theaters. The recognized eras are: World War II, Korean conflict, Vietnam and the Gulf War.

NEED HELP? WE'RE READY.

How to contact the County of Santa Cruz Veteran's Services Office

IN PERSON:

842 Front St., Santa Cruz
18 West Beach St., Watsonville

BY PHONE:

831-454-7276

BY EMAIL:

Sheila.Challberg@santacruzcounty.us

BY FAX:

831-458-7116

ONLINE:

santacruzvets.com



A Good Day to Be a Vet

Wednesday Veterans Service Day
delivers resources to those in need

by Matt Jocks



Dr. Jean Lighthall of the Palo Alto VA says Veterans Service Day brings medical care to Veterans who may face barriers to getting to a doctor on their own.
PHOTO BY CHIP HOLLEY

The County of Santa Cruz Veteran's Services Office and the next-door Veterans Hall are bustling on Wednesdays. That's when Veterans, often more than 100 strong, can get medical attention, housing assistance, employment services and a chance to participate in a substance-abuse group, all in the same place. For some vets, it's a chance to have a hot lunch or visit a food pantry. For others, it's a way to know their community cares about them.

"The idea is for it to be a one-stop shop," says Dean Kaufman, a Veterans advocate who helps run the weekly event. "We want to help create a web of support so they don't fall through the cracks."

Veterans Service Day welcomes all Veterans. For Kaufman, a Gulf War Veteran, it comes down to two words: "Overcoming barriers."

The main draw on Wednesdays is medical care provided by staff from the Palo Alto VA, who serve Veterans each week until 3 p.m.

"We're the main medical care for the homeless vets," says Dr. Jean Lighthall. "They all may officially have primary care physicians, but they just don't make it to them. Having this site offers convenience, but it's also a very welcoming atmosphere."

And the Veterans aren't the only ones who benefit.

"It can be a difficult population to work with," Dr. Lighthall says, "but to know that this may be the only place they get the attention they need, it makes it very rewarding."