

THE LIGHTFIGHTER

Monterey and San Benito County
Military & Veterans Affairs Office



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More at:

www.mvao.org

Cover Art- SGT Vickie Hodge, 3rd ID Baghdad Airport by Elzie Golden
US Army Center of Military History
https://history.army.mil/books/wot_artwork/images/46a.jpg



Director’s Message: Jason Cameron, County Military and Veterans Affairs Officer

Welcome to this issue of *The Lightfighter*, detailing new legislation effecting Veterans; Changes in VA Service Connection for Vietnam Veteran; VA Vaccinations; and the reopening of businesses and the economy. It was a busy quarter!



As we continue through this year(+) pandemic (COVID-19) our lives have been impacted professionally and personally. The Military & Veterans Affairs Office has continued to provide all vital Veteran services. A quick snapshot of last calendar year; Monterey County Veteran Population is estimated at 20,674 with 31.8% accessing VA Compensation or Pension. In calendar year 2020 the VA paid out Veterans in the County over \$110 Million in Compensation and Pensions Benefits with an Average Award of \$17,395 per claimant.

If you or a Veteran you know is experiencing financial difficulty due to COVID-19 keep in mind that Nations Finest, Veterans Transition Center, and calling 211 may be able to assist with necessary essential services and living items such as rent, food, clothing or assistance with utilities (gas, electricity). Also keep in mind that the federal government recently approved legislation to extend federal unemployment benefits. This new legislation continues the federal increase for all unemployment benefits, which adds \$300 to each week of benefits through September 4, 2021.

I want every Veteran, Spouse, Dependent, Surviving Spouse and Transitioning Service Members to know that we are still here working hard for you. Presently, all appointments are by phone and/or via video conference (Zoom). If you have a computer or laptop (even a smartphone), a video appointment is a great option. We are also assessing feasibility on providing limited in-person appointments and do not have a date yet. But rest assured that we can continue our services to you in this capacity. Stay safe and we will get through this!

Our Mission Statement:

The Monterey County Military & Veterans Affairs Office (MVAO) provides advocacy, assistance, and services designed to enhance the lives of the County’s Veterans who served their country in the Armed Forces, their families, and their survivors. We assist in obtaining entitlements and services from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), California Department of Veterans Affairs (CDVA), and local programs for eligible Veterans and their families.

Office Locations and Hours

<p>Monterey Monterey County Superior Courthouse</p> <p>1200 Aguajito Rd, Suite 003 Monterey, CA 93940</p> <p><u>(831) 647-7613</u></p>	<p>Salinas Life Foundation Bldg</p> <p>1000 S. Main St, Suite 209A Salinas, CA 93901</p> <p><u>(831) 647-7613</u></p>	<p>Marina VA Outpatient Clinic</p> <p>201 9th St Marina, CA 93933</p> <p><u>(831) 647-7613</u></p>	<p>Hollister San Benito County Veterans Memorial Bldg</p> <p>649 San Benito St Hollister, CA 95023</p> <p><u>(831) 637-4846</u></p>
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Due to COVID-19 response guidelines, our office is providing [phone](#) and [virtual appointments](#) to our Veterans and their dependents. To schedule a phone or virtual appointment, please call our main office at:

(831) 647-7613

Or visit our website at www.mvao.org



VA Co-Payments Waived

The [American Rescue Plan Act of 2021](#), signed into law by President Joe Biden on March 11, requires the Department of Veterans Affairs to waive all Veteran copayments for medical care provided by the VA.



[The law waives all copayments for VA medical care provided to Veterans through the VA from April 6, 2020, to Sept. 30, 2021.](#) The law will write off up to \$1 billion in Veterans' medical debt as part of a broader COVID-19 economic relief effort.

Normally the VA provides free medical care for service-connected medical conditions, Veterans with higher disability levels, or those with limited financial means. However, for some Veterans, depending on their Priority Group or medical condition, copayments for VA-provided health care and prescriptions must be made.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, President Trump signed an executive order delaying the collection of VA copayments, offering relief to Veterans and their families economically impacted by the pandemic. Upon entering office, President Biden issued an executive order directing the VA to continue actions providing economic relief to Veterans. As a result, in February the VA announced that it would suspend collection of medical and benefit payments through the end of the fiscal year.

This new law will forgive all medical debts for care provided to Veterans through the VA and repay any Veterans who made payments for medical care during the covered time frame.

If you have made any payments to the VA for covered medical care since April 2020, expect to see a refund soon!

If you need assistance with your VA medical benefits, please contact our office at (831) 647-7613 or www.mvao.org

New Agent Orange Conditions

On January 1, 2021, the [FY 2021 National Defense Authorization Act \(NDAA\)](#) was passed into law. Three new conditions were added to the list of [presumptive conditions](#) for which the Department of Veterans Affairs grants service connection to Vietnam War Veterans affected by exposure to the chemical herbicide Agent Orange.

VA now presumes service connection for the following Agent Orange-related conditions:

- AL Amyloidosis
- Chronic B-Cell Leukemia Chloracne
- Diabetes Mellitus Type 2 Hodgkin's Disease
- Ischemic Heart Disease Multiple Myeloma Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma
- Parkinson's Disease
- Peripheral Neuropathy, Early Onset Porphyria Cutanea Tarda
- Prostate Cancer
- Respiratory Cancers, including Lung Cancer
- Soft Tissue Sarcomas (other than osteosarcoma, chondrosarcoma, Kaposi's sarcoma, and mesothelioma)
- **Bladder cancer **NEW****
- **Hypothyroidism **NEW****
- **Parkinsonism **NEW****

If you are a Vietnam War Veteran who served boots-on-the-ground, or within 12-miles of the coast, **please contact our office** (831) 647-7613 or www.mvao.org to discuss a claim for presumptive conditions due to Agent Orange exposure.





Sweeping Veterans Legislation Approved

On Jan. 5, President Trump signed into law [H.R. 7105](#), the [Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvements Act of 2020](#), which was passed by Congress in late December. “This is the culmination of two years of bipartisan work,” said Rep. Phil Roe, R-Tenn. “There is something in this bill for just about every one of our nation’s Veterans and their loved ones.”

The landmark Veterans’ Legislation includes several Veteran-related bills that were pending in the 116th Congress:

- ✓ Most notably the [Deborah Sampson Act](#), which will break the cultural barriers impacting women Veterans by requiring VA to address privacy concerns and improve access, expand the amount of time new mothers are given to find health care coverage for their newborns, increase staff cultural competency, eliminate harassment and assault, and make other much-needed improvements to women Veterans’ health care.
- ✓ Will require VA to make Disability Benefits Questionnaires (DBQs) available for public use, again.
- ✓ Will lower the age from 57 to 55 to remarry without incurring penalties for surviving spouses receiving Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC).
- ✓ Will change the statutory definition of Vietnam Veteran to include individuals who served in the Republic of Vietnam from Nov. 1, 1955, to Feb. 27, 1961.
- ✓ Will require VA to study incidents of cancer and other illnesses experienced by service members who served at the Karshi-Khanabad (K2) Air Base in Uzbekistan between Oct. 1, 2001, and Sept. 30, 2005.
- ✓ Will increase certain Veteran funeral benefits and authorize VA to add spouses and eligible dependent children to VA-furnished headstones.
- ✓ Will call for the elimination of the 12-year limit on using Veteran Readiness and Employment (VR&E) benefits.
- ✓ Will create certain education, employment, and housing protections for Veterans impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ✓ Will expand benefits and services for homeless Veterans.

The enactment of this Veterans’ legislation package satisfies several important resolutions and legislative priorities regarding women Veterans’ health care, disability assistance and memorial affairs, and economic opportunity issues.

Meet our New Management Analyst- Jonathan Brown

Jonathan Brown came to Monterey County in 2018 from southern California where he was the Athletic Director for Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) services at the Naval Weapons Station in Seal Beach, where he developed a robust recreation program for Veterans, military service members, DoD employees, and their families.



Moving to Monterey, he continued his work in community services by taking the Program Director position at North County Recreation and Parks District overseeing all recreational programs for the area. Focusing on ensuring quality programming over a long period of time he integrated himself within the community to identify which services were most needed and enjoyed. In that vein, he worked with many other service departments and organizations throughout the County and State, secured funding and increased communication, all of which resulted in more services offered, more participation, and high satisfaction rates. Now, as the Military & Veterans Affairs Office’s Management Analyst I, Jonathan will focus on legislative and community affairs which impact Veteran and military benefits and services. Welcome to the Team, Jonathan!



Dentistry4Vets is Ready to Serve You!

[Dentistry4Vets](#) is a local, non-profit provider of affordable and professional comprehensive dental and oral health care to the Veteran community. Dentistry4Vets recently opened a clinic at the Montage Wellness Center in Marina.

Dental treatment is offered at a 70% discount from the commonly used rates in Monterey County.

Treatment Services Provided

- Initial exam with treatment plan (\$30.00) + X-rays (\$48.00)
- Dental Hygiene Treatment (\$35.00)
- Oral Surgery exams with a panorex x-ray (\$60.00)
- Fillings, dentures, extractions, crowns, bridges, root canals, pathology, and cancer screenings
- Oral surgery for implants and other procedures are offered by Dr. George Yellich (US Navy Veteran) in his private office in Monterey.



Register at www.dentistry4vets.org or (831) 883-9371



COVID-19 Coronavirus

Local advocacy sure has gone a long way recently. In February, with the support of the Monterey County Board of Supervisors and [Congressman Jimmy Panetta](#), MVAO helped champion for 1000 Moderna vaccinations to be distributed to eligible Veterans at the [MG Gourley Clinic in Marina](#).

In early March, MVAO again worked with Congressman Panetta to garner his support of the [SAVE LIVES Act](#) which passed into law on March 24th, approving the VA to administer **COVID vaccinations to ALL Veterans**, including those not enrolled or eligible for VA healthcare. Moreover, this new law provides COVID vaccinations for approved **Caregivers and Spouses**.

At this moment, we are awaiting VA guidance and local clinic information on COVID vaccination quantities, schedules, and patient prioritization. Regardless, this is great news for the Veterans, dependents, and residents of Monterey and San Benito Counties.

Get more information and [sign up at the VA COVID vaccination registry](#) or call the VA Palo Alto COVID vaccination registry at (650) 496-2535 for more information. As always, feel free to contact us at www.mvao.org or calling (831) 647-7613 if we can assist you!

Ways to Connect to the VA for Health Care Eligibility

The interest in COVID vaccinations has drawn out many Veterans seeking VA Health Care. There are two common pathways for VA health care eligibility-

1. Be a former POW; Purple Heart recipient; Combat Veteran discharged within last 5 years; receiving VA service-connected disability benefits; receiving VA pension; receiving Medicaid; or served in Vietnam, SW Asia/Gulf War, or Camp Lejeune during certain periods of time
2. Family income is below the income threshold (i.e., Don't have the resources to otherwise pay for health insurance). [Income limits vary by County](#).

Of course, our accredited Veteran Service Representatives are always standing by to assist with your application for VA benefits, claims and/or services. All our services are free and can be completed remotely or via telephone.

Feel free to contact us at (831) 647-7613 or www.mvao.org.



Our Staff and Veteran Service Representatives are proud to share last quarter's Activity Report showing number and value of claims, benefits, and services provided to Monterey and San Benito County Veterans and Families!



MONTEREY and SAN BENITO COUNTY

Quarterly Activity Report Jan – Mar 2021

Disability Compensation Awards



\$1,713,698

Retroactive Payments

\$213,206

Reoccurring Monthly Payments



549

Scheduled Appointments

1,123 Claims Filed



377 Claims Awarded



2,822

Incoming Phone Calls



In February alone, successfully advocated for **1000** COVID Vaccinations at Marina VA Clinic

\$40,428 in College Fee Waivers

Did you know that only 31.8% of Monterey County Veterans are connected to the VA for Compensation or Pension benefits?

As a Veteran community, we need to look out for each other. If you come across a fellow Veteran, simply ask them if they have connected with the VA. If their answer is no, have them contact our office. Let's work together to increase the number of Veterans accessing VA benefits!