



# Communicator

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## President's Message

*(Solano CVSO Ted Puntillo, President)*

Hello Association:

May is here and we should all start preparing for the conference, and the end of the fiscal year on June 30, 2017. Budget hearings will be taking place in the next month and the state's May Revise should hit this month. There will be a lot of budget issues and questions. Our new subvention should make most of us insulated from any cuts. Let me know if you have budget cuts on the horizon.

Our mentor program is in need of experienced competent CVSO's who want to help their fellow counties. I have volunteered myself, and really enjoy visiting other offices and learning from them what they are doing and also sharing some ideas that we have developed in Solano County. Please, let me know if you want to help out our fellow offices.

We recently had a strategic planning meeting with CalVet and we agreed that we would use the VSOF funds for the Toll Free Line that gets veterans our contact information. It was part of the "you served, you earned" program we had two years ago. The cost is usually under \$10,000.00 a year. We also agreed that Vet Pro would get an increase in their fees and are working on some exciting improvements that will keep us on the cutting edge of claim filing automation. They have taken lots of our suggestions and are working on getting them into the next generation of Vet Pro.

Other subjects discussed were sanctions on offices that are not scanning information into Vet Pro. Specifically, College Fee Waivers (CFW) are being processed without even being put into the Vet Pro system, taken as workload units and no supporting documents scanned. Counties doing this can expect a letter sent to your Board regarding this very bad breach of protocol and regulations. CFW timelines were also discussed. You can file a CFW for upcoming school year at any time after January 1 if the veteran and student present the signed tax form showing income and support is under \$12,486.00 along with the rest of the requirements. School dependents who did not work must wait until after April 15 (or the tax deadline) to get the letter that states they did not file taxes for the previous year.

Our organization also signed an MOU with Bergman & Moore Law Firm of Washington DC to give us extra help in fighting for our veterans when we get a BVA decision that does not give us the decision we were seeking. They are free and we are not obligated to use them, but we should if the BVA decision is not to our liking. They will give us training in October in Riverside at the conference and we will get some SOP's out on how to use them in the next month or so.

We also discussed the district offices putting awards for electronic claims and how we would like them to calculate the awards.....See you soon in San Diego in June.

Ted

**Los Angeles County**, officially the County of Los Angeles, is the most populous county in the United States. Its population is larger than that of 42 individual U.S. states. It has 88 incorporated cities and many unincorporated areas and at 4,083 square miles (10,570 km<sup>2</sup>), it is larger than the combined areas of the U.S. states of Delaware and Rhode Island. The county is home to more than one-quarter of California residents and is one of the most ethnically diverse counties in the U.S. Its county seat, the City of Los Angeles, is also its most populous city at about four million.





# TIME & PLACE COMMITTEE

(San Luis Obispo County—CVSO Dana Cummings, Chair)

## Dates & Locations of Upcoming Conferences



**June 11—16, 2017**

*Town & Country Resort & Convention Ctr.*



**October 8—13, 2017**

*Marriott Convention Center  
Riverside, CA*



**February 25—March 2, 2018**

*Holiday Inn Sacramento Downtown*

# NewsLetter DEADLINE

***Last Thursday of the Month  
Unless Notified Otherwise!***

## Thailand Military Bases and Agent Orange Exposure



Vietnam-era Veterans whose service involved duty on or near the perimeters of military bases in Thailand anytime between February 28, 1961 and May 7, 1975 may have been exposed to herbicides and may qualify for VA benefits.

The following Veterans may have been exposed to herbicides:

- **U.S. Air Force Veterans** who served on Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) bases at U-Tapao, Ubon, Nakhon Phanom, Udorn, Takhli, Korat, and Don Muang, near the air base perimeter anytime between February 28, 1961 and May 7, 1975.
- **U.S. Army Veterans** who provided perimeter security on RTAF bases in Thailand anytime between February 28, 1961 and May 7, 1975.

**U.S. Army Veterans** who were stationed on some small Army installations in Thailand anytime between February 28, 1961 and May 7, 1975. However, the Army Veteran must have been a member of a military police (MP) unit or was assigned an MP military occupational specialty whose duty **placed him/her at or near the base perimeter**.

To receive benefits for [diseases associated with herbicide exposure](#), these Veterans must show on a factual basis that they were exposed to herbicides during their service as shown by evidence of daily work duties, performance evaluation reports, or other credible evidence.

Veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange or other herbicides during service may be eligible for a variety of VA benefits, including an [Agent Orange Registry health exam](#), health care, and disability compensation for diseases associated with exposure. Their dependents and survivors also may be eligible for benefits.

# Legislative Advocate's Report

## CACVSO Communicator

May 2017

By: Pete Conaty

As you know, on January when the Governor's proposed 2017-18 budget was released, it called for a cut of 16 positions from the CalVet Strike Teams. The Association opposed these cuts and working with CACVSO leadership, the Legislative Committee, and Jack Kirwan the CACVSO budget consultant; we actively took action on the issue. In March 28, the Assembly Budget Subcommittee for State Administration #4 (Assembly Sub 4) met to discuss and vote on the issue. Since CalVet can't take positions on the budget put together by their boss (the Governor), it was up to the Association and other interested parties to oppose it. We submitted detailed supporting data to the committee as well as lobbied key members of the Legislature prior to the hearing. I testified against the cuts on behalf of the Association. Veterans Service Organization representatives also testified against the cuts. Our efforts were successful and Assembly Sub 4 rejected the proposed Strike Team cuts unanimously.

On May 11, CACVSO President Ted Puntillo and Seth Reeb from my office attended the hearing of the Senate Budget Subcommittee on State Administration #4 (Senate Sub 4) where the issue was to be decided by the Senate. Again, due to careful groundwork beforehand, Senate Sub 4 rejected the proposed cuts.

Therefore, we believe the issue to cut 16 Strike Team positions is dead. However, there is always more than one way to skin a cat and we will keep our eyes out for efforts to sneak the cuts in via a budget trailer bill.

Below are portions of the Senate Sub 4 analysis on the proposed cuts.

### **8955 Department of Veterans Affairs**

#### **Issue 1: Reduce Funding for Veterans Services Division Support**

The budget requests a reduction of \$1.701 million (General Fund) ongoing for the California Department of Veterans Affairs, Veteran Services Division. The reduction reverses the 2016-17 Spring Finance Letter that funded 16 existing, but unfunded, positions, and reclassified four positions that assist in processing claims for federal veteran benefits and increase oversight of county veterans service officers. The funding supports positions in the district offices in Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Diego.

#### **Background**

The Veterans Services Division (VSD) within CalVet is tasked with connecting California veterans and their families with earned benefits and services. To perform this mission, the VSD provides advocacy, education, and service assistance to veterans as they attempt to access their state and federal benefits. The CalVet manages three district offices throughout the state, which are co-located within the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) Regional Offices in Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Diego. The district offices assist veterans with claims. When a veteran or family member chooses to provide the CalVet with power of attorney (POA) over a claim, one of the three CalVet district offices will represent the veteran or family member in the submission and appellate process for a USDVA benefit claim. The CalVet maintains POA for about 40 percent of USDVA claims in California, which amounted to approximately 59,000 claims in fiscal year 2014-15 filed by County Veteran Service Offices (CVSO) and the CalVet. The CalVet's role as the POA representative for the veteran claimants is to ensure the veterans and their families receive competent claims representation. In addition to these basic functions, the CalVet district office staff provides a wide variety of support to California's veterans, their families, CVSOs, USDVA, and veteran service organizations.

The Budget Act of 2013 included a \$3 million General Fund allocation and 36 limited-term positions for three years to the CalVet to initiate the Joint Claims Initiative. The Joint Claims Initiative is a partnership between the USDVA and the CalVet, which formed a 12-person "Strike Team" in each of the three district offices, designed to reduce the backlog of pending initial entitlement claims. Strike teams have helped reduce the first initial entitlement claims backlog at USDVA from about 70,000 to 7,000. The Budget Act of 2015 made permanent the 36 limited-term positions due to the lengthy claims process. Funding for these positions was on a limited basis, thus continued funding for 16 of the 36 positions, as well as funding to reclassify four existing positions, was requested in a spring finance letter and approved last year.

#### **Staff Comment**

The subcommittee considered this item at its March 9, 2017, hearing. Last year's request to fund these positions on an ongoing basis emphasized the importance of these positions and noted that, "without these positions only 11 staff would be servicing the 1.8 million veterans in California". The loss of funding for these positions will result in delays in veterans receiving their federal benefits. These positions have resulted in more federal dollars coming into the state and are critical for connecting our veterans with other federal and state programs and benefits.

## ***VA Announces Contract Award for Program for a Faster Care Mobile App for Veterans to Schedule Medical Appointments***

**WASHINGTON** — The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recently awarded a contract for a commercially available, off-the-shelf online patient self-scheduling system through a mobile application, or app, that will help improve access to care for Veterans.

Awarded to [Document Storage Systems](#) on April 14, the contract supports the [Faster Care for Veterans Act of 2016](#), which requires VA to establish an 18-month trial program operational in at least three Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs), under which Veterans can use a cell phone, tablet, computer or mobile device to schedule and confirm primary care, specialty care and mental health appointments.

“The VA is making critical improvements to Veteran health care, and will always look to leverage innovative tools that will put more capabilities in the hands of Veterans,” said VA Secretary [Dr. David J.](#)

[Shulkin](#). “Self-scheduling apps are widely used in the private sector and will help create a better experience for Veterans and their medical-care providers.”

VA’s Mobile Veterans Appointment Request (VAR) app, currently available at 99 sites, also provides most of the key capabilities required by the Faster Care for Veterans Act, and is modeled after successful mobile applications used for patient scheduling. VA intends to continue development of VAR to incorporate new capabilities.

## ***VA Announces Short-Term Extension of Strategic Review of Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers***

**WASHINGTON** — Today, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced a six-week extension of the strategic review of its Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family [Caregivers](#).

On April 17, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced a [decision](#) to temporarily halt certain revocations from the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers because of concerns about inconsistent application of eligibility requirements for the program throughout its medical centers.

VA will use the six-week extension of that temporary halt to complete its review of the program. At the end of that review, the VA intends to provide clarity on enrollment criteria for the program and to seek authorization to use the program’s existing resources for those who need them most.

“We are extending our strategic review of the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers to make sure everyone — from our Veterans and their caregivers to our employees who work with them — has clear guidance on enrollment criteria for the program,” said VA Secretary [Dr. David J. Shulkin](#). “Our Caregiver Support Program is making a difference in the lives of our Veterans and the caregivers who support them, and we want to make sure the program is operating in the best way for them, and above all that the program’s existing resources go to those Veterans who need them most.”

For more information about the VA Caregiver Program, visit [www.caregiver.va.gov](http://www.caregiver.va.gov).



U.S. Department  
of Veterans Affairs

Sacramento Valley National Cemetery  
5810 Midway Road  
Dixon, CA 95620

## Media Advisory

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Michael H. Henshaw, Director  
707-693-2460

May 2017

### Sacramento Valley National Cemetery Memorial Day Program

**What:** A Memorial Day Program to honor the legacy of those who paid the ultimate sacrifice in service to our nation.

**Who:** Featuring Alive Music Orchestra (Vacaville Jazz Society) and a Flyover by the USAF.

**When:** **Saturday, May 27 (9:00am):** Flags Out – Small flags will be placed at all gravesites throughout the cemetery. Please bring a metal screw driver to help punch holes into the soil for the flags.

**Monday, May 29 (9:00am):** Program to honor all of our Fallen Heroes, Military Honors and music featuring the Band of the Golden West (USAF - Travis AFB).

**Tuesday, May 30 (9:00am until all picked up):** Flags In – Small flags will be retrieved and cleaned from all gravesites throughout the cemetery. Flags will be stored for future use.

**Where:** Sacramento Valley National Cemetery – Flag Assembly Area 5810 Midway Road, Dixon, CA 95620

**Contact:** Michael H. Henshaw, Cemetery Director , Office: 707-693-2460

**Background:** Memorial Day is a United States federal holiday observed on the last Monday of May (May 29 in 2017). Formerly known as Decoration Day, it commemorates U.S. service members who died while in the military service. First enacted to honor Union and Confederate soldiers following the American Civil War, it was extended after World War I to honor Americans who have died in all wars.

## Persian Gulf War Veterans Still Suffering Serious Health Problems

This year marks the 26th anniversary of the Persian Gulf War. It was fought in late 1990 through early 1991 by a U.S.-led coalition of 34 countries against Iraq in response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait.

It also was the first U.S. war to be waged after the advent of the 24-hour cable television news cycle. The conflict was accompanied by memorably intense and round-the-clock coverage on CNN. But there've been few recognitions of the war's 25-year milestone on the cable news networks, let alone in broadcast or print media.

For David Winnett, a Gulf War combat veteran who climbed the ranks from private to captain during his 20-year career in the U.S. Marines, it's just the latest in a succession of insults to the men and women who served in this largely forgotten war.

"It's no surprise that many people could easily forget 'our war.' It was far too fast by any historical measure," Winnett told Healthline. "Perhaps things would be different had we continued our advance all the way to Baghdad, but the fact is, we didn't. So regardless of whether or not we think our war has been unfairly set aside in the history books, it is what it is."

### **The VA's Position**

Despite the scientific evidence and a mandate from Congress that Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) recognize several of the symptoms as connected to service in the Gulf War, the VA maintains that there are no definitive scientific studies that link symptoms and diseases associated with GWI to toxic exposures during the war. According to a 2015 report, about 80 percent of Gulf War veterans who file disability claims citing presumptive chronic multi-symptom illnesses connected to toxic exposures are denied by the VA.

A written statement from the VA's Post-Deployment Health Services team to Healthline stated that in the past few years the VA has "ramped up educational efforts to VA providers on Gulf War Illness." However, the statement read, "there are times when referral to a psychiatrist is indicated due to a co-morbid condition such as severe depression or another severe mental health condition."

In another email to Healthline, VA officials said a claim could be denied for a number of reasons, including the belief an ailment was caused by something other than military service or the ailment could be "less than 10 percent disabling." Most often, say multiple sources for this story, veterans who say they have these symptoms are sent to the psychiatric departments of VA centers, where they are typically given psychotropic drugs that don't help them, and in many cases make things worse. The VA acknowledges the following in a statement on its website: "Rockets filled with sarin and cyclosporine mixes were found at a munitions storage depot in Khamisiyah, Iraq, that had been demolished by U.S. service members following the 1991 Gulf War cease-fire. An undetermined amount of these chemicals was released into the atmosphere. The Department of Defense concluded about 100,000 Gulf War Veterans could have been exposed to low levels of these nerve agents."

The VA also adds that "research doesn't show long-term neurological problems from exposure to low levels of sarin. A low level of sarin is an amount that doesn't cause noticeable symptoms during the exposure."

Regarding the burn pits, a VA statement on its burn pits registry page reads, "At this time, research does not show evidence of long-term health problems from exposure to burn pits."



## Similarity Between the Warrior and the Wolf

The wolf, a coursing predator, has been responsible for keeping the balance in nature for thousands of years. The wolf speaks up for the mouse by making sure that the elk doesn't rub all the bark off the tree and create a wasteland. The wolf speaks up for the frog by moving the heard from one green lush valley to another so that the stream bed and the waterways can sustain the life of the frog. In these actions, the wolf's true role is to protect the wilds of North America by maintaining a balance in nature.

The Veteran, much like the wolf, acts like a coursing predator and travels around the globe to protect the indigent, the poor, and the downtrodden by moving them to a safe place. The Veteran, much like the wolf, can kill if necessary to protect the good of the many. Herein lies the similarity. The wolf protects the environment and is ridiculed, the Veteran protects his country and is called a murderer. The Veteran, who travels around the world to protect democracy and our way of life, returns home with scars, physical or otherwise. Both the wolf and the Veteran serve to protect us all. At LARC we believe they should both be given a chance to heal.



There have been studies written on trauma in elephants, trauma in chimps, trauma in Veterans. In all these mammals, trauma manifests itself in similar ways. So we know that a similar trauma suffered by a similar sentient being can often be manifested in exactly the same way. Here at LARC we have seen over the years that a wolf who has suffered a physical or emotional scar selects a Veteran with a similar trauma. We've observed that when the wolf and the Veteran walk side-by-side, there is an unspoken, non-verbal communication that blossoms. This human-animal bond often serves as the catalyst in the Veteran's reintroduction into society.

## IMPACT

The community impact of our project is felt throughout society. By offering the Veterans employment and path to recovery, we are healing families, putting our young war heroes back to work, and saving animals from destruction. By aiding a Veteran in recovery, we impact his or her life and the lives of those that come in contact with him or her. Our philosophy is not to band-aid the problem but rather to promote long-term solutions. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) cannot be solved with a pill and does not have a cure; therefore we must empower those suffering from this debilitating illness with the right tools for success. The tools are provided in three stages. The individual with PTSD is supported by a fellow

Veteran further along in the program. This "living" example of a support person helps the Veteran through the hard times. In addition to the support person, the Veterans in the program are exposed to wolves, coyotes, foxes, and wolf-dogs to promote an animal-human bond. Our returning combat heroes are often unsure whether they are an infantryman or a husband and many of the rescued animals at our sanctuary (who have also suffered trauma) are unsure whether they are a wild wolf or a domestic wolf-dog. This similarity in trauma and societal misplacement in both species is what helps each one to understand each other and heal. Over the years, staff and clinicians have noticed the unspoken bond between the wolves and the Veterans. Oftentimes, the most traumatized wolf chooses the most traumatized Veteran. This non-verbal cross-species communication is often the catalyst in the Veteran's recovery.

The "pack" dynamic is a new exploration by our staff at LARC. Most Veterans served in a group (3-5 soldiers), and within that group each Veteran had a role. When one was lost the entire group suffered – so "pack" awareness (or as it is often referred to in modern media, "brotherhood") was born through military service. We use a pack to heal at LARC, so that when one animal living in an enclosure with 3 other wolves accepts our fallen hero, then the whole pack begins approaching him/her and allows him/her in. This unilateral acceptance often leads to healing and family re-unification for the Veterans enrolled in the "Warriors and Wolves" program.

LARC's program has been called cutting edge and unique. Through our visionary board we are able to save Veterans, rescue animals, and protect the environment (by using donated food that would have otherwise been sent to a landfill) – all under one roof. At LARC our impact is direct when it comes to the Veterans in our program, but spans a far wider net. Our program impacts, sons, daughters, wives, brother, fathers, sisters, employers, and the community by healing our heroes and getting them back to work, back to their families, and involved in their community.



SOME APPROACHING  
DATES OF INTEREST

**MAY 2017**

- 1 Law Day
- 5 Cinco de Mayo
- 6 National Nurses Day
- 10 Mother's Day
- 12 Mil. Spouse Appreciation
- 20 Armed Forces Day
- 22 National Maritime Day
- 29 Memorial Day



**Freedom  
isn't Free**



**Support  
Our Troops**

