

U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Veterans' Affairs  
Health Subcommittee Hearing  
Ventura County Office of Education, July 30, 2018  
Testimony of Mike McManus, Veterans Service Officer  
Ventura County Human Services Agency

Good morning, Chairman Dunn, Ranking Member Brownley, and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to provide information to the Committee regarding long term care options to Southern California veterans through the Greater Los Angeles Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Healthcare System.

My name is Mike McManus and I am the County of Ventura, Veteran Services Officer. My staff and I connect fellow veterans, their dependents, and survivors with federal and state veterans' benefits and local resources. One of our primary responsibilities is connecting veterans with VA disability compensation for such conditions as Post Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and for conditions resulting from physical injury while in the military. We also assist veterans to enroll in VA health care and refer to local and regional care resources.

The Veteran Services Office has five accredited personnel who interview veterans, file the appropriate benefit claim, advocate on behalf of the veteran, and make needed referrals to other service providers. We also have support staff that enable us to meet client needs. The Veteran Services Office has conducted a variety of out reach activities to inform the veteran community about benefits, to include VA health care. The office currently operates out of the main office and 10 field offices to make it as convenient as possible for veterans to meet us. We partner with a variety of organizations helping connect veterans to earned benefits and services. One primary source of partnership is through the Veteran Collaborative of Ventura County, which is led by the Veteran Services Office. The VSO is reaching more veterans than ever before. In Fiscal Year 12/13 the office saw 3,572 people, however, by Fiscal Year 17/18 office staff assisted 6,764 people (source: VetPro). In FY 12/13 the Veteran Services Office connected county veterans with over 8.75 million dollars in federal benefit payments, but by FY 16/17 (latest year stats available), those benefit payments totaled over 11.5 million dollars (source: 2018 California Association of County Veteran Service Officer Annual Report).

I am a retired United States Air Force Senior Master Sergeant. I spent the last seven years of my 20 years in the military as a First Sergeant with one deployment for Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. As a First Sergeant I had overall supervision over all enlisted personnel with my units. I advised the unit commanders on all matters affecting their enlisted force to include issues involving mental & physical health and substance abuse, and those conditions that might impact service members, their families, their career, and the unit.

I've been the County's Veteran Services Officer since January 2010. My staff and I and partners such as the Ventura County Area Agency on Aging, assist Ventura County veterans needing long term care. There are a variety of options available to veterans, provided they are enrolled in VA health care and are made aware of the various program options. Usually, the veteran would start by seeing their primary care provider and social worker at the Oxnard Community Based Outpatient Clinic.

Ventura County has over 40,000 veterans, thousands more National Guard, Air National Guard, and Reserve personnel who may over time be eligible for VA long term care. Approximately 22,000 Ventura County veterans served in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam and range in age from 65 up. In addition to the typical ailments of aging, over 4,100 of these veterans also have chronic injuries from military service.

In essence you have tens of thousands of veterans in Ventura County and many of these will need some form of long term care. I feel there is a large unmet need in the community due to misperceptions by veterans and lack of information from the VA. My staff and I have spoken with countless veterans who thought Medicare, Tricare, and/or the VA would provide for their long term care needs. They aren't aware that Medicare provides very little long term care, Tricare much less, and the VA only if the veteran is eligible, typically 70 percent service connected or higher. As outreach to the military/veteran community increases from organizations such as the Ventura County Veteran Services Office and the Veteran Collaborative of Ventura County the number of veterans seeking services increases and we can better education them on realistic options.

In addition to veteran misperceptions, there is a lack of information provided to veterans regarding VA long term care options. There are a variety of options viable to veterans, including:

- VA nursing home care on the campus of the Greater LA Medical Center, care through one of the community nursing homes the VA contracts with such as Coastal View Health Care Center in Ventura and Shoreline Care Center in Oxnard, and care in one of the California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet) Veterans Homes that provides memory and/or skilled nursing care. The Homes are a wonderful experience for the veterans living there, however, most California veterans will not have the opportunity due to lack of beds.

Typically, a vet must be 70% service connected or higher to be eligible for VA nursing home care. Many veterans assume they're eligible once enrolled in VA health care, but that's not the case. Only four percent (4%) of Ventura County veterans have a service connected rating of 70% or higher.

- In some cases, the veteran turns to Medi-Cal to provide nursing home or health care aid. In this case, the Veteran Services Office will refer the veteran to a county Human Services Agency Community Service Center for information and enrollment. We will do what we can to connect a veteran with their VA benefit, but in some cases the veteran is ineligible for VA health care (e.g. Other Than

- Honorable Discharge), is not 70% service connected for injuries from service, or the veteran simply decides not use the VA for personal reasons.
- A veteran's VA primary care provider may also request a veteran's use of the Homemaker and Home Health Aide Care program, which use an organization that has a contract with the VA. A Homemaker or Home Health Aide can be used as a part of an alternative to nursing home care, and as a way to get respite care at home for veterans and their family caregiver. This program can help keep a veteran in their home.
  - Ventura County is blessed to have Oxnard Family Circle providing adult day health care for veterans. They provide skilled services from nurses, therapists & social workers, case management and help with activities of daily living. This vital program provides much needed respite care for a family caregiver. This program can help keep a veteran in their home.
  - There are several hospice providers in the county assisting veterans such as Livingston Memorial Visiting Nurse Association and Vitas. We've routinely heard positive comments about these two service providers as they assist veterans and their families at end of life. Hospice providers not only comfort the veteran, but refer to the Veteran Services Office so we can speak with the veteran or a family member about VA benefits. Many times, this is the first time such a discussion has occurred.
  - The above programs come from the Veterans Healthcare Administration (VHA), but now I want to mention a benefit provided by the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), that can help veterans. Aid & Attendance (A&A) is a monthly amount paid in addition to either disability compensation or pension when the veteran requires the aid of another person in order to perform essential functions of daily living, or they are bedridden, or are a patient in a nursing home, or who are limited to a corrected 5/200 visual acuity or less in both eyes. The A&A benefit can be used by the veteran to pay for a care giver to enter their home or to help pay the cost of living in an assisted living facility. This benefit is helpful, but by no means covers the cost of care.

The Veteran Services Office and our many partners will continue to assist our veterans. However, I feel the VA should counsel every veteran that is 70% service connected or higher on his or her long term care options. Ideally, this would be done via local town hall meetings so veterans can address specific circumstances with VHA representatives well versed in the many VA programs.

The VA should also educate veteran service organizations on VA long term care programs so they can assist in counseling veterans on their options.

I also feel the VA should expand their community partnerships with adult day health care provides to prolong veterans in their own homes and to provide respite for their care givers.

I'd like to thank Chairman Dunn and Ranking Member Brownley for this opportunity.

Points of contact from organizations reference above:

Ventura County Area Agency on Aging, Victoria Jump at 805 477-7300

Coastal View Health Care Center, Jill at 805 642-0156

Shoreline Care Center, Mike Frasier at 805 746-9681

Oxnard Family Circle, Katy Krul at 805 385-4180

Livingston Memorial Visiting Nurse Association, Diana Davis at 805 509-9280

Vitas, David Mack at 805 437-2100