

THE LIGHTFIGHTER

Monterey and San Benito County
Military & Veterans Affairs Office



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More at: www.mvao.org

Cover Art- "OPFOR Fort Polk, Louisiana" by SGT Jeffrey Manusza, 1995
<https://history.army.mil/art/DISPLAY1.HTM>



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



First and foremost – happy belated Independence Day! I hope that everyone had a happy and safe 4th of July.

The County Fiscal Year runs July to June. We have now entered Fiscal Year 2022/23 and have done so fully intact, budgetarily. The Military & Veterans Affairs Office (MVAO) is very lean, and our major expense is our personnel - so, any budget cut could be devastating to the services we provide. Our Board of Supervisors recognizes this and has fully supported the office year over year.

We have a few things we are working to complete, hopefully by the end of the calendar year. We anticipate both the Main Office on Aguajito and the Salinas Office on Main Street to complete their respective moves; the Main Office will move to the Coastal Building 1 mile south of the VA Clinic in Marina, and the Salinas Office will move to the “One Stop” Building on La Guardia. This is great news as the moves will tremendously increase our workspace and allow us to serve you better and more comfortably. In addition, we will be working extremely hard to get the State of California to establish a 9th Veterans Home here in Monterey County - managed by the California Department of Veterans Affairs.

Looking forward to continuing to serve each and every one of you! Thank you for your service to our great Nation!

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
Monterey County Superior Courthouse	Monterey County Life Foundation Bldg	MG Gourley VA Outpatient Clinic	San Benito County Veterans Memorial Bldg
1200 Aguajito Rd, Suite 003 Monterey, CA 93940 (831) 647-7613	1000 S. Main St, Suite 209A Salinas, CA 93901 (831) 647-7613	201 9 th St Marina, CA 93933 (831) 647-7613	649 San Benito St Hollister, CA 95023 (831) 637-4846
Monday – Thursday 8:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. 1:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m. Appointments Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday	Monday - Thursday 8:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. 1:00 p.m. – 4:30 p.m. Appointments Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday	Monday - Thursday 8:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. 1:00 p.m. – 4:30 p.m. Appointments Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday	Monday - Thursday 8:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. 1:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.
Walk-In Services on Tuesday	Walk-In Services on Wednesday	Walk-In Services on Thursday	Please Call for an Appointment
Closed on Fridays	Closed on Fridays	Closed on Fridays	Closed on Fridays



National Guard Proposing Healthcare for All Guard Members



Army Gen. Dan Hokanson, Chief of the National Guard Bureau, is proposing funding health insurance for all National Guard members. The

Bureau estimates nearly 60,000, or **one in eight Guard members, don't have health insurance outside of their days on active orders**, clearly impacting the readiness of the Guard.

Because of their reserve status, **Guard members are only eligible for military health insurance during drill weekends, training rotations and deployments**. The basic assumption is that Guard members will have some sort of employer-sponsored health care when they're in a civilian status.

But in reality, it doesn't work out that way.

Small businesses with fewer than 50 employees aren't required to provide insurance, for example, while part-time employees aren't generally eligible for benefits. Then there are jobs like independent contracting, and more, that also don't provide benefits.

The issue of National Guard benefits has gotten more and more attention in the past couple of years, as Guard units have been called up for border patrol support, pandemic response, law enforcement at protests and a months-long mission providing security around the Capitol in Washington, D.C.

When the federal government activates Guard members, they not only get health insurance, but they get to accumulate days that provide other benefits, including the GI Bill and military retirement.

Unfortunately, when state governors activate the Guard, they get none of that.

No bills have yet been proposed, but Gen. Hokanson is working with lawmakers and the DoD on the issue.

To find out if you are eligible for healthcare benefits, contact our office at **(831) 647-7613** or www.mvao.org

Lawmakers Move to Guarantee Cost-of-Living Boost for VA Benefits

Lawmakers recently took the first steps in ensuring that Veterans receive a cost-of-living boost in their federal benefits later this year by introducing legislation that would guarantee the same increases as Social Security.

The measure was filed in May by Reps. Elaine Luria (D-VA) and Troy Nehls (R-TX), followed by Sens. Jon Tester (D-MT) and Jerry Moran (R-KS). In joint statements, the four called the proposal critical to bolstering Veteran's finances.

"We have a responsibility to take care of our Veterans, many of whom rely on VA for financial support," said Moran, ranking member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee. "As rampant inflation is driving up the cost of living, **this legislation helps make certain that Veterans are able to keep up with our changing economy and receive the benefits they have been promised.**"

Typically, lawmakers approve the annual proposal to couple VA benefits increases with Social Security benefits increases by large bipartisan margins.

But it isn't automatic. Despite efforts by some advocates in the past, an annual cost-of-living increase in Veterans benefits requires congressional action, whereas Social Security benefits, are adjusted based on an automatic formula that is triggered whether lawmakers vote on it or not.

Last year, that increase was 5.9%. Officials have not said what this year's adjustment may be, but continued inflation and rising costs across the economy could drive that figure even higher.

The VA COLA increase legislation would apply to payouts for disability compensation, clothing allowance, dependency and indemnity benefits, and other VA assistance programs.

No timetable has been set for when either chamber could vote on the proposal.

Contact our office at **831-647-7613** or www.mvao.org if you have questions about your VA payments



VA Announces Respiratory Cancers as Presumed Service-Connected

The VA announced the addition of nine rare respiratory cancers to the list of newly **presumed service-connected disabilities** due to exposure to **fine particulate matter** (airborne hazards, burn pits, smoke, dust, etc.). Veterans who served any amount of time in the Southwest Asia theater of operations beginning August 2, 1990, to the present, or Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Syria, or Djibouti beginning September 19, 2001 to the present, and had any of these cancers manifest at any time during or after separation are eligible for presumptive service-connection.

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.

The nine presumptive respiratory cancers are

- ❖ Squamous cell carcinoma of the larynx;
- ❖ Squamous cell carcinoma 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.

This eligibility applies to new claims and appeals, pending claims, and claims pending in a VBA decision review lane. **Claims and appeals previously decided will not be automatically readjudicated.** Individuals with a previously denied claim will be sent an outreach letter informing them of the change and how to file a claim.

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

Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program (VRRAP)

If you're a Veteran who lost your job due to the COVID-19 pandemic, VA may have a solution for you. The [Veteran Rapid Retraining Assistance Program \(VRRAP\)](#) offers education and training for a variety of [high-demand jobs](#) so you can get back to work.

VRRAP covers education and training programs approved under the GI Bill and Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) that lead to high-demand jobs. These include associate degrees, non-college degrees, and certificate programs. The Department of Labor determines what's considered a high-demand job for VRRAP.

Qualifying Veterans can receive up to 12 months of tuition and fees along with a monthly housing allowance at [participating schools](#)

To be eligible for VRRAP, you must be between 22 and 66 years of age, unemployed due to COVID-19, able to work, and not eligible for education or unemployment benefits.

If you do qualify, apply soon! The VA will stop accepting new VRRAP enrollments on December 11, 2022—or when they reach either the funding or participant limit, whichever comes first.



MVAO is proud to say we have already connected local Veterans to this great new retraining and employment program. To learn more about VRRAP, program eligibility, and how to apply, visit www.va.gov/education or contact our office at www.mvao.org or **831-647-7613**



Protect Your Veterans Benefits from Scams!

Have you received a suspicious call from an organization claiming to represent or have affiliation with the Department of Veteran Affairs? Did the caller guarantee a lucrative payout for your disability compensation or pension claim for a “small fee”?

If so, **you may be the target of a scammer**. Recently, VA has seen an increase of fraudsters and non-accredited representatives who are [Pension Poaching](#) from elderly Veterans and their dependents and survivors.

Pension Poaching is the financial exploitation by an advisor who profits by artificially qualifying a claimant for VA pension benefits. The scheme often involves financial maneuvers such as advising claimants to hide their assets in trusts or annuity products sometimes resulting in lost investments and lucrative fees paid to the advisor. Pension Poaching is rapidly evolving as a preferred method used by criminals to defraud elderly Veterans, survivors, and their families who are eligible for VA benefits.

- Be suspicious if someone offers to shift your assets around to qualify for VA pension.
- **NEVER** share eBenefits, VA.GOV, or other VA login credentials with anyone.
- **DO NOT** deposit VA benefits directly into a third-party bank account unless the person is court appointed or a VA accredited fiduciary.
- Remember, your **County Veteran Services Offices or VA do not charge fees** for processing a claim. Only use [accredited representatives](#) like [MVAO](#) to help file your claim.
- VA does not threaten or take adverse actions such as jail or lawsuits on claimants. If in doubt, call VA directly at **1-800-827-1000**.

To report suspected activity, please contact the VA Office of Inspector General (OIG) by calling **1-800-488-8244**. You may also file a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission by visiting www.consumercomplaints.fcc.gov.

Protecting Veterans’ benefits against fraudulent activity is one of the best things everyone can do to honor them, their service and sacrifice.

Each of our Veteran Services Representatives is accredited and recognized by the VA. Contact us at www.MVAO.org or **831-647-7613**



MVAO is on FaceBook!

Follow us at

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





Yellow Ribbon Program Can Help Post-9/11 Veterans Pay for More Expensive Schooling

The [Yellow Ribbon Program](#) is specifically geared to Veterans, or their dependents, interested in attending higher-priced [private schools, graduate schools and international universities](#) whose tuition and fees are higher than the maximum Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit. The program can also cover the higher fees charged to nonresidents at [out-of-state](#) universities.

The Yellow Ribbon Program assists Veterans in paying for educational expenses that exceed the maximum Post-9/11 GI Bill payments. As of Aug. 1, the 2022-2023 9/11 GI Bill maximum benefit will be capped at \$26,381. The Yellow Ribbon Program can, in certain circumstances, help Veterans exceed this benefit cap to afford a more expensive undergraduate or graduate school. The program does not require that you attend full-time.

Schools who chose to participate in the Yellow Ribbon Program agree to contribute up to 50% of their tuition costs that exceed the maximum Post-9/11 GI Bill benefit in a given year. How much depends on the individual school. The VA then matches that amount.

Schools calculate your benefit by adding up all tuition and mandatory fees. They then subtract any aid received from other sources — such as scholarships, grants, and your Post-9/11 GI Bill tuition payment. Finally, your school applies its Yellow Ribbon benefit to the total amount calculated.

For example, if you wish to attend a participating university and the tuition is \$40,000 a year, the Post-9/11 GI Bill would pay for all but \$13,619. If the university agreed to waive \$6,000 for Yellow Ribbon participants, the VA would match that contribution, resulting in your yearly out-of-pocket tuition expenses being just \$1,619.

[Each school has its own policies](#), and they may differ for undergraduate, graduate and doctoral programs at the same school. Differences may also apply to the type of school within a university that you wish to attend. So, the benefit for nursing school may differ from that offered to students at the engineering school. Each school is different, and you'll need to investigate thoroughly.

To qualify, you must be eligible for the Post-9/11 GI Bill at the 100% benefit level. The educational benefit covers your full tuition and fees at school, a monthly housing allowance and up to \$1,000 for books and supplies.

To qualify for the maximum amount of this assistance, and to be eligible for the Yellow Ribbon Program, recipients must have:

- Served at least 36 months on active duty and, if separated, received an Honorable discharge;
- Served for at least 30 continuous days (without a break) on or after Sept. 11, 2001; or
- Received a Purple Heart at any time after 9/11 and been Honorably discharged after any amount of service.

Recipients may also qualify for the program if they are dependents taking advantage of the unused benefits transferred by an eligible Veteran or if they are a [Fry Scholar](#)

If you believe you qualify for the program, the next step is investigating whether or not your intended university is a [Yellow Ribbon school](#). If your intended university participates, it's imperative to contact the school to investigate whether it has exceeded its yearly maximum number of students, per its agreed to contract with the VA. Enrollment is on a first come, first serve basis, and funds are limited.

If you need assistance with applying to this valuable program, please contact our office at www.MVAO.org



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



April - June 2022

2,048



Incoming
Calls / Email
Requests

1,040

Vet Rep Appointments



99 College
Fee Waivers

\$601,794

788 Unique Veterans

1,564 Claims Actions

457 Compensation Awards



New VA Disability Compensation Awards Earned this Quarter



\$1,213,530

Retroactive Payments

\$194,180

Recurring Monthly Payments