STATE OF CALIFORNIA EDMUND G. BROWN JR, Governor

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
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September 13, 2011

Dear Veteran Stakeholder,

I would like to call your attention to the attached report: "California's Veterans Needs Assessment – *Policy Implications for the Future*". This study looks at a variety of data collection efforts to define where California should focus veteran policy. Simply stated: our priorities should be to provide our veterans easier access to Employment, Healthcare, Education and Training, and Housing, in that order. Those priorities are based upon what VETERANS are telling us, not upon our own preconceived notions.

While I recognize that this study may raise concerns, because it seems to leave out vulnerable demographics like homeless veterans, it is time to recognize that the cure to veteran homelessness lies more in prevention and less symptomatic in treatment. Our priorities must be to provide transitioning veterans assistance with Employment, Healthcare, Education and Training, and Housing, which will allow them to successfully transition back to civilian life. This must be done while still doing our best to take care of those veterans who have not yet successfully made the transition.

I hope you find this report thought provoking and thank you for your continued support of California's 2 million veterans.

Sincerely,

(copy of original signature upon request)

PETER J. GRAVETT
Major General (Retired)
Secretary

Enclosure

California Veterans Needs Assessment

Policy Implications for the Future

September 2011

California Department of Veterans Affairs

Peter Gravett, Secretary

Executive Summary

The California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet) strives to provide high quality advocacy and services for veterans. To do so, and to maximize the effective use of scarce resources, CalVet must understand the needs of veterans and how to best provide veterans' services and information. To prioritize its strategic goals, CalVet conducted a number of information gathering efforts relating to how California's veterans perceive their personal needs and the needs of their fellow veterans. By having a clear understanding of veterans needs, CalVet will be better able to implement policy initiatives to adapt its programs to meet those needs.

CalVet looked at the results of several investigations aimed at identifying California's veterans needs including:

- **California's Veterans: *Changing Times, Changing Needs*** – the California Veterans Needs Assessment was a survey of more than 4,500 veterans regarding their needs and effective ways to provide veteran services and benefit information.
- ***CalVet Connect* Interviews** –interviews of more than 50,000 veterans as part of *CalVet Connect* (the successor to Operation Welcome Home or OWH).
- ***CalVet Connect Reintegration*** – benefit information requests generated through CalVet's veteran reintegration process.
- ***County Veterans Service Officers*** –a survey of County Veterans Service Officers (CVSO) soliciting their professional opinion of veteran needs in their local communities based on their thousands of contacts with veterans every year.

The most common veteran concerns identified throughout these investigations include **Employment, Healthcare, Education, and Housing**. These four core issues should drive the State's policies and resource priorities as we move forward. Other findings of interest to setting policy priorities are the lack of awareness of available benefits and lack of awareness on how to connect to those benefits; benefits which could alleviate the need for assistance with employment, healthcare, education, and housing.

A coordinated two pronged approach is needed to ensure that policy and resource allocation decisions not only address alleviating the identified needs, but also address improving veteran awareness and connectivity to benefits. Simply making policy decisions that increase employment, healthcare, education, and housing benefits will have little impact on individual veterans unless we first solve the problems of making veterans aware of those benefits and then providing them the connectivity to take advantage of those benefits. This is best summarized as a "prevention is 9/10ths of the cure" approach to solving veteran issues.

In order to make significant inroads to better serving California's veterans, the State must adopt policies that improve services to veterans in the following priority:

1. Employment
2. Healthcare
3. Education and Training
4. Housing

Statewide policies should recognize a need to reprioritize and reallocate resources among CalVet's General Fund resourced programs to address those service priorities, as well as recognize the need to consolidate the variety of veteran programs scattered throughout many state agencies under the purview of CalVet, and to improve collaborations multi-dimensionally among the many funders, providers and governmental agencies.

Specific recommendations to assist in furthering California's ability to better meet our veteran needs include:

1. California should undertake a major effort to have the Department of Defense implement a "hot hand-off" of service members being discharged from active duty to the individual state departments of veteran affairs. This hand-off would include electronic distribution of discharge documents and voluntary enrollment in the veteran reintegration program.
2. California should evaluate the transfer of veteran employment programs from the Employment Development Department to CalVet. Implementation should be done in phases with CalVet assuming responsibility for the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) as a first priority.
3. California should establish a leadership role for the Troops to College initiative within CalVet.
4. Establish an interagency collaborative forum to build synergy, reduce costs through economy of scale and reduction in duplicative efforts.
5. CalVet should evaluate the level of services being provided at its veteran homes in comparison to those provided in the private sector to determine if it could reduce operating costs. CalVet should then seek authority to redirect some portion of realized savings and improvements in revenue streams to fund improvements in veteran services.
6. CalVet should undertake an effort to revamp the Farm and Home Loan Program to make it more pertinent to a wider range of veterans.

Factual Data on Veteran Needs

In developing conclusions, implications and policy recommendations, CalVet looked at the results of recent fact-finding efforts aimed at identifying California's veteran needs. These include two broad based, statewide surveys of veterans and their families (California Veterans Needs Assessment Survey and CalVet Connect interviews), veteran requests for benefit information, and a smaller survey of full time professional veteran service representatives in California's county veterans service offices.

California's Veterans: Changing Times, Changing Needs

CalVet conducted the Veterans Needs Assessment Survey to gain the veteran's perspective on their specific needs and to find the best way of providing veteran services and benefit information. The survey was conducted between February and May 2010. Paper and on-line versions of the survey were presented to veterans and active duty members throughout California. In addition, families of veterans and active duty members, as well as concerned citizens, were invited to participate. The full text of the survey report is available at www.calvet.ca.gov.

The survey data analysis identified critical needs of veterans and active duty members as well as differences across some of the measured demographics. The following significant findings are highlighted as they form the basis for our conclusions:

Needs in General

- Employment (finding a job) was the most urgent need of veterans and active duty members, followed closely by meeting healthcare needs, job training and education.
- One-third of veterans and active duty members also thought knowing more about benefits was a critical need.
- Critical needs differed across military status (veterans vs. active duty members), age groups, genders and geographic regions:
    - The need for jobs, training/education, help buying a home, healthcare, substance abuse treatment, and mental health services decreased with age.
    - Compared to veterans, active duty members were more likely to want help with jobs, training/education, buying a home, and applying for benefits. This is likely due to the overall younger age of active duty members compared to veterans in general. Conversely, older veterans were more likely to express a need for long-term care/assisted living.
    - Significant differences were also found between males and females including:
        - Females have a greater need for help with military sexual trauma, mental health services and buying a home;
        - Males on the other hand were more likely to want help applying for benefits and were more likely to report not having critical needs.
    - Compared to respondents in other geographical regions, respondents living in the Los Angeles region were more likely to need a job and training/education. Respondents in the north state and Inland Empire regions were the most likely to need mental health services.

Knowledge of veteran benefits

- The majority of veterans and active duty members knew about VA benefits with nearly 40% reporting they had good or excellent knowledge and another 40% reporting they had average knowledge. Only 3% claimed reported they did not know anything about VA benefits.
- Knowledge of benefits differed across age groups and geographic region:
    - Knowledge did not increase or decrease with age. In fact, respondents between 70 and 79 years of age were the most knowledgeable about benefits. Conversely, those 29 and younger, 60 to 69, and 80 and older were the least knowledgeable.
    - Respondents in the Central Coast, north state, and San Diego OWH regions were more knowledgeable about benefits than respondents in most other regions.

Reasons for not claiming/receiving benefits

- The two most common reasons for not receiving VA benefits were:
    - Respondents did not feel they were eligible (38%)
    - Respondents did not know how to file or where to get claims assistance (26%).

- Surprisingly, more veterans than active duty members felt they were not eligible for federal benefits, which seems unusual since a majority of those benefits are not available to active duty members. However, more active duty members than veterans do not know how to file for benefits or where to get help with claims.
- Males (21%) were more than twice as likely as females (9%) to choose not to file a claim.
- Younger respondents (under 30) were more likely than older respondents to not know how to file a claim or where to go for claims assistance.
- Respondents also provided other reasons for not receiving benefits:
    - Veterans are too proud to apply for "help."
    - Veterans do not need VA benefits.
    - There is negative stigma associated with receiving benefits that discourages veterans from applying.
    - Veterans have had negative past experiences with the VA.
    - Veterans find that it is too difficult to qualify for benefits.

CalVet Connect - Information Requests and Veteran Interview Data

As an initial method for capturing veteran contact information, CalVet works in conjunction with the Employment Development Department and the National Guard to collect "reintegration forms" from veterans. These forms collect contact information and provide options for veterans to request benefit information. This data is collected through both hard copy and on-line versions of the reintegration form. In the first eighteen months these forms have been collected, over 54,000 veterans have requested information on specific benefit topics (Chart 1). The most frequently requested information topics are[1]:

1. Employment
2. State Benefits
3. Education/Training
4. Healthcare
5. College Fee Waiver for Dependents
6. Compensation and Pension Benefits
7. Veterans License Plate Program

[1] It should be noted that the reintegration form does not provide a check box to request information on housing options.

Reintegration Form Summary Report

Reintegration Forms	
Total Forms Received	54,582

Information Requests	
Information Requested	Number Of Requests
Employment	42,170
State Benefits	40,669
Education/Training	34,949
Healthcare	32,300
College Fee Waiver for Dependents	30,853
Compensation & Pension Benefits	29,550
Veterans License Plate Program	29,042
Financial Assistance	22,538
CalVet Home Loans	22,407
Veterans Service Organizations	18,787
OEF/OIF Veterans	14,803
Legal Assistance	14,406
Disabled Veteran Business Enterprise	13,494
DD 214	12,974
TBI/PTSD	12,854
Veterans Homes	12,576
Transportation	11,758
Women Veterans Roster	8,005
Agent Orange	7,474
Volunteering	7,028
Total Requests	418,637

Veterans of OIF/OEF/OND conflicts	25,814

(as of 5/22/2011)

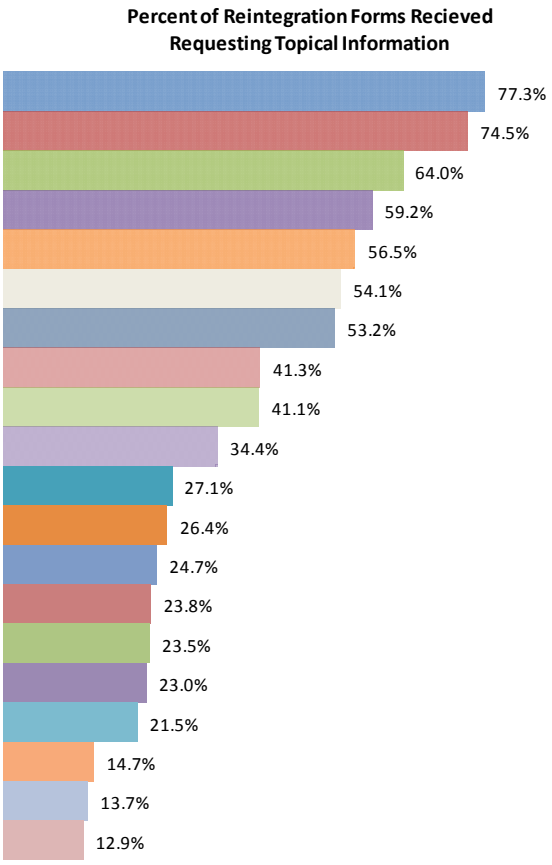

Chart 1 – Veteran Information Requests Through the Reintegration Form Process

The CalVet Connect program conducts personal interviews with veterans resulting in a second source of veteran needs related data. One component of Operation Welcome Home (the precursor to CalVet Connect) involved personal contact with the most recently released veterans. Contact information was derived from the reintegration forms primarily collected as service members attended the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) just prior to their release from active duty. CalVet Corps members would contact these veterans within one week of their anticipated return to California to introduce the veterans to the program, and then conduct a structured interview process at 30, 90, and 180 days after the initial contact.

During these interviews a structured series of questions were asked, as well as a general discussion of veteran benefits to elicit the veteran's need for referral to specific services. A veteran may be given multiple referrals to a variety of services during these interviews. Of the almost 46,000 veterans who were interviewed there were over 192,000 referrals to services. Chart 3 summarizes those referrals by general topics.

CalVet Connect Interviews

Total Interviews	45,889
Type of Referral	**Referrals**
Employment Services (including One Stops, Unemployment Insurance, and other employment services)	90,944
Healthcare (including VA Health Care, Traumatic Brain Injury, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Family Counseling, Substance Abuse, and Women's Health)	33,890
Education and Training	30,592
Financial Assistance	11,867
Housing Services (including homeless veteran issues, transitional housing, and mortgage/foreclosure issues)	10,455
Compensation Benefits	10,040
Legal Services	4,344
Total Referrals	192,132

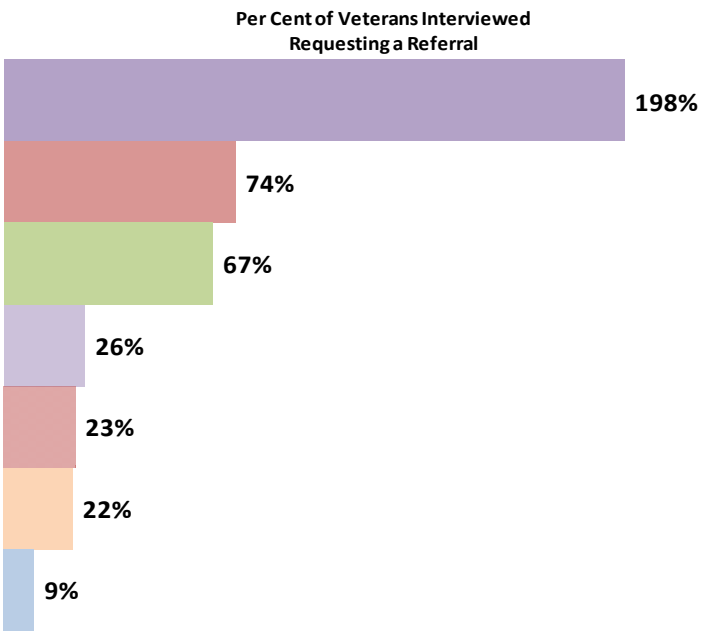

Chart 2 - CalVet Connect Interview & Referral Data

As can be clearly seem from the data veterans sought multiple referrals to Employment Services, and significantly more referrals to Healthcare Services and Education Services than other types of services.

County Veterans Service Officers

In January 2010, CalVet released a survey to the County Veterans Service Officers (CVSO) of California. The purpose of the survey was to poll those on the front lines serving veterans about their expert opinions on the most important veteran needs and how veteran services could be enhanced.

A total of 32 CVSO representatives completed the questionnaire, giving CDVA a snapshot of their first-hand experiences with veterans regarding concerns such as claim submissions, training, license plate sales, general issues the CVSO faces, use of work studies, transportation options, and budget cuts.

One question was directly related to the issues under consideration in this analysis, specifically: "In your expert opinion, what are the top three "needs" for veterans?" The results are displayed in Chart 3:

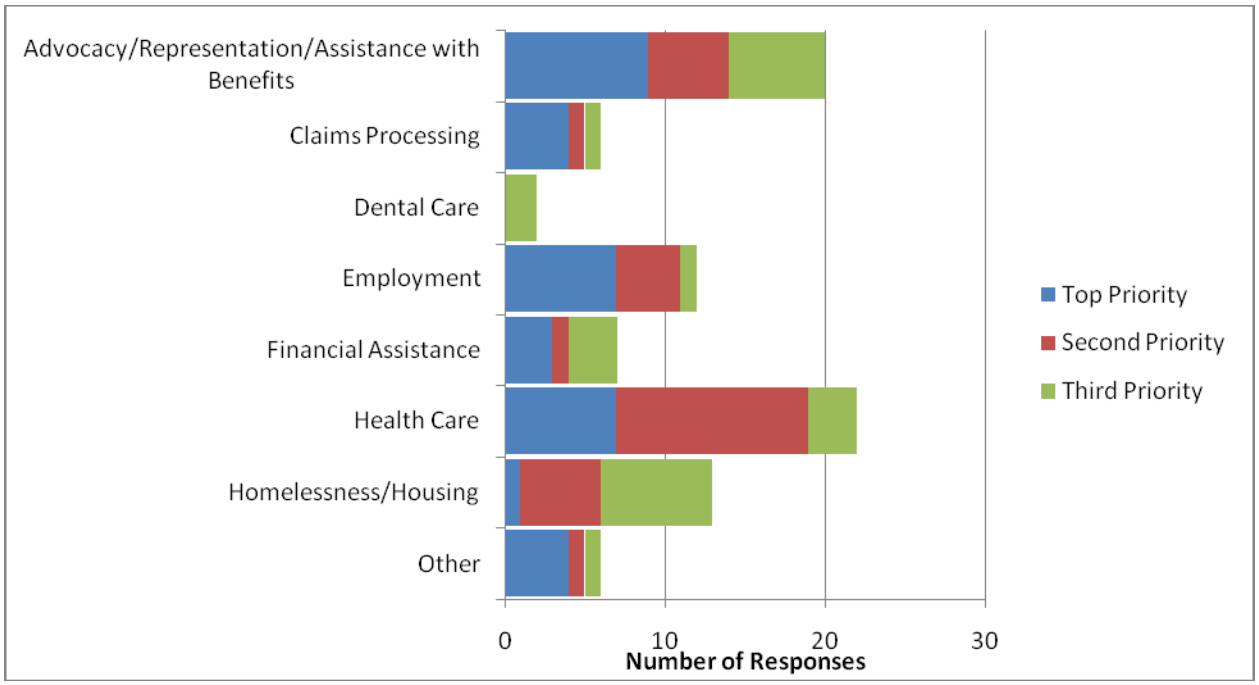

Chart 3 - CVSO Responses to the survey question "In your expert opinion, what are the top three "needs" for veterans?"

Conclusions

Veteran Needs

Needs reported in the California Veterans Needs Assessment Survey were compared to similar data collected under the Department's CalVet Connect program, as well as to those identified by the county veterans service officer survey. Comparisons were made on services/needs categories that the samplings had in common, although some were not exact matches. For example, *housing* in the OWH weekly report was compared to *homelessness* and *help buying a home* in the CalVet survey.

The following table lists the most frequently identified needs from the various sources.

Veterans' Needs in Descending Order Beginning with Most Requested/Reported Service/Need

CalVet Survey	Cal Vet Connect Reintegration Requests	CalVet Connect Interviews	CVSO Survey
1. Employment	1. Employment	1. Employment	1. Healthcare
2. Healthcare	2. State Benefits	2. Healthcare	2. Representation/ Claims Assistance
3. Learning about benefits/Claims Assistance	3. Education/Job Training	3. Education/Job Training	3. Employment
4. Education/Job Training	4. Healthcare	4. Financial Assistance	4. Housing
5. Housing	5. College Fee Waiver	5. Housing	5. Financial Assistance

Clearly employment ranks consistently as the top priority need, followed by healthcare needs and education and training, and finally housing needs. The prioritization of employment as the number one issue, in particular for veterans recently released from active duty is reinforced by the May 2011 Bureau of Labor Statistics which reports that veterans who enlisted after the September 11, 2001 attacks have a higher un-employment rate (12.1%) then veterans from other eras (8.3%) and non-veterans (8.5%)

Veteran Benefit Awareness and Utilization

The California Veterans Needs Assessment Survey data also allows us to form conclusions related to benefit awareness and utilization and their impact on addressing these priorities.

While 80% of all veterans assess their knowledge of veteran benefits as average or better, there is a significant difference when you compare that general veteran population to the under-30 age group. The survey found that the under-30 demographic is one of the least knowledgeable age groups. In trying to understand why veterans were not claiming or receiving benefits, the survey shows that those younger veterans are significantly less likely than older respondents to know how to file a claim or where to go for claims assistance.

It should also be noted that the survey of CVSOs identified claims representation as the second most significant issue. Although not in the top four veterans needs overall, this finding is consistent with findings from the Veterans Needs Assessment Survey in the area of benefit awareness.

While not specifically analyzed for the purposes of this report, it is interesting to note that a recent survey of women veterans in the Inland Empire produced substantially the same findings discussed above.

Policy Implications

California should set a focus on improving services to veterans in the following priority:

1. Employment
2. Healthcare
3. Education and Training
4. Housing

In an era of needing to perform better in delivering services to California's veterans with less resources, the State should reprioritize and reallocate resources (funding and positions) among CalVet's General Fund resourced programs.

California should undertake an effort to consolidate the variety of veteran programs scattered throughout many state agencies under the purview of CalVet.

Recommendations

1. California should undertake a major effort to have the Department of Defense implement a "hot hand-off" of service members being discharged from active duty to the individual state departments of veteran affairs. This hand-off would include electronic distribution of discharge documents and voluntary enrollment in the veteran reintegration program.
2. California should evaluate the transfer of veteran employment programs from the Employment Development Department to CalVet. Implementation should be done in phases with CalVet assuming responsibility for the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) as a first priority.
3. California should establish a leadership role for the Troops to College initiative within CalVet.
4. Establish an interagency collaborative forum to build synergy, reduce costs through economy of scale, and reduction in duplicative efforts.
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6. CalVet should undertake an effort to revamp the Farm and Home Loan Program to make it more pertinent to a wider range of veterans.