



**Statement of Richard Valdez**  
Past State Commander  
DAV Department of California

Before the  
**House Committee on Veterans' Affairs**

Hearing on  
**The VA West Los Angeles Campus Master Plan and  
the National Center for Warrior Independence  
May 13, 2026**

Chairman Bost, Ranking Member Takano, and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of DAV (Disabled American Veterans), Department of California (DAV-CAL), I appreciate the opportunity to testify before the Committee. My testimony addresses the challenges and opportunities to expand and strengthen programs, services, and facilities for homeless veterans at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) West Los Angeles campus. DAV-CAL is a state-chartered organization founded in 1922. It operates independently from the national DAV organization while supporting the same mission of fulfilling our promises to the men and women who served.

Aiding our fellow veterans is the core mission of DAV-CAL. We help fulfill our nation's promises to veterans by funding and managing a variety of assistance programs. We employ Department Service Officers who, over the past two years, have helped more than 2,800 veterans file claims for VA benefits. DAV-CAL also connects service-injured veterans with job training programs, employers, hiring events, and other employment resources.

DAV-CAL provides disaster and emergency relief to veterans' families in need, including those affected by the Palisades and Altadena fires. We also regularly hold food and clothing drives for impoverished veteran families and veterans experiencing homelessness. DAV-CAL works with community organizations and private businesses to develop resources that support additional programs, including recreational and therapeutic art programs. DAV-CAL also operates a veterans transportation network, which I will discuss below. Importantly, all our services and assistance are provided free of charge to veterans.

Mr. Chairman, my journey to becoming a Marine and a lifelong veteran advocate began, unbeknownst to me at the time, when I was a little boy sitting on neighbors' porches listening to their World War I stories. Later, I listened to my brothers and their friends talk around a backyard

fire about their World War II and Korean War experiences. It was not until I experienced my own war in Vietnam that I came to understand the full price paid by those who serve.

My military career began in February 1966, when I enlisted in the Marine Corps under a delayed-entry program while I was still in high school. After graduating from Fermin Lasuen High School in San Pedro, California, I reported to Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego in July 1966 and graduated as a private first class in September 1966. After infantry training and completion of my primary MOS school, I was assigned to a unit preparing to make a landing in Vietnam.

On January 5, 1967, my comrades and I boarded the USNS General Nelson M. Walker and departed the next day for Vietnam, arriving on January 24, 1967. We were flown to Chu Lai, where we joined the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division. The next day, the battalion boarded trucks and convoyed to Quang Ngai, our jump-off point for Operation DeSoto near Duc Pho farther south. Although my MOS was cook, my training led to my assignment as a machine gunner on the battalion's Quick Reaction Force.

I was shot in the knee on the 45th day of the operation, suffered severe damage, and spent three months recovering at the Naval Hospital on Guam. When I learned that I might be transported back to the United States for continued rehabilitation, I requested to return to my unit in Vietnam, and that request was accepted. I later extended my tour in December 1967 and returned just as the Tet Offensive was getting underway. I remained in-country until I rotated back to the United States in October 1968. In addition to my knee wound, I suffered back damage during a mortar attack. I completed my service at Marine Corps Air Station Tustin and was honorably discharged in July 1969. During my time in the Marine Corps, I was awarded the Purple Heart and the Combat Action Ribbon.

After my discharge, I thought I was ready to enter the civilian workforce. My first five months were a rocky start, but in 1970 I shifted course and began a career that lasted more than three decades in the aerospace and defense industries. Beginning in the stockroom, I advanced to increasingly responsible positions, including computer operator, business manager, government contracts administrator, and technical and threat analyst on classified Sensitive Compartmented Information (SCI) defense contracts.

After I retired in 2003, I felt something was not right and began seeing a VA doctor, not only for my physical disabilities but also because I realized I needed mental health treatment. That is when I first learned how much DAV could help me receive the benefits I had earned through my service. Working with DAV service officers, I applied for and was awarded service connection for my knee and back injuries, as well as for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related to my time in Vietnam and the psychological impact of those injuries and other incidents, including the rocket and mortar attacks I had survived.

During this period, I learned about and started going to a VA Vet Center for peer support with my fellow Vietnam veterans. I was struck by how much that experience reminded me of sitting by the fire listening to my brothers and their friends talk about their own war experiences. This was the start of my new career in veteran volunteerism.

I became active with San Bernardino DAV Chapter 12, where I later served as Chapter Commander from 2011 to 2013. For many years, I also served as a volunteer Chapter Service Officer, helping disabled veterans prepare claims for injuries and illnesses connected to their military service. I also spent one year volunteering for the San Bernardino County Department

of Military and Veteran Affairs. Through that experience, I came to believe that many struggling veterans needed a place of their own—a place where they could gather and be among fellow veterans. That belief led me to develop a plan and negotiate with the city for a parcel of land to create a Veterans Wellness Garden. I am proud to say that, 15 years later, it is still serving veterans and their families. This experience later motivated me to become involved in the effort to develop a veteran community on the VA West LA campus.

I also became more involved with the DAV Department of California (DAV-CAL), eventually serving as State Commander from 2013 to 2014. After that, I served as DAV-CAL Legislative Director from 2014 to 2019 and as the Judge Advocate during the same period. I have also served on various committees of the national DAV organization dealing with legislation and charitable grants.

Mr. Chairman, the Committee has asked about the oil lease arrangement that helped support DAV-CAL's veteran transportation program at the West LA campus. Although I was not directly involved in negotiating or managing those agreements, I can provide background on the arrangement and how the resulting transportation program operated. I will also provide background on the West LA master plan, its laudable goals, the obstacles that have blocked its implementation, and what must be done now to make this dream a reality.

For more than a decade, DAV-CAL has supported efforts to expand housing and services for homeless veterans at the West LA campus. I have organized or participated in dozens of stand downs and other events to provide services and assistance to veterans, particularly those who were impoverished, vulnerable, homeless, or at risk of becoming homeless. I also volunteered to help conduct point-in-time counts for San Bernardino County to help officials understand the scale of veteran homelessness. Given my personal commitment and the DAV-CAL mission, I closely followed developments related to the *Valentini v. Shinseki* lawsuit, which led to a January 2015 settlement agreement requiring the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System (VAGLAHS) to develop a master plan to assist veterans experiencing homelessness at the VA West LA campus.

In February 2015, during national DAV's annual Mid-Winter Conference in Washington, D.C., I had the opportunity to meet with then-VA Secretary Bob McDonald to discuss the importance of incorporating veterans' and veterans service organizations perspectives during development of the master plan. In that conversation, Secretary McDonald asked me to help his Special Assistant for West LA by organizing VSO leaders in California, primarily in the greater Los Angeles service area. That group became known as the VSO Coalition, which I chaired along with the American Legion State Commander as co-chair. The West LA VA Draft Master Plan was released for public comment in October 2015, and I was pleased to draft comments that DAV-CAL submitted to VA in December 2015.

Throughout 2016, I remained actively involved with fellow VSO leaders and other stakeholders who provided input to VA and Congress on how to implement the West LA Campus Master Plan. In September 2016, Congress passed, and the President signed, the West Los Angeles Leasing Act of 2016. The law supported implementation of the West LA Master Plan, with a focus on ensuring that leases of VA property principally benefited veterans, their families, and especially the homeless veterans who would eventually be housed on the campus.

During 2016 and 2017, as greater scrutiny was placed on whether leases at West LA were benefiting veterans, VA was negotiating with the Bureau of Land Management and Breitburn Operating LP, an oil and energy company interested in restarting oil drilling operations from a

parcel of land on the West LA campus. VA officials proposed requiring Breitburn to donate 2.5% of its oil royalties each month to DAV-CAL to support transportation services for veterans to and from the West LA campus. DAV-CAL was well known at West LA for its veterans transportation network, which provided free rides for veterans to and from medical appointments at VA facilities.

Mr. Chairman, as I am sure you know, the national DAV Transportation Network is the largest program of its kind for veterans in the nation. The program is primarily operated by individual DAV Departments in each state, including California, and has more than 3,400 volunteer drivers at VA medical centers across the country. During FY 2025, DAV volunteers across all 50 states donated more than 614,000 hours transporting veterans to VA medical appointments. In total, DAV volunteer drivers logged more than 9.6 million miles and provided more than 230,000 rides to VA appointments, saving taxpayers more than \$21.3 million.

DAV-CAL employs hospital service coordinators at several VA medical facilities in the state, including West LA. These coordinators arrange transportation for veterans traveling to and from appointments, including community care appointments. Since 2018, DAV-CAL volunteer drivers have provided more than 112,000 hours of service, transporting 84,000 veterans more than 1.8 million miles at no cost. DAV-CAL also purchases and donates vehicles to California VA medical centers for use in transporting veterans.

In March 2017, VA and Breitburn signed an amendment and extension of the revocable lease to resume oil drilling operations from land at the West LA campus for an additional 10 years. Although DAV-CAL was not a signatory to that agreement, it included a provision requiring Breitburn to donate a 2.5% royalty each month to the DAV-CAL. Those funds were to be used “...solely for the purpose of providing transportation to Veterans on and around the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System.” Following further discussions and negotiations, VA and DAV-CAL signed a Donation Agreement in September 2017 authorizing the acceptance and use of Breitburn donations, which were to be used “...to provide transportation services to Veterans and their families to and from the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System campus [West LA].” VA’s emphasis on transportation was considered critical to making the future West LA campus and its services fully accessible for veterans who lived on or off the campus.

DAV-CAL and VA agreed that a sound use of the donated funds would be to expand transportation services for non-ambulatory veterans, particularly those who use wheelchairs, through a third-party transportation vendor. In October 2019, after consulting with VA officials, DAV-CAL contracted with ButterFLi Technologies, a Los Angeles-based company that provided medical transportation for both ambulatory and non-ambulatory individuals. This new service transported veterans to appointments at VA West LA, VA Sepulveda, and the Wilshire Federal Building, where the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Regional Office was located.

Just months after this program began operating, COVID-19 struck the nation in early 2020. During the pandemic, VA suspended all volunteer transportation programs nationwide beginning in April 2020. Fortunately, the contracted ButterFLi program was allowed to continue transporting veterans to medical appointments at West LA and Sepulveda, providing an especially valuable service during the pandemic. COVID-19 restrictions were lifted in late 2022, and DAV-CAL was able to restart its volunteer transportation program.

In October 2022, after consultation with VA officials at West LA, DAV-CAL modified its contract with ButterFLi from a fixed-route program to an on-demand program that could meet a wider variety of veteran needs, particularly for disabled veterans who used wheelchairs or had other

mobility challenges. This program continued through April 2024, when DAV-CAL notified all parties that it was ending the program, stopping the donations from Breitburn, and ending the contract with ButterFLi.

In total, DAV-CAL received approximately \$897,000 in royalty-funded donations and disbursed approximately \$907,000 on veteran transportation services through this program. This included approximately \$667,000 for contracted transportation services through ButterFLi and approximately \$240,000 for the purchase of vehicles. In addition, during this period, DAV-CAL spent more than \$300,000 of its operating budget for hospital service coordinators who worked with veterans to arrange their rides. That amount does not include other DAV-CAL staff time and resources used to manage and oversee these programs.

Although the ButterFLi transportation program was ended, DAV-CAL's veteran transportation network continues to serve both West LA and Sepulveda. Over the past two years, vehicles operated by DAV-CAL have transported thousands of Los Angeles area veterans hundreds of thousands of miles to and from medical appointments.

DAV-CAL also remains interested and engaged in the effort to establish a true home and community for thousands of homeless veterans at the West LA campus, as envisioned in the master plan. The executive order issued in May 2025 to create a National Center for Warrior Independence has put new emphasis on—and, I hope, momentum behind—this decade-long effort. DAV-CAL's transportation network would be a critical support for veterans seeking housing, treatment, and community reintegration at the National Center for Warrior Independence. To be successful, however, veterans and veteran stakeholders must be at the center of all discussions and decisions regarding implementation of this plan. The DAV Department of California stands ready to play whatever role is necessary to finally see this dream realized.

For the men and women who have served and suffered following their service, there is no more time to waste. They answered the call when our nation needed them. Now we must answer the call by providing the housing, programs, services, and community they have earned through their service.

Mr. Chairman, that concludes my testimony. I would be pleased to answer any questions you or members of the Committee may have.