

April-June 2025



# Communicator

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## Presidents Message

Members,

I wanted to thank you all for a great February Conference. At this conference, there was a different structure to our legislative day, we had the opportunity to listen and learn from two great panels, and we were fortunate enough to have Kimberly Dickerson present to us once again. The feedback we received from those who presented to us at the Secretary of States building has been overwhelmingly positive and they appreciated being able to hear directly from all of you. I hope you all enjoyed the speech that Mike Pereira, founder of Battlefields to Ballfields, gave to us at the banquet and got an understanding of his passion for providing positive opportunities to the veteran community.

This week, members of the CACVSO eBoard will be meeting in San Luis Obispo for our leadership retreat. During our time together, we will work on activities that will bring us a better understanding of each other and team building. Our agenda will focus our expectations of board members, discussion and edits to our bylaws, on how to improve upon our conferences, and evaluating our strategic plan to achieve both our long- and short-term goals. This summit is critical to the success that our organization will achieve in the future, and I am looking forward to a couple of days of hard work and critical conversations with my fellow board members to build upon the historical success that the CACVSO has already achieved.

During this summit we will also be welcoming our new Treasurer Amy Klock, from San Diego County to our board. I want to thank Ryan Kegley from Stanislaus County for his past four years' service as our treasurer. Just like many of us, Ryan has had to place more focus on his office, as his county prepares for the expected federal cuts to their programs. We have been blessed to have him serve as our treasurer and he has done well in making sure that we are financially sound in our operations.

I had an opportunity to meet with Roberto Herrera, Deputy Secretary of Veterans Services for CalVet, where we discussed the topic of office administration personnel obtaining their accreditation. We had a very pointed discussion, where he conveyed to me that this was an effort to ensure that those who were filing claims to the VA were obtaining accreditation as part of their effort to limit unaccredited agencies from operating in California. I am looking forward to presenting our discussion to our board members during our retreat, where we can then develop our proposal to CalVet.

Also, in an effort to move our association to VetPro 2.0, CalVet has been provided a list of "features" needed to migrate from our current web-based version to VetPro 2.0. Your CACVSO eBoard, will be evaluating this list (along

## UPCOMING TRAINING

**2025 Summer  
Virtual Conference-TBD**

**2025 Fall Conference**

Chicken Ranch Hotel and Casino  
Jamestown, CA



**October 19-24, 2025**

**2026 Winter Conference**

HARD Rock Hotel and Casino  
Wheatland, CA



February 22-27, 2026

## Chaplain's Corner



*"I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit." Romans 15:13 (NLT)*

# NewsLetter DEADLINE

June 20, 2025

with projected costs) to determine exactly what features we as an association need to move to VetPro 2.0. The goal will be to limit costs and make sure that you, our members, have access to the most up-to-date technology in our industry.

April 6-10 is the National Association of County Veterans Services Officers (NACVSO) Leadership Summit. During summit the CACVSO will have its President, 1<sup>st</sup> VP, 2<sup>nd</sup> VP, Legislative Chair, and lobbyist present, and ready advocate for the veterans of California and most importantly, you. I asked our eBoard for their permission for our lobbyist Yolanda Benson to accompany us this year, because of the current political climate in DC and the very real threat to how veterans access their benefits. During this summit, we will hear directly from the Secretary of the VA and other leaders from the VA. We are also scheduling appointments with our elected California representatives and committee members. We will do all that we can to ensure that your voice and concerns are heard while we are in DC.

Finally, we will also be meeting with legislative leaders from the VFW and NACVSO. We will be working to make sure that our messaging and talking points are aligned in our efforts against "Claim Sharks" and their ability to operate in California. I am not going to sugarcoat this to you, this is going to be a fight unlike anything we have seen. Although we have strong support in keeping them out of California, they have also been able to establish a strong wall of support. This is going to require all of our individual efforts, teamwork, and a tremendous amount of fight, for us to be successful. I want you to know that your leadership is up for this challenge, and we are looking forward to it.

I am going to ask all of you that were at our banquet to please carry the coin you received in your pocket. Hold it. Believe in our efforts. When this year is over and we have been successful, you can then place it on a shelf to add to your collection.

Until then, lets put all of our efforts and energy into throwing these bottom feeding fish back into the ocean.



## By Laws Committee

Current members: Jose Lopez, Dell Pratt, Isabel Gonzalez. Jose Lopez (Kern County) is assuming the Parliamentarian Role. Dell Pratt (Napa County) remains on the Bylaws Committee. Isabel Gonzalez (Sonoma County) is working a draft version of CACVSO Ethics for Review.



## Education Consultants Update

The Supreme Court's 7-2 decision in *Bufkin v. Collins* (decided March 5, 2025) addressed the "benefit-of-the-doubt" rule in veterans' disability claims, which requires the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to favor the Veteran when evidence for and against a claim is evenly balanced. The Court ruled that the VA's determination of whether evidence is in "approximate balance" is a factual finding, subject to review only for clear error, and not de novo re-evaluation. This reinforces deference to the VA's decisions, making it harder for higher courts to overturn

them.

The case involved two Veterans, Joshua Bufkin and Norman Thornton, who were denied PTSD-related benefits. Mr. Bufkin claimed his PTSD was linked to military service, citing marital stress and his wife's suicide threats, but VA doctors disputed the connection. Mr. Thornton sought a higher disability rating, but the Board of Veterans' Appeals found insufficient evidence. Both argued that the VA misapplied its benefit-of-the-doubt rule.

Justice Clarence Thomas, writing for the majority, stated that the Veterans Court must review legal issues de novo but defer to the VA's factual findings unless clearly erroneous. He emphasized that determining "approximate balance" is a factual matter, not subject to stricter review. In dissent, Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, joined by Justice Neil Gorsuch, argued that the ruling undermines Congress's intent to favor Veterans in close cases, potentially leading to unfair denials.

The decision has significant implications for Veterans, making it harder to challenge claim denials, especially in complex cases with ambiguous evidence. It highlights the tension between administrative efficiency and fair treatment for Veterans, raising concerns about barriers to benefits. Advocates fear the ruling could disadvantage Veterans, particularly those with incomplete evidence.

The bottom line is that the benefit-of-the-doubt rule remains unchanged, but the Board of Veterans' Appeals continues to operate with limited oversight in its proper application. Consequently, CVSOs should now prioritize thorough and precise claim preparation more than ever, rather than relying on AOJ adjudicators or BVA Law Judges to deter-

and precise claim preparation more than ever, rather than relying on AOs adjudicators or DVA Law Judges to determine that the facts regarding an issue meet the equipoise standard and properly apply the benefit-of-the-doubt rule. Keep in mind that powerful, detailed evidence is preferred over crossing one's fingers and hoping a VA decision-maker sees your client's case the same way you do!

And always remember: Please reach out to us if you have any questions or any other claim/appeal-related dilemmas with which we may be able to help you figure out a path forward. We are here to help all CACVSO members!

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## Funding Process Committee

We have been working with CalVet since early 2023 on regulatory language amendment. We are looking to amend the language in California Code of Regulations, Title 12 (Military and Veterans Affairs), Division 2 (Dept Veteran Affairs), Chapter 3 (Veterans' Services), subchapter 4 (County subvention).

Our primary purpose in proposing these changes is NOT to change the basic way the subvention process is implemented today, but rather to establish flexibility to allow CalVet to make less consequential changes administratively, without having to undertake a formal rulemaking process. The flexibility to amend supporting documents like the list of auditable workload units administratively on an as-needed basis would be one example. The project also incorporates all the regulatory changes added to the September 15, 2019 version of the Subvention Manual, which are currently implemented in day-to-day practice, but which have never been legally incorporated into Title 12, and thus have no legal standing.

The following are example of proposed changes:

- Eliminate reference to Subvention Manual (SM).
- Move any requirements imposed in SM up into appropriate section of Title 12
- Eliminate redundant language
- Provide a less restrictive process for identifying auditable WLUs
- Soften requirement to use specific formats for reporting every 6 or 12 months
- Consolidate reporting requirements into a single section in a timeline format.
- Publish SM's discussion items as "best practices," and provide clarity for implementing program requirements in day-to-day office environment.
- Change the allocation of available funds to percentage
  - Admin up to 10% vice \$20,000
  - Training up to 5% vice \$12,000
  - Leave \$1500 for conference attendance



This continues to be a work in progress. We are awaiting for CalVet to provide their suggested changes based off of what we provided.



## Legislative Committee

It is an honor to serve as Chair of the Legislative Committee for the 2025-2026 term. Our committee's primary responsibility is to advocate for policies that support California's veterans and ensure County Veterans Service Officers (CVSOs) have the resources to fulfill their mission. We are committed to addressing issues that impact CVSOs, amplifying their voices, and ensuring they can effectively serve veterans.

A growing concern is the rise of unaccredited representatives and legal services charging veterans excessive fees for benefits assistance, often circumventing laws designed to protect them. These predatory practices create financial hardships and undermine the integrity of the benefits system. Our committee is actively working at the state and federal levels to support legislation that holds these entities accountable and ensures veterans have access to accredited, trustworthy support without financial barriers.

To strengthen our advocacy, we are collaborating with key organizations, including the National Association of County Veteran Service Officers (NACVSO) and the National Association of Counties (NACo). Additionally, we have partnered with Ms. Yolanda Benson of Government Strategies, Inc. to enhance our engagement and effectiveness in advancing veteran-focused policies.

Please join me in thanking Jose Lopez, Veterans Service Officer for the Kern County Veterans Service Department, for his dedicated service on the committee. Mr. Lopez has stepped down from the committee to take on another role in support of the association. I am also pleased to introduce two new members to the Legislative Committee. Matt Knox, San Bernardino County Veterans Service Officer, brings extensive experience in county government and veteran advocacy. Greg Coffos, Director of the County of Riverside Veterans' Services Department, has a strong background in veteran support services and housing initiatives. Their expertise will be invaluable to our efforts.

Our committee remains focused on legislative priorities that provide tangible support to veterans, including state property and income tax reforms to increase financial relief and make California more competitive in attracting and retaining veterans. We also support expanding state education benefits for veterans, service members, and their dependents.

We are dedicated to advocating for the policies that matter most to our members and the veterans we serve. We encourage all CVSOs to share concerns and ideas so we can work together to advance meaningful change. Please reach out with any issues you would like the committee to address.

# NORTHSTAR



Dear CA County Veteran Service Officers,

On behalf of NorthStar, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude for inviting myself and our organization's co-founder, Dr. Amanda Wilson, to present during the CACVSO Winter Conference 2025. It was a privilege to not only share our message, but to learn about the tireless work you do as Veteran Service Officers. I personally would not have reached my current stage of well-being without the dedication and commitment of professionals like you, and I remain both humbled and inspired by the challenges and obstacles you address daily.

Throughout our conversations, it became clear that comprehensive, accessible care for Alcohol and Substance Use Disorders is more critical than ever. Most Military and Veteran families lack access to science-driven, evidence-based, and culturally competent treatment—leading to challenges that disrupt the path to well-being and reintegration. At NorthStar, we are committed to bridging these gaps by providing specialized telehealth services that meet individuals where they are, delivering high-quality, personalized care directly to those who need it most. By integrating medication-assisted treatments, nutrient repletion focused on restoring brain health, flexible virtual group support, and individualized therapies, our team is revolutionizing how these debilitating disorders are treated.

Our aim is simple: to ensure that every Military member and Veteran receives the necessary support to thrive. By combining our telehealth offerings with your local expertise and community connections, we can work together to create lasting, positive change and save lives. NorthStar's approach is grounded in data-driven methods, compassionate care, and an unwavering commitment to improving the lives of those we serve. As a fellow advocate, I recognize the powerful impact we can make if we join forces and embrace the "one team, one fight" mindset.

I am truly excited by the prospect of deepening our collaboration and learning more about the unique challenges you face at the county level. By actively seeking your insights, I hope we can collectively identify new opportunities to enhance and optimize the quality of life for Military and Veteran populations statewide. The more we share our knowledge and resources, the more effective we become at improving the lives of those we serve.

Thank you once again for your hospitality and your willingness to discuss the ways we can work together. I look forward to the opportunity to continue this conversation and explore how NorthStar can support and amplify the outstanding efforts you undertake every day. Please feel free to text or call me directly at (253) 357-7240 or email me at [zsalisbury@northstarcare.com](mailto:zsalisbury@northstarcare.com). You can find additional resources and information from our presentation at this link: <https://northstarcare.com/cacvso2025>. I look forward to connecting with you and finding new ways to strengthen your communities.

Respectfully,

Zachary A. Salisbury  
Director of Veteran Strategic Initiatives