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California Department of Veterans Affairs **STRATEGIC PLAN**



2021-2023



CAL VET
CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT
OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

LETTER FROM THE SECRETARY

Since 2015, I have had the distinct honor of leading the California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet). Originally appointed by Governor Brown; in 2020, I was granted the privilege to continue serving the approximately 1.6 million veterans of California by being reappointed as Secretary of CalVet by Governor Gavin Newsom. As a war veteran, who served through four different deployments in the Gulf Wars, I couldn't think of a more rewarding way to continue to serve than by working with our dedicated CalVet staff, as well as our partners in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), County Veterans Service Offices, and veterans service organizations across the state to ensure veterans achieve a high quality of life by connecting them with the benefits they have earned.



In our 2018-20 Strategic Plan, we laid out a list of accomplishments we had achieved over the few preceding years, along with some additional goals we sought to accomplish. I am pleased to say that we have met and, in some cases, exceeded our goals; and now we will build upon those successes and look for new ways to continue improving the lives of veterans and their families.

As a practicing physician, one of my proudest achievements for CalVet is that, for the past three years, we have consistently earned 4- and 5-star ratings for quality-of-care operations in our eight Veterans Homes throughout California. In fact, our Barstow, Chula Vista, Fresno, Redding, and Yountville Homes ranked among the best nursing homes in California by U.S. News & World Report.

After years of planning, we are now set to roll out two distinct, but equally important, projects that will improve the quality of health care in our Homes. Construction of a \$300 million state-of-the-art, 240-bed Skilled Nursing Facility on our Yountville campus will commence in spring of 2021. We will also be implementing a new California Electronic Health Records system (CEHR) in our Homes starting in 2021, which will streamline clinical, financial, and administrative processes in our Homes.

In 2018, California voters passed a \$1 billion bond to support the CalVet Home Loans Program. In the past three years, CalVet has issued \$465 million in bonds, using the proceeds to provide home loans to 1,847 veterans to help them purchase a home. I never tire of reading the effusive thank you letters from grateful families, acknowledging the members of our Home Loans Division for their care and compassion, as those veterans achieved their piece of the American dream. This year, we will commemorate the 100th anniversary of the program.

Another way we work to get veterans and their families into housing is through our Veterans Housing and Homelessness Prevention Program (VHHP). In conjunction with our partners in the Department of Housing and Community Development and the California Housing Finance Agency, the VHHP has funded approximately \$365 million for emergent, transitional, permanent supportive, and affordable housing for veterans. So far, VHHP has funded 75 separate projects that resulted in the building of 3,000 veteran housing units throughout the state.

Housing is not the only benefit we have dramatically expanded in the past several years. In the last strategic plan, we outlined the new California Transition Assistance Program (CalTAP) to educate service members, veterans, and their families about the benefits they have earned. This is the first-of-its-kind state program in the nation which addresses the needs of veterans at every stage of their lives – from the time they separate from active duty, through their education and providing for their families, up until the end of their lives.

We have now instituted this CalTAP curriculum at 24 active-duty military installations statewide. We've also developed a student veteran orientation program to reach the nearly 60,000 veterans attending California colleges and universities. The CalTAP curriculum is based on 34 online modules containing 141 lessons that cover a myriad of topics – from accessing compensation and pension benefits to enrolling in VA health care. All online modules are available on our CalVet website.

We've also dramatically increased our outreach efforts to women and minority veterans, two groups who have been traditionally vastly underserved. California is home to approximately 150,000 women who served in our U.S. military. CalVet's Women Veterans Division (WVD) implemented a Women Veterans Roster in late 2014. This roster helps connect subscribers with updated information about benefits, programs, services, and resources throughout California. Over the past three years, the Women Veterans Roster grew from approximately 58,000 contacts to about 75,000 contacts. In addition to other outreach activities, the WVD organized or participated in more than three dozen workshops and outreach events, and presented more than a dozen webinars on issues covering health care, traumatic brain injury, domestic violence, financial aid, and higher education.

Of the nearly 1.6 million veterans in California, more than 661,000 self-identify as an ethnic minority. While minority veterans comprise approximately 38 percent of the total California veteran population, as a group they are less likely to access their veterans benefits than do non-minority veterans. CalVet has been actively working to address that disparity, and its Minority and Underrepresented Veterans Division (MUVD) has been working diligently to ensure all veterans receive equal access to services — regardless of race, ethnicity, country of origin, religion, disability, gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

In March 2018, MUVD launched the Pathway to Citizenship program in partnership with the Governor's Office and community immigration services. The goal of the workshop is to provide free legal assistance to veterans seeking citizenship and/or naturalization services. Additionally, veterans have the opportunity to learn about state and federal benefits they have earned. In this short time, the division hosted workshops in 11 cities in 10 different counties across California.

Similar to the Women Veterans Roster, a MUVD Roster was launched to provide updates on benefits, programs, and services to minority and underrepresented veterans. The division also participated in numerous outreach and training programs throughout the state.

None of the work we do to house, protect, and serve veterans in California, and none of our advocacy and outreach efforts, would be possible without the diligent work and unwavering support from CalVet's Legal, Administrative, Legislation, Information Technology, and Communications divisions. The efforts behind the scenes to increase efficiencies, to make our systems better, to improve communication efforts with the public, local elected officials, and community members, are all vital to our successes over the past few years.

And while it's important to look back on those successes, only some of which are captured above, the following pages will provide a roadmap for building upon those successes and further improving how we serve veterans over the coming years.

We know now, perhaps more than ever, that we must be nimble in how we provide those services. Throughout 2020 and continuing into 2021, we faced one of our most daunting challenges yet. COVID-19 swept across the globe, and CalVet faced this foe head on. Our team quickly ramped up new procedures and policies to keep our employees and the residents in our Homes safe, and we implemented creative ways to continue serving veterans in our communities. I am immensely proud of what we have accomplished and the way we have all come together during this global pandemic.

There is always more to do, and I am looking forward to working with my dedicated team here at CalVet as well as with federal, state, local partners, and non-profit groups — all committed to improving services to California veterans.



Vito Imbasciani MD
Secretary



MISSION

To serve and honor all California veterans by connecting them and their families with their earned benefits through education, advocacy, and direct services.

VISION

CalVet provides innovative leadership in veteran advocacy and veteran services in California, and sets the national standard for connecting veterans and their families with the rights and benefits they have earned through their military service.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

COMPASSION

We exhibit respect, empathy, and sensitivity in every interaction, treating all veterans and their family members, our colleagues, and our partners with dignity and appreciation. We understand and honor the military experience and the impacts of service on veterans and their families.

ACCOUNTABILITY

We hold ourselves responsible for providing extraordinary care in our veterans homes, exceptional outreach and service to our veterans community, and sound stewardship of our resources, and do so with competence and expertise.

LEADERSHIP

We spearhead, collaborate upon, and support initiatives to develop and adopt innovative ideas to enhance veterans rights, services, advocacy, and outreach statewide and throughout the nation. We share our improvements and counsel freely with other veterans service providers.

CALIFORNIA VETERANS

California is home to nearly 1.6 million of the nation's approximately 18 million veterans, more than any other state. California veterans are a diverse group encompassing women veterans, Native American veterans, Asian American veterans, Latino veterans, Black veterans, and more LGBTQ veterans than any other state.

Much like the U.S. veteran population, California's veterans are in a state of transition. According to VA data, California's veteran population will decrease steadily over the next few decades. The primary cause for this decline is the loss of the WWII and Korean War cohorts, who now represent fewer than 8% of California's veterans.





However, the population reduction is not indicative of a proportional decline in service demands. As Vietnam War veterans continue to age, they are more likely than their predecessors to have physical and mental healthcare needs, as will Gulf War era veterans over the next few decades. Compared to past generations, Vietnam War and Gulf War era veterans are several times more likely to have documented service-connected injuries or illnesses, with an especially high concentration of severe disabilities. CalVet believes these greater needs will translate to ongoing high demand for long-term care, despite the overall population decline, with these needs developing at younger ages.

The vast majority of veterans return to civilian life with little difficulty and assume their roles as productive members of their communities, benefitting from the training and experience gained through their military service. CalVet works to ensure those veterans are aware of benefits and resources available for them to enhance the career, family, health, and financial aspects of their lives. While most veterans eventually transition into civilian life with success, those who experience difficulties need greater assistance and services. Multiple subsets of our veterans struggle with their post-service transition due to injury and disability, mental health and substance abuse issues, or difficulty accessing education and employment opportunities.

While just over 5% of adult Californians today have served in the military themselves, statewide public support for ensuring that our nation keeps its promise to service members continues to be strong. With assistance from our partners at the federal, state, and county levels, as well as the non-profit and service organizations our state is fortunate to have in abundance, CalVet is committed to ensuring that all veterans attain a high quality of life.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OVERVIEW

CalVet serves California's veterans through three core program areas: Veterans Services and Outreach, Veterans Homes of California, and the Home Loans program. This strategic plan outlines how programmatic and support divisions within CalVet will work to accomplish the goals and objectives to deliver care and services to California's veterans. Each element of this plan directly supports CalVet's Mission and Vision, and was developed to ensure we perform in accordance with our Guiding Principles.

GOALS

1. Provide the highest quality care and services to California veterans and their families.
2. Collaborate with local, state, and federal leaders; stakeholders; and other partners to enhance services and protections for veterans and their families.
3. Bolster outreach and service delivery to rural, tribal, women, minority, LGBTQ, and other underserved veterans.
4. Invest in our workforce and enhance operational effectiveness to maximize service to our veterans.



GOAL 1

PROVIDE THE HIGHEST QUALITY CARE AND SERVICES TO CALIFORNIA VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES.

- A. Continue to provide premiere care throughout California's eight veterans homes. Maintain 4- and 5-star ratings by the U.S. centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, as well as top rankings and inspection marks from state licensing agencies and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.
- B. Build upon efforts to respond to the changing needs of veterans throughout California's veterans homes. Using the Veterans Homes of California 2020 Master Plan (2020 Master Plan) as a guide, ensure the continued success of the Veterans Homes by preparing for a sustained high service demand, specifically for long-term care, by California's veteran population, despite an overall population decline.
- C. Improve CalVet Home Loan use among veterans and real estate professionals through new loan products and improved technology. Develop and improve communication, outreach and product offerings - such as refinancing - to assist veterans and real estate professionals statewide in providing a home loan, and the realization of the American dream of homeownership, to as many veterans as possible.
- D. Enhance efforts to educate California veterans and their families about federal, state, and local benefits. Continue to work closely with local communities and other partners to improve the California Transitional Assistance Program (CalTAP), ensuring that we interact with veterans at pivotal moments throughout their post-military experience to educate them about the services and benefits they have earned.
- E. Enhance efforts to provide services and housing for veterans experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless. Working with our partners at the California Department of Housing and Community Development and the California Housing Finance Agency, continue to assist veterans to achieve housing stability and improve self-sufficiency through the VHHP.



GOAL 2

COLLABORATE WITH LOCAL, STATE, AND FEDERAL LEADERS; STAKEHOLDERS; AND OTHER PARTNERS TO ENHANCE SERVICES AND PROTECTIONS FOR VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES.

- A. Strengthen collaboration with the VA and other partners at the national level to improve and expand healthcare, housing, education, inclusion, and outreach to all veterans, while increasing federal investment in CalVet operations. Collaborate through summits, meetings, and other direct contacts with federal legislators, high-level representatives within divisions of the VA, and groups such as the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs. Work to improve mental health services, enhance and expand education benefits, support expansion of the HUD/VASH program, and improve outreach to the LGBTQ community, and the reversal of the ban on transgender individuals from serving in the military, among other efforts. Advocate, educate, and strategically engage federal decision-makers about the work of CalVet and the needs of California's veterans to ensure veterans and their families receive federal support.

B. Maintain timely and effective communication and collaboration with local and state government entities, partners, and stakeholders. Improve strategic engagement with local elected officials and community leaders, key state legislators, and other stakeholders to ensure policies, regulations, and proposed legislation benefit and best serve veterans as well as CalVet's mission.



C. Enhance CalVet's leadership function in collaboration with the veteran community. Continue to expand CalVet's role as a state and national leader in veteran advocacy through statewide conferences, meetings, and consultations with our partners at the federal, state, and local government levels, as well as non-profit organizations and veteran service organizations throughout California.

D. Ensure veterans and their families are satisfied with the care and services they receive. Enhance outreach and communication with residents, families, stakeholders, and the public through regular meetings, social media, and other means. Ensure veterans in our homes have a voice about care, activities, and quality of life through the Allied Councils, town halls, and individual meetings.

GOAL 3

BOLSTER OUTREACH AND SERVICE DELIVERY TO RURAL, TRIBAL, WOMEN, MINORITY, LGBTQ, AND OTHER UNDERSERVED VETERANS.



A. Intensify ongoing efforts to highlight inequities and improve service delivery to traditionally underserved veteran communities. Through the MUV and the WVD, increase the use of webinars, workshops, social media, community events, and engagement with stakeholder groups to ensure federal and state decision-makers understand inequities; while all veterans, regardless of sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, national origin, citizenship status, religion, sex, age, or mental or physical disability, have access to and receive the benefits they have earned.

B. Increase awareness of, provide preventative training for, and improve access to services that address military sexual trauma (MST). In collaboration with the Governor's Military Council; key local, state and federal officials; and stakeholder groups, promote awareness of MST as well as the devastating impacts MST has on service members. Advocate for improved training for all active-duty military personnel in every branch of the military, and connect survivors with services and benefits available from the VA, the state, and local communities for veterans who have experienced MST.

C. Raise the level of CalVet's cultural competency and our ability to effectively serve our diverse veterans. Continually focus on, evaluate, and improve staff training as well as develop and deliver services, to be culturally aware and customer-service oriented. Ensure that all publications, posted information, and public remarks acknowledge the interests of all segments of our diverse veteran population.

GOAL 4

INVEST IN OUR WORKFORCE AND ENHANCE OPERATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS TO MAXIMIZE SERVICE TO OUR VETERANS.

- A. Implement modern information technology solutions throughout CalVet. Actively explore and implement solutions that use modern methods and technology to enhance the delivery of care to residents; streamline outreach efforts; and provide more efficient services to all veterans and their families. Such efforts should include, but not be limited to, implementing the CEHR system and expanding telemedicine in every Veterans Home; increasing training for appropriate staff on the state's Financial Information System for California (FI\$Cal); and regularly updating CalVet's website to ensure veterans have easy access to information and benefits.



- B. Plan proactively for department staffing needs and improve efforts to recruit, develop and retain quality staff. Update the department's workforce development plan. Collaborate with other state departments and agencies on best practices for recruiting and retaining quality staff. Increase participation in job fairs and work with veterans groups, community colleges, and other stakeholders to publicize career opportunities at CalVet. Increase efforts to publicize job openings and positive accomplishments and articles through traditional media, social media, CalVet Connect, seminars, and speaking engagements. Implement an exit interview policy in all divisions to track reasons why staff leave CalVet.



- C. Identify and plan for the future long-term needs of California's veteran population and of each Veterans Home. Utilizing information provided in the 2020 Master Plan, prepare for the changing demographics and needs of California's veteran population. Initiate policies across all divisions to address those changes. Work with the VA, the California Legislature, stakeholders, and other partners to address new challenges of an aging veteran population, to implement key recommendations of the 2020 Master Plan, and to ensure our veterans receive the same compassionate, high-quality care, and services for years to come.