



The COMMUNICATOR is the official publication of the California Association of County Veterans Service Officers (CACVSO). Opinions expressed are those of contributing writers and do not necessarily reflect opinions or policies of CACVSO officers, members, or the editorial staff. The newsletter reserves the right to edit, amend, or reject any contribution submitted for publication.

For article submissions, email:
david.west@co.nevada.ca.us

Fair use notice: *This document contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. Such material is made available in an effort to advance understanding of environmental, political, human rights, economic, democracy, scientific, social justice issues, etc. It is believed that this constitutes a 'fair use' of any such copyrighted material as provided for in section 107 of the US Copyright Law. In accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107, this material is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving similar information for research and educational purposes. For more information go to: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.shtml>. If you wish to use copyrighted material for purposes of your own that go beyond 'fair use', you must obtain permission from the copyright owner.*

Hello CACVSO Members!

As I am writing this, our office has just begun a partial reopen with appointments available Monday through Thursday. I know that many of your counties are in different stages of protection and reopening, and many different opinions exist about how to approach this COVID19 virus. Nevertheless, I am very proud and appreciative of the efforts of our executive board and committee chairs in keeping this association moving forward. I have had to rely on a lot of you to make quick changes, resolve conflicts and make improvements in many different areas. Thank you!

I also want to recognize the hard work of our new Executive Director and Education Consultants. Both Marion and Katrina have jumped in and gotten right to work on association matters. We as members are in a much better place having their support and leadership. Of course, our consultants Jack Kirwan and Reeb & Associates have not skipped a beat when dealing with statewide issues, so thank you to them as well.

I wish to highlight our legislative committee. Ted Puntillo is the chair and leads all of our association's efforts in supporting state laws and funding that affect our association and the Veterans that we serve. If you have any interests regarding legislation, please direct them to Ted and the legislative committee members. I want to thank Ted and his members for their contributions to this important matter.

Until next month, please keep yourselves healthy and safe. I honor all of the work that you do, thank you!

Nathan D. Johnson
President

This Month's Featured County

Nevada County is a small rural county situated north of Sacramento and surrounded by the Placer, El Dorado, and Plumas counties. The county has 9,585 Veterans who live across a 974-square-mile region that spans from the foothills, over the Sierra Nevada's and extending east to the California/Nevada border. The county was formed in 1851, following the explosion of expansion in the region due to the 1849 Gold Rush. The Nevada Theatre, built in 1865 in Nevada City, is the oldest theatre in California and once famously hosted Mark Twain. Nevada County is home to the Empire Mine Historic State Park, which is the site of one of the oldest, deepest, and richest gold mines in California. In operation for more than 100 years, the mine extracted 5.8 million ounces of gold before it closed in 1956.



VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

News Release

Office of Public Affairs
Media Relations

Washington, DC 20420
(202) 461-7600
www.va.gov

VA offers debt relief to Veterans through year's end

July 9, 2020, 12:26:00 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) today announced its commitment to extend debt relief to Veterans adversely impacted by COVID-19 to the end of 2020 by suspending certain debt collection actions.

The department recognizes Veterans and beneficiaries are still being greatly impacted by the coronavirus prompting the extension of financial relief.

“Veterans and their families should be focused on their health and safety during the pandemic,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “VA is taking action to give those with pending debts greater flexibility during these challenging times.”

VA is suspending all actions on Veteran debts under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Treasury Department. This includes the suspension of collection action or extending repayment terms on preexisting VA debts, whichever the Veteran prefers.

For benefit debts, Veterans should contact the VA Debt Management Center at 1-800-827-0648.

For health care debts, Veterans should contact the Health Resource Center at 1-866-400-1238 or <https://www.pay.gov> for payments.

California County Veterans Service Officers

Legislation and State Budget Update

By: Seth Reeb - Reeb Government Relations

Barstow Veterans Home

Budget Subcommittee in the Senate and Assembly heard and considered the Newsom proposal to Close the Barstow Veterans Home on May 21. Both subcommittees agreed that there was insufficient information to justify closure, and there needs to be a detailed plan and stakeholder involvement before considering closure.

The proposed closure of the Barstow Veterans Home was rejected by the Legislature in June, after strong pushback from Veteran Organizations, the community, and several Legislators. As you will see below, the budget requires stakeholder input before the Legislature will consider approving that closure.

The budget for FY 2020-21 included a requirement for stakeholder input. The Department of Veterans Affairs has been directed to provide a report to the Legislature by February 1, 2021, on its proposed plan for the Barstow Veterans Home.

1. A detailed transition plan that ensures that no residents of the home are involuntarily discharged without being provided alternate placement options as part of any transition efforts, and includes the estimated number and timing of any transfer of residents, changes in staffing, and any relocation of jobs to nearby veterans homes.
2. A plan to support staff during any proposed changes.
3. An estimate of the cost and programmatic impacts of the plan for the home on the department's Veterans Homes system.
4. Options for expansion of the home's skilled nursing facility as recommended in the 2020 Master Plan.
5. Options for conversion of the home's intermediate care facility into a residential care facility for the elderly as recommended in the 2020 Master Plan.
6. An option for full closure of the home.
7. A summary of the options discussed, and feedback received, at the stakeholder meetings as well as any outcomes and or deliverables as a result of the stakeholder meetings.

Orange County Veterans Cemetery

Department of Veterans Affairs suffered budget cuts in the face of a massive state budget deficit due to the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2019-2020 budget appropriated \$20.4 million to the Southern California Veterans Cemetery Master Development Fund. The monies appropriated were to be used to conduct a study and the development of the new cemetery—\$700,000 to be used for the study of two prospective locations in Orange County, Irvine area. The 2020-2021 budget removes that appropriation and instead now appropriates \$700 thousand to conduct a study of the two sites.

Legislation

Before the coronavirus, we had been tracking over 50 veteran-related bills for the second year of the 2019-2020 legislative year. Because of the pandemic, the Legislature had to shelve many of its bills in order to deal with the post coronavirus recovery. CACVSO has taken a position on 13 of the active bills that continue making their way through the legislative process.



The Legislature will return from summer recess on July 27. The Legislature will have until August 31 to pass legislation and, the Governor will have until September 30 to sign or veto bills.

End of year legislative calendar

July 27 —Legislature reconvenes from Summer Recess

August 31 —Last day for each house to pass bills Final recess begins upon adjournment

September 30 —Last day for Governor to sign or veto bills passed by the Legislature

November 3 —General Election

Dec. 7 —12 Legislature reconvenes for 2021–22 Regular Session

Key bills being tracked:

[AB 240](#) ([Irwin](#) D) **Veterans’ homes: lease of property.**
Position Support

[AB 694](#) ([Irwin](#) D) **Veterans Housing and Homeless Prevention Bond Act of 2022.**
Position Support

[AB 1935](#) ([Voepel](#) R) **Veterans: mental health.**
Position Support

[AB 2046](#) ([Voepel](#) R) **Family law: child support.**
Position Support

[AB 2192](#) ([Committee on Veterans Affairs](#)) **Governor’s Military Council.**
Position Support

[AB 2494](#) ([Choi](#) R) **Postsecondary education: course credit for prior military education, training, and service.**
Position Support

[AB 2549](#) ([Salas](#) D) **Department of Consumer Affairs: temporary licenses.**
Position Support

[AB 3137](#) ([Voepel](#) R) **Community colleges: California College Promise: members of the Armed Forces of the United States.**
Position Support

[AB 3371](#) ([Committee on Veterans Affairs](#)) **Veteran suicides: report.**
Position Support

[SB 588](#) ([Archuleta](#) D) **Public contracts: Disabled Veteran Business Enterprise Program.**
Position Support

[SB 907](#) ([Archuleta](#) D) **Child abuse or neglect investigation: military notification.**
Position Support

[SB 1007](#) ([Hueso](#) D) **Personal income taxes: exclusion: uniformed services: retirement pay.**
Position Support

SB 1177 (Jones R) Veterans' Home of California system.
Position Support

For more detailed information about these individual measures, you can use the link below for the California legislative information. <http://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/home.xhtml>

For More information:

Ted Puntillo, Chair, Legislative Committee
tepuntillo@solanocounty.com

Seth Reeb, Veterans Advocate
Reeb Government Relations
sethreeb@comcast.net

A Message from Mary Marky

VA Oakland Regional Office
Service Center Manage

The Veterans Benefit Administration, Oakland Regional Office is preparing to reconstitute our Regional Office and out based locations in accordance with the Veterans Administration requirements and directives. As you are well aware, we never stopped serving our Veterans with all the benefits they have earned and we have utilized virtual platforms (WebEx, VA Video Connect, etc.) to continue to provide outreach and serve our Veterans during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The VA has numerous safety and regulatory guidance in the plan, that will act as our guide in a phased approach how we safely return our employees and partners to our facilities. Those guidelines include a downward trajectory in COVID-19 cases, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is readily available, training for our employees and ensuring we are following state and local guidelines. We monitor all of these requirements daily to determine the next steps.

In the meantime, all Regional Office employees are continuing to process claims while working remotely. With all of our records scanned and available in VBMS, there is no interruption in service for claims that are ready for the next action.

As our course of action moving forward is based on different data across the 44 counties we serve, there may be instances where one county is moving forward ahead of others. Communication with our partners and Veterans on when each of our offices will be reopened is very important. We look forward to providing updates during our monthly VSO meetings as well as through our VSO liaison, James Little, and our Public Affairs Officer, Adam Takata.

Hello CACVSO Members!

This past April 30, 2020 marked the 45th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War. But as many of you have witnessed first-hand, many of our Veterans who served during that war still suffer from medical conditions caused by their in-service exposure to herbicides – not just in Vietnam but in Thailand, near the Korean DMZ, Guam, and elsewhere.

We all know that VA has a list of medical conditions presumed to be related to a Veteran's in-service herbicide exposure (they're listed at 38 C.F.R. section 3.309(e). But what if a Veteran is diagnosed with a medical condition that is not on VA's presumptive list? Is that Veteran precluded or prohibited from filing a claim for service connection? No! In other words, is VA's list of presumptive conditions an exclusive list? No!! But sometimes, VA decision makers treat it like it is and wrongly deny claims by asserting that VA's M-21 manual provision requires them to deny the claim because "VA has determined no positive association" between the claimed medical condition and herbicide exposure. Simply stated, this rationale means VA cannot grant service connection on a **presumptive basis**, which is true.

However, this same rationale completely ignores the Veteran's entitlement to service connection on a **direct basis** so long as the Veteran has the requisite medical-nexus opinion (i.e., criteria no. 3 for a grant of direct service connection).

For reasons not known to us, we often see VA fail to apply the laws of direct service connection to herbicide exposure-related claims. If this happens to any of your Veterans' claims, please do not accept VA's erroneous denial. Here is a summary of the laws and case law to reference when you file an appeal:

- 38 C.F.R. § 3.303(d): Service connection may be granted for any disease diagnosed **AFTER** discharge, when all of the evidence, including that pertinent to service, establishes that the disease was incurred in service. See also 38 U.S.C. §§ 1110, 1116(f).
- *Combee v. Brown*, 34 F.3d 1039, 1042-1044 (Fed. Cir. 1994) ("That a medical condition is not presumptively related to herbicide exposure does not preclude a veteran from establishing **direct service connection** with proof of actual or direct causation" and that presumptive service connection "does not foreclose proof of **direct service connection**.").

- *Kent v. Nicholson*, 20 Vet. App. 1, 16 (2006) (explaining that a claim "includes **all theories under which service connection may be granted**").
- *Polovick v. Shinseki*, 23 Vet. App. 48, 53 (2009) (holding a condition's absence from the presumptive list does not preclude a Veteran from establishing **direct service connection** by showing that it is as likely as not that the condition is due to in-service herbicide exposure).
- *DeLisio v. Shinseki*, 25 Vet. App. 45, 53 (2011) (explaining that "even if a claimant believes that his [or her] condition is related to service in a particular way, **the claim is not limited solely to one theory of service connection**.").

And for good measure, it's worth noting that in August 2012, the VA Secretary specifically stated that **even if there is not a positive statistical association between a given disease and Agent Orange exposure, that does not preclude VA from granting service connection for any such disease if the evidence otherwise supports service connection**. See Update, 77 Fed. Reg. at 47924.

So, as we are known to say, please don't let your Veteran or widow give up or quit fighting for their earned service-connected benefits, especially when VA law and science supports their righteous claim. As always, feel free to reach out to us if we can help in any way,

Katrina Eagle & Jim Radogna

Suggestions for Handling Stress

By A.Norwood, Tehama County VSO

Burnout, fatigue, and exhaustion. These all highly contribute to the number one reason many of our offices lose qualified and competent Veteran Advocates and Representatives. Stress in the workplace can have many origins or come from one single event. It can impact both employees and employers alike. It is generally believed that some stress is okay (sometimes referred to as “challenge” or “positive stress”) but when stress occurs in amounts that you cannot handle, both mental and physical changes may occur. Not all of us can simply be John McClane; roll up a towel under our feet, and suddenly be prepared to take on an entire office tower of terrorists. Some of us need to develop interoffice practices to identify and address our own personal work-related stressors.

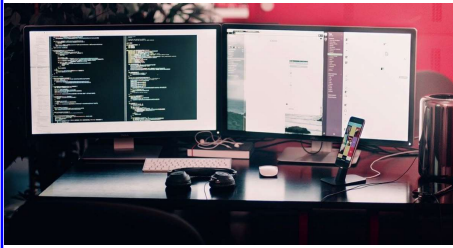
Identifying stressors for the workplace is a crucial initial phase for beginning to mitigate the workplace stress. Recognizing that you are experiencing stress in the workplace is the first step. We all know when we feel overtly stressed due to time sensitive deadlines, and other demanding duties. However, recognizing the internal symptoms of stress are often overlooked until it may be too late. According to a report by the Mayo Clinic regarding workplace burnout, the primary symptoms include chronic fatigue, insomnia, emotional instability, high blood pressure, and heart disease. If we work to recognize the early symptoms of stress in both ourselves and our teams, we can greater ensure our longevity.

Some of the suggestions for reducing workplace stressors are to organize and plan your caseloads. This may seem obvious but take a knee and evaluate the situation regarding your office case flow. Are we providing our staff and ourselves adequate time to complete our duties? Having assigned periods of our workday to complete emails, phone calls, and case management duties ensures that we do not allow our responsibilities to become burdensome. Do we recognize our staff or ourselves as regularly struggling to complete our duties? Addressing our time management shortfalls early significantly reduces a build up of stress.

Sharing our experiences and staying up to date on recent changes ensures streamlined case flow. Do we routinely hold team meetings? Are the meetings used to push information from top down, or to develop greater team synchronism? Having team meetings is an opportunity to share and develop knowledge amongst peers in the workplace. Providing opportunities for our teams to hear caseload challenges and solutions not only facilitates learning, but also illustrates to others the common struggles and challenges of case management. This is good for the cohesion of office personnel and reducing stress.

Maintain a solid and steady sight picture of your primary mission as a Veteran Service Organization. Do not allow yourselves to be spread too thin. We all have community feel good groups and administrative projects requesting our time and office resources. Maintaining focus on providing services to our Veterans must remain our primary mission. I was fortunate to have learned this lesson early from my predecessor, Kelly Osborne. A parting lesson and common office phrase she often would say, “Veterans First, how does this benefit all of our Veterans?” I recall this idiom routinely when making commitments and decisions related to this office. Limiting the amount of outside commitments reduces the stress caused by outside demands.

These are merely suggestive practices for reducing the amount of stress caused by the routine of our positions. The main principles we must remember are recognizing stress within ourselves and team members, formulate a plan to mitigate these stresses, and continue to perform our duties for the greatest benefit to our Veteran community.



Using Technology to Serve Veterans

The current pandemic has necessitated the need for all county agencies to re-evaluate how they provide services that are deemed non-essential to clients in need of assistance. The Nevada County VSO has maintained its expected quality and timeliness since being issued its work at-home orders on March 18, 2020.

The Nevada County VSO was working toward a completely electronically filed claims policy implementation when the telework orders were issued. Staff familiarity with the process allowed for a smooth transition from the office to their home environment. Luckily, VetPro released the Finger.Ink function of VetPro right around the time our orders were issued. This single improvement allowed for the Nevada County staff to easily obtain signatures over the phone and simultaneously reduce the stress for our clients.

When the CVSO was approached by county leadership to explore avenues to reduce program costs by 5

– 10% due to expected funding decreases data was used to show how the program is already decreasing county costs. The implementation of fully electronically claims filing process has allowed the Nevada County VSO to reduce supply costs by \$1,371.58. These figures include the cost of printing, paper, along with a reduction in toner cartridges. Furthermore, showing county leadership that this change in process was saving the county \$27,242.19 in lost production costs, further supported the belief that the VSO was already reducing costs for the county.

Using a model developed by the Contra Costa County VSO, Nevada County has implemented a “Virtual VSO” on its county webpage. The veteran is given the option for either a phone interview or a Virtual interview. If the veteran chooses the Virtual option, he or she is directed to the county webpage and instructed to click on the “Virtual VSO” tab. Here the client is taken to a ZOOM meeting experience that allows the veteran the comfort of face to face interview. Using this technology has allowed the VSO to continue to collaborate with outside agencies in times of immediate need and has proven to our community that we are exploring every avenue to continue to provide the services our community expects.

Last, without formal avenues to perform outreach the VSO for Nevada County has expanded the programs social media influence. With Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn media accounts the VSO is giving information 3-5 times per week on each platform in an effort to reach even more veterans to great success. The increase in social media influence has even led to some great opportunities for collaboration from outstanding organizations. As we continue to work for our clients during these trying times it is important to find new avenues or expand on old ones to reach our clientele. We will need to continue to work together to explore new avenues of outreach and efficiency as we learn to work in the new normal.





Upcoming Events

2020 Fall Conference

Grass Valley, CA

Monday, October 18, 2020—Friday, October 23, 2020

**This will be a Virtual Conference*

2021 Winter Conference

Sacramento, CA

Monday February 22, 2021 – Friday February 26, 2020

Holiday Inn

DATES OF INTEREST

July 2020

- 4 Independence Day
- 5 National Bikini Day
- 6 National Fried Chicken Day
- 11 Cheer up the Lonely Day
- 14 Bastille Day
- 21 National Junk Food Day
- 24 Amelia Earhart Day
- 31 System Administrator Day

Awareness Weeks

- 6-12 National Child Obesity Week
- 28th July – 3rd August Hepatitis Awareness Week

Monthly Observances

- National Grilling Month
- National Culinary Arts Month
- National Anti-Boredom Month

- Stone—Ruby
- Flower—Larkspur

