

## **Solano VA Expands Outreach, Remains One-Stop-Shop for Benefits**

The Solano County VA is a popular one-stop-shop for advice and information for our veteran community. As the demand for services continues to grow, we've expanded our outreach efforts to ensure the high quality programming reaches veterans looking to gain access.

In 2013 our offices filed more than 4,000 claims. Those claims generated more than \$20 million in Federal tax dollars to Solano County. That's money that goes directly into the pockets of our veterans and their families in the form of benefits, programs and services.

We are committed to providing the services veterans have come to expect, including college tuition assistance, outreach to the elderly and widowed, and those looking for benefit assistance when leaving the service.

We are also working to broaden our outreach efforts, including the Missing in America Project, treatment for the incarcerated, and expanding our presence at the Mare Island office with a new, highly qualified volunteer representative.

The following is a description of our new outreach programs. These new and expanded services have already yielded some pretty significant results – directly benefitting veterans and their families living in Solano County.

### **Missing in America Project**

Michael McKay, our Missing in American Project (MIAP) coordinator, is working with the Solano County Coroner's Office to identify and properly bury the remains of veterans who have served honorably but have not been buried properly until now. This new outreach program has already identified the remains of 12 local veterans (in the first month) and will properly bury them this fall at the National Cemetery in Dixon.

### **Incarcerated Veterans**

We realize many of our incarcerated veterans have physical and/or mental health issues, and will likely need assistance once they are released. As a response, our office started reaching out to the jail system, working with the courts, DA, Public Defender and Sheriff's Office to try and get veterans out of custody and into treatment programs. Treatment is a recipe for success and saves tax payer dollars while helping reduce recidivism rates among this special population who served our country honorably at one time.

### **Services Provided at Mare Island**

Cheryl Cook volunteers her time two half-days a week at a satellite office in Vallejo, helping veterans gain access to VA benefits and services at Mare Island. Having another person at our VA extension, especially one with more than 20 years of running the County VA in San Francisco, significantly increases the number of veterans we can see in any given year.

In addition to our expanded outreach efforts, we remain committed to providing veterans with the services they have come to expect, including the following programs.

### **Tuition Assistance for Students**

Our office processes between 1,500 and 2,000 college fee waivers every year as part of the College Fee Waiver Program. This program gives veterans and their children the opportunity to attend any public

institution of higher learning with most (or all) of their tuition waived, saving veterans and their families tens of thousands of dollars over the life of the dependent's college career.

### **The Elderly and Widowed**

One of our primary target audiences is the elderly and widowed. We conduct weekly outreach efforts to inform these groups of programs and services that may not be well known but have substantial benefits. One such program is the Veterans Pension with Aid and Attendance program, designed for war time veterans who are low income and cannot care for themselves. Our office works with this population, reaching out to care facilities throughout Solano County, ensuring all veteran clients that want it, have access to these pension benefit programs.

### **Veterans Seeking Benefits after Discharge**

We spend a good deal of time working to connect veterans to the benefits they have rightfully earned by serving our country. Most of these benefits involve injuries and conditions that started while in the service. Bill Alcares, our senior veteran's representative, is at Travis AFB three days a week at the Family Readiness Center to help discharging veterans file claims – even before they leave the service.

At the Solano County VA, we encourage all veterans and their families to take advantage of our services. If you have any questions about the programs and services mentioned in this article, please give us a call or stop by our offices. We are open 9 a.m. – 12 p.m. and 1 p.m. – 4 p.m., Monday – Friday and look forward to helping you soon.

*Ted Puntillo is Director of Veteran's Services for Solano County. Reach him at (707) 784-6590 or [tepuntillo@SolanoCounty.com](mailto:tepuntillo@SolanoCounty.com). The Solano County Veteran's Services Office, 675 Texas St. in Fairfield, is open from 9 a.m. to noon and 1 to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday.*