

THE LIGHTFIGHTER

Monterey and San Benito County
Military & Veterans Affairs Office



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More at: www.mvao.org

Cover Art- "Scaling the Wall With a Little Help" - Saudi Arabia, 1991, by Master Sergeant Sieger Hartgers
<https://history.army.mil/museums/armyArtists/msgHartgers-msgVarisano.html>



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



Welcome to the Spring edition of the Lightfighter! As we move into the third quarter of FY22 the legislation cycles are moving into full speed. As your Military & Veterans Affairs its our responsibility to support legislation that would benefit Transitioning Military Members, Reservists, National Guard Members, Veterans, Spouses and Dependents. In addition to directly supporting these efforts we also discuss proposed legislation with our County Board of Supervisors who in-turn provide their strong support. Some of the proposed legislation includes Elimination of State Tax on Military Retirement Pay; Increase of Real Estate Tax Exemption Amount; Creating a Scaled Approach to Qualify for the Real Estate Tax Exemption; and Allow for Online Application for Veteran designation on CDL or ID Card from DMV to name a few.

In addition to proposed legislation, we are working diligently to garner support all over the Central Coast to establish a 9th California Department of Veterans Affairs – “Veterans Home” here in Monterey County. We have had multiple meetings with stakeholders at every level to determine needs and path forward. We have the full backing from our County Board of Supervisors and this effort has been adopted as a 2022 County of Monterey Legislative Priority!

Remember, only 3 out of 10 Veterans in Monterey County are receiving VA Compensation or Pension benefits. Word of mouth is how we can get more Veterans connected! As Veterans, it up to us to look out for one another - we must take care of each other. Share our information! Thank you all for your service!

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

Monterey	Salinas	Marina	Hollister
<p>Monterey County Superior Courthouse</p> <p>1200 Aguajito Rd, Suite 003 Monterey, CA 93940</p> <p><u>(831) 647-7613</u></p> <p>Monday – Thursday 8:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. 1:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.</p> <p>Appointments Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday</p> <p>Walk-In Services on Tuesday</p> <p>Closed on Fridays</p>	<p>Salinas Monterey County Life Foundation Bldg</p> <p>1000 S. Main St, Suite 209A Salinas, CA 93901</p> <p><u>(831) 647-7613</u></p> <p>Monday - Thursday 8:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. 1:00 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.</p> <p>Appointments Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday</p> <p>Walk-In Services on Wednesday</p> <p>Closed on Fridays</p>	<p>Marina MG Gourley VA Outpatient Clinic</p> <p>201 9th St Marina, CA 93933</p> <p><u>(831) 647-7613</u></p> <p>Monday - Thursday 8:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. 1:00 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.</p> <p>Appointments Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday</p> <p>Walk-In Services on Thursday</p> <p>Closed on Fridays</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> <p>Monday - Thursday 8:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. 1:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.</p> <p>Please Call for an Appointment</p> <p>Closed on Fridays</p>



Two Years of COVID for VA: 609,000 Cases; 21,000 Deaths



More than 609,000 VA patients and employees have contracted **COVID-19** over the last two years, and nearly 21,000 have died from the virus. That equates to more than 28 deaths a day linked to COVID during the pandemic across America. Almost 2,400 new VA deaths have been reported since Jan. 1, 2022, and 253 VA employee deaths from COVID work out to roughly one staffer death every three days over that span.

“This has weighed on us, ever since we had our first reported death [from COVID],” said Dr. Steven Lieberman, VA’s Deputy Under Secretary for Health. “We are in the business of saving lives, and this has been a tragic two years for the country.”

But Lieberman said even as the department adjusts operations, leaders at VA recognize that the agency is forever changed by the pandemic, both in positive and negative ways.

“It has just been so upsetting to all of us.”

It has also forced changes that will endure past the pandemic, whose end date is still uncertain.

Telehealth appointments for VA physicians have skyrocketed at the department. Lieberman said before the pandemic, the massive department health care system handled about 2,500 remote video meetings a day. Now, the number is about 41,000.

If you need assistance filing a claim or accessing VA benefits, please contact our office at (831) 647-7613 or www.mvao.org

Veterans, active-duty can take advantage of Public Service Loan Forgiveness program

Veterans and active-duty service members can get one step closer to student loan forgiveness through the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) program.

By **cancelling loans after 10 years of public service**, PSLF removes the burden of student debt on public servants, makes it possible for many borrowers to stay in their jobs, and entices others to work in high-need fields.

The Department of Education will allow months spent on active duty to count toward PSLF, even if the service member’s loans were on a deferment or forbearance rather than in active repayment. **This change addresses one major challenge service members face in accessing PSLF and ensures that members of the military will not need to focus on their student loans while serving our country.**



Federal Student Aid will develop and implement a process to address periods of student loan deferments and forbearance for active-duty service members and will update affected borrowers to let them know what they need to do to take advantage of this change.

You will need to submit a PSLF form so the Department of Education can review your loans under the simplified rules and determine whether your current or past employers qualify for PSLF. You can submit this form through the PSLF Help Tool at StudentAid.gov/PSLF. **You will need to submit your application by October 31, 2022.**

Contact our office at **831-647-7613** or www.mvao.org for assistance accessing Veteran Educational benefits!

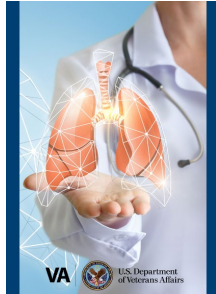


VA to propose certain rare cancers be added to presumed service-connected list

The VA will propose adding certain rare respiratory cancers to the list of [presumed service-connected disabilities](#) in relation to military environmental exposure to particulate matter.

When the proposal becomes final, dependents, survivors, and Veterans who had claims previously denied for **any of the below respiratory cancers** are highly encouraged to file a [supplemental claim](#) for benefits.

- ❖ Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) of the larynx;
- ❖ SCC of the trachea;
- ❖ Adenocarcinoma of the trachea;
- ❖ Salivary gland-type tumors of the trachea;
- ❖ Adenosquamous carcinoma of the lung;
- ❖ Large cell carcinoma of the lung;
- ❖ Salivary gland-type tumors of the lung;
- ❖ Sarcomatoid carcinoma of the lung and;
- ❖ Typical and atypical carcinoid of the lung.



Any Veteran who had one of these cancers manifest to a degree of 0% or more at any time during or after separation would become eligible for service-connection.

VA intends to focus its rule on the rare respiratory cancers above in **Veterans who served any amount of time in the Southwest Asia theater of operations and other locations**. The Southwest Asia theater of operations refers to Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the neutral zone between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, the Gulf of Aden, the Gulf of Oman, the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, and the airspace above these locations.

If you are a Veteran who has been diagnosed with one of the above conditions or need assistance with a supplemental claim, **please contact our office at (831) 647-7613 or www.mvao.org**

VA proposes updates to rating schedule for respiratory, auditory and mental health disorders

The VA is proposing updates to the [VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities](#) for the **respiratory, auditory and mental health disorders** will enable VA to incorporate modern medical data and terminology to provide Veterans with more accurate and consistent decisions.

“Veterans who currently receive compensation for a service-connected condition in these body systems will not have their disability rating impacted when the VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities is updated,” said Thomas Murphy, the VA’s Interim Undersecretary for Benefits. “Updating the rating schedule allows Veterans to receive decisions based on the most current medical knowledge relating to their condition.”

Proposed updates include:

- ✓ Modernizing the evaluative rating criteria for **sleep apnea** to evaluate it based on its responsiveness to treatment
- ✓ Evaluating **tinnitus** as a symptom of the underlying disease which causes it, rather than as a stand-alone disability.
- ✓ Evaluating **mental health conditions** based on a more robust and holistic approach that assesses how impactful the disability is to life activities and self-care. Additionally, the proposed evaluation criteria include a 10% minimum evaluation for having one or more service-connected mental health conditions and will no longer require “total occupational and social impairment” to attain a 100% evaluation.

No change to a Veteran’s current rating would occur due to these proposed changes. If the proposed changes are finalized, Veterans who currently receive compensation for a service-connected condition can apply for increased compensation, but no reductions shall be made unless an improvement in the Veteran’s disability is shown to have occurred. **The public has 60 days (until 4/18/22) to provide comments to VA regarding the proposed updates via the Federal Register notices located [here](#).**



Worries of Toxic Pollutants at Fort Ord

For nearly 80 years, recruits reporting to central California’s Ft. Ord considered themselves the lucky ones, privileged to live and work amid sparkling seas, sandy dunes and sage-covered hills.

However, according to an [AP News Special Investigative Report on toxic pollution at Ft. Ord](#), there was an environmental and health underside. Recruits tossed live grenades into the canyons of “Mortar Alley,” sprayed soapy chemicals on burn pits of scrap metal and solvents, poured toxic substances down drains and into leaky tanks they buried underground. [When it rained, poisons percolated into aquifers](#) from which the base drew its drinking water.

Through the years, Soldiers and civilians who lived at the U.S. Army base didn’t question whether their tap water was safe to drink. But in 1990, four years before it began the process of closing as an active military training base, Ft. Ord was added to the [Environmental Protection Agency’s list of the most polluted places in the nation](#). Included in that pollution were dozens of chemicals, some now known to cause cancer, found in the base’s drinking water and soil.

The AP’s review of public documents shows the Army knew that chemicals had been improperly dumped at Ft. Ord for decades. Even after the contamination was documented, the Army downplayed the risks. **Decades later, several Ft. Ord Veterans who were diagnosed with cancers — especially rare blood disorders.** Veterans in general have higher blood cancer rates than the general population, according to VA cancer data. And in the region that includes Ft. Ord, Veterans have a [35 percent higher rate of multiple myeloma diagnosis](#) than the general U.S. population. The problem is not just at Ft. Ord, but all over the U.S. and abroad, almost everywhere the military has set foot, and the federal government is still learning about the extent of both the pollution and the health effects of its toxic legacy.

Despite the military’s claims that there aren’t any health problems associated with living and serving at Ft. Ord, nor hundreds of other shuttered military bases, almost every closure has exposed widespread toxic pollution and required a massive cleanup. Dozens have contaminated groundwater, from Ft. Dix, New Jersey to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. **Ft. Ord is 25 years into its cleanup as a federal Superfund site, and it’s expected to continue for decades.**

To date, the [military has only acknowledged troops’ health could have been damaged](#) by drinking contaminated water at a single U.S. base: Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, and only during a 35-year window, between 1953 to 1987. Servicemembers there were found by federal epidemiologists to have higher mortality rates from many cancers, including multiple myeloma and leukemia. Men developed breast cancer, and pregnant women tended to have children with higher rates of birth defects and low birth weight. Like Ft. Ord, Camp Lejeune began closing contaminated wells in the mid-’80s.

Following the AP Investigative Report, California **Congressmembers Jimmy Panetta and Katie Porter asked the military and VA to study** whether there’s evidence that potential toxic and contaminated drinking water at Ft. Ord **can be tied to specific cancers and other diseases.** “Our nation owes a debt of gratitude to our servicemembers and their families,” said Reps. Porter and Panetta in a joint letter to the director of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. “By conducting a new study at Ft. Ord, we may guarantee that those harmed while serving our country get the medical care they need.”

Montana **Sen. Jon Tester, Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chair**, added that the “VA should take this and any potential toxic exposure among our military men and women seriously and keep working to provide a fresh look at the possibility of toxic exposures at Ft. Ord which may be causing adverse health effects in Veterans.”



CalVet College Fee Waiver Program

California offers many benefits to California Veterans. Eligibility requirements differ; some require a service-connected (S/C) disability rating, while others don't. One of the most used benefits is the **California College Fee Waiver Program**.



The California College Fee Waiver Program benefits the dependents of Veterans. Students meeting the eligibility criteria may get their **college tuition fees waived if they attend a California Community College, a California State University, or University of California campus**. This benefit can be used in conjunction with other available grants, scholarships, student loans, etc.

To be eligible for the most widely used program, **Plan B**, a child must have a parent who is deceased from a S/C disability or is a disabled Veteran (**0% or more S/C disabled**) and **earn less than \$14,097** per year (this is **student income, NOT parent income**). Applicants to the program must submit proof of income, such as a tax return from the previous year. If the student had no income, a statement to that effect can be obtained from either the Franchise Tax Board at 800-852-5711, or the IRS at 800-829-1040. There is **NO age limit for this plan!**

Additionally, under CalVet's **Plan A**, a spouse or child (up to age 27) can receive a waiver if the **Veteran is S/C deceased or rated 100% S/C disabled**. There is **no income limit** for a spouse or children of S/C deceased or 100% S/C disabled veterans under this section of the program.

There are many state and federal benefits and programs available to Veterans and their dependents. To find out if you are eligible for any of these benefits, visit or call our office at **(831) 647-7613** or www.mvao.org

VA Email Phishing Warning

Phishing is a type of cyber-attack where the attacker sends an email message designed to deceive a person and convince them to reveal sensitive information to the attacker. It is the most common means attackers use to gain unauthorized access to a device to obtain sensitive information.

Phishing emails can come from an unfamiliar sender or familiar looking sender with an email address that is off by a few letters. Additionally, phishing emails can include large or "too good to be true" offers or attachments.



If you receive a suspicious email from the VA, **DO NOT** open the email or click on any attachments or links. **VA does not send emails asking for personal information, threatening emails, or emails claiming to take adverse actions on claimants or beneficiaries (jail or lawsuits)**. If you receive any of these emails or are in doubt about any communications appearing to be from VA, please **contact VA directly at (800) 827-1000**.

You can find more information to help keep you cybersafe at [Cybercrime Support Network](#) and the [Scam Spotter organization](#). If you are unsure of the validity of VA correspondence or need assistance, **please contact our office at (831) 647-7613** or www.mvao.org



Homeless Veteran Stand Down

MVAO is proud to again sponsor Monterey County Homeless Veteran Stand Down at the **Monterey County Fairgrounds from June 17-18, 2022.**

Stand Down is a biennial resource event for Homeless Veterans and their Families. **With the support of the Monterey County Board of Supervisors, MVAO was able to secure additional funding totaling \$100,000 towards this Stand Down.**

Services offered will include

- ✓ Medical and Dental Care
- ✓ Legal Assistance
- ✓ Veterinary Care
- ✓ Homeless Resource Providers
- ✓ Meals
- ✓ Clothing
- ✓ Employment Resources



MVAO is partnering with a local Veteran-serving non-profit, the **Veterans Transition Center (VTC)** www.vtcmonterey.org to organize and execute the event. The Monterey County Homeless Veteran Stand Down is open to all homeless Veterans from across the Central Coast region.

You can help our Homeless Veterans by volunteering to help or donating needed services or items.

More information can be found at www.montereystanddown.org or by calling VTC at 831-883-8387, ext 238 (Marlene Baker)

2022 Monterey County Veterans of the Year Awards Nominations

The Monterey County Military and Veterans Affairs Advisory Commission (MVAAC) established the Veterans of the Year (VOY) Program in 1991 to **honor and recognize Veterans who distinguish themselves through dedicated volunteer service to the citizens of the Monterey County Supervisorial Districts.**

VOY Nominees must have served **Honorably** in Armed Forces of the United States under those conditions as outlined by both Federal and State Law. They must reside in Monterey County, and they must have performed their service to the community in a **volunteer status.**

The volunteer community service recognized may, but is not required to, support other Veterans. Service of many different types for the benefit of any residents of Monterey County is considered worthy of consideration for recognition.

The VOY nomination form is here and nominations must be submitted by **Thursday, June 30, 2022.**

More information can be found by contacting **Sid Williams, United Veterans Council Secretary** at www.uvc-mc.com or through our office at 831-647-7613 and www.mvao.org



MVAO is on FaceBook!

Follow us at

<https://www.facebook.com/people/Monterey-County-Military-Veteran-Affairs-MVAO/100066802656967/>





Our Staff and Veteran Service Representatives are proud to share last Quarter's Activity Report showing the 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



January – March 2022

2,346



Incoming
Calls / Email
Requests

1,026

Vet Rep Appointments



25 College
Fee Waivers

\$104,352

823 Unique Veterans

1,609 Claims Actions

522 Compensation Awards



**New VA Disability Compensation
Awards Earned this Quarter**

\$1,114,066

Retroactive Payments

\$189,078

Recurring Monthly Payments

