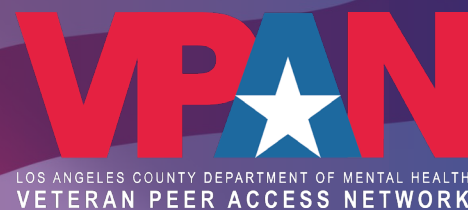


Los Angeles County VPAN Quarterly Dispatch



The quarterly newsletter for L.A. County Department of Mental Health Veteran Peer Access Network

Meeting the need where it exists: VPAN gets personal

Working in the field of mental health necessarily involves “getting personal”. When you’re dealing with an individual’s mental health, you’re dealing with what makes them tick, what thoughts or impulses are behind their actions. It doesn’t get much more personal than that.

This work can manifest in a variety of ways and with a variety of partners. For some examples, let’s use the work Alex Vasquez, a newly-promoted Mental Health Clinical Supervisor who represents Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health (LACDMH) on the Veteran Mental Evaluation Team (VMET), has been doing in the field recently:



*Dr. Rhonda Higgins,
Program Director*

- Coordinating with a Veteran Justice Officer and Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) on behalf of an incarcerated veteran to ensure he isn’t back out on the street following his release.
- Working with the Los Angeles Police Department Case Assessment Management Program to foster an environment in which no veterans experiencing homelessness or mental health issues fall through the cracks.
- Going with the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department (LASD) to visit a veteran experiencing severe mental health issues so

they can connect him with in-patient residential treatment and HUD-VASH housing.

- Transporting one of our veterans with the assistance of LASD to a residential substance abuse treatment facility in Tarzana.

As you can see, “getting personal” can involve a lot of coordination with our partners in law enforcement, whether it’s routine outreach and wellness checks or crisis management. This work is and always will be a team effort.

We also can’t help but get personal to an extent with our personnel, colleagues with whom we have in some cases been working since the beginning of VPAN. Housing Coordinator Liza Rodriguez, our resident guru on all things housing, is being recognized for her expertise with a promotion! Sadly, for us that means leaving VPAN, but she’ll remain within the LACDMH family at the departmental housing division.

Filling Liza’s big shoes will be some familiar faces! Mental Health Clinical Supervisor Phillip Chaidez has already been overseeing our work with PATH (People Assisting The Homeless). After Liza’s eventual departure, Sergio Lopez (Medical Case Worker I) will assume the role of Housing Coordinator and Janet Saber (Management Analyst) will take over the duties of Training Coordinator.

Another familiar face around Patriotic Hall is Simone Bent (Medical Case Worker II) who is leaving us for a promotion at the

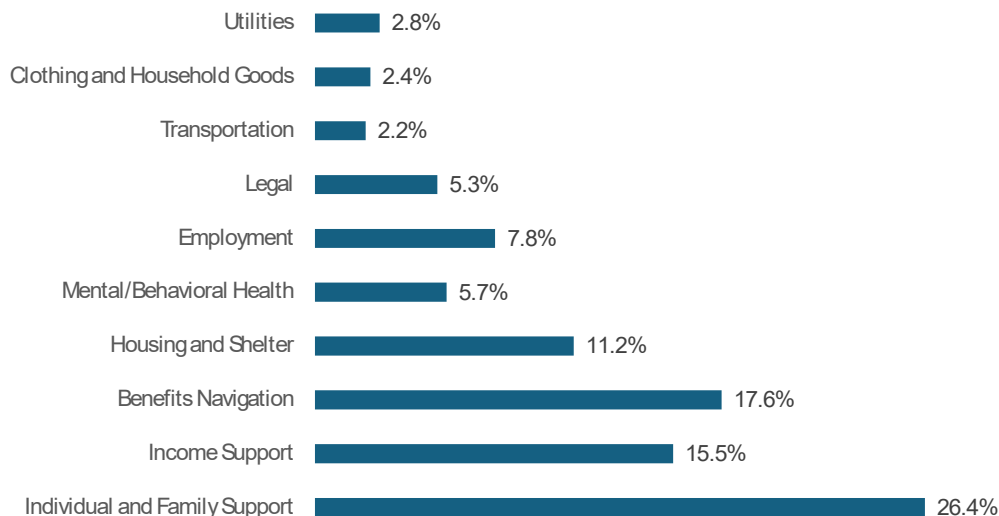
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FY 2023/2024 2nd Quarter Recap (October – December)

Total Clients Served: 964
Total Service Episodes: 1,970

Support Line Breakdown

Support Line Total Callers: 2,571
Total Referrals: 537



Service Episode Breakdown

Juggling Two Districts: VPAN Program Manager Leads Rebuilding Efforts

Bryan Palomera's dance card was already full managing Battleship Iowa-Supervisory District 4 (SD4) when the call came in that he was needed to take over SD2 on a temporary basis and would be running both districts simultaneously.

"We acquired SD2 in September and I started running both districts in conjunction," said Palomera, who started off as a housing coordinator with SD4 just one year earlier.

Every district has a Rally Point (RP). For SD4, the RP is aboard the Battleship Iowa in San Pedro. "There's an office space allocated for VPAN," Palomera noted. "We are trying to make it an all-around services area for veterans and their families to access resources and benefits."

The RP for SD2 is located in Hawthorne and just opened officially on Jan. 12. New program manager Alison Mode joined the staff around that time and will be overseeing both SD2 and SD4. "We will start off running both districts together," Palomera said.

Asked what it was like managing both districts at the same time, Palomera was frank about the challenges: "At times I was just stretched thin – staffing and training the new district was a challenge with rehiring, retraining, and rebuilding. I like to compare it to having two children. Both need the same amount of attention."

Palomera handled the tough task of building out SD2 and complying with the two different reporting chains of command and competing sets of district needs by staying in close contact with community partners throughout. This led to greater collaboration and exposure for both districts.

"We're always asking for other partnerships throughout the districts," Palomera said. "These are community access points (CAPs) where we expand services."

Peer in Profile: Bryan Palomera

Job Title: VPAN Assistant Program Manager for SD2 & SD4

Time with VPAN: 1 year, 4 months

Past Life: Worked at the Salvation Army Bell Shelter as a veteran case manager and housing specialist.

Honors: VPAN Quarterly PM (SD2/4); received City of Downey Veteran's Day Certificate of Recognition

Military Background: U.S. Marine Corps from 2008 to 2012. Two tours: one with the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) and one with the 31st MEU. Deployed on humanitarian mission to Palestine with 15th MEU. "Throughout my time in the military I realized I have a lot of passion for helping vets and other service members in need when no one else would."

What He Likes About VPAN: "VPAN is completely different from a lot of the other organizations that have so many eligibility requirements. They make it about the veteran, VPAN has opened doors for them."

Hobbies/Interests/Passions: The gym, motorcycles, and family time. "I would say going to the gym, but I haven't seen it as much as I used to."



Palomera's four years with the U.S. Marines Corps gave him a passion for helping veterans and service members in need.

Southeast Los Angeles County Workforce Development Board (SELACO) is one of the partners that stepped up to the task. Palomera set up a jobs account to provide the districts with referrals, which helped him to staff up SD2. "We allocated 5 peers for SD4 and three peers for SD2 – I only had one peer split between the districts," he recalled. "Now we are capably staffed in both districts."

While the missions for both SD2 and SD4 are similar, the outreach methods used and demographics are different. "For example, with SD4 — it's hard to reach into Long Beach," Palomera explained. "Within SD2, I needed to rebuild relationships with organizations and the community."

"We provided a lot of boots on the ground to establish trust in our services. For the next six months, we are going to be promoting a lot of community and social events to reach out to the community," he added. "The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs assigned two Veterans Service Officers, one for each Rally Point. They will be physically based at the RP and will attend community events to help veterans with disability claims."

(continued on page 3)

Outreach 101: How to Build Successful VPAN Events

Palomera

(continued from page 2)

Upcoming outreach events include a Women's Veterans Wellness Day and Recreational Therapy Movie Nights for veterans in isolation.

Palomera credits his team with making the build-out and the transition a success. "They know what it took. All eyes were on us throughout this process. That whole transition was extremely difficult."

He also received a lot of moral and physical support from VPAN peers like Service Coordinator David Gutierrez. "He was my Lone Ranger," Palomera said.

Palomera also noted the contributions of the following team members – Service Coordinator Verenise Media; Assistant Service Coordinator Audrey Champ; and Squad Leader Richard Douglas – for "stepping up at times when we were short-staffed, putting on multiple hats to get the job done, and being able to view the bigger picture when all odds were against us."



When not multitasking as the SD4 and SD2 Program Manager, Palomera enjoyed outdoor activities with his two kids.



VPAN Program Manager Leo Chirinos (JVS-SD1)



VPAN Program Manager Jimmy Guevara (JVS-SD5)

VPAN Quarterly Dispatch talked with VPAN Program Managers Leo Chirinos (JVS-SD1) and Jimmy Guevara (JVS-SD5) about the secrets to their success in organizing creative outreach events for veterans and their families.

WHY DO OUTREACH IN THE FIRST PLACE?

Leo: It's very important in the field we are in as peers. You want to raise awareness about these programs for veterans and, oftentimes, people are very siloed or live in a bubble. We try to place ourselves strategically so we can raise awareness – it could just be a matter of going down to the local VFW. The goal is to bring veterans in and help inform them of services they are eligible for that they might not be aware of.

Jimmy: We are a brand-new program and veterans already have a hard time determining what's out there for them. We're doing face-to-face communications to find out what challenges veterans are experiencing in the field. Having someone that speaks the same [military] language makes a difference. We understand each other. When we do outreach, veterans also spread the word for us to other veterans. It creates a community that spans several generations.

WHAT'S THE #1 CHALLENGE OF DOING OUTREACH?

Leo: People are just skeptical about the organization because it's fairly new. They don't believe the services are really free. And it also depends on the generation [of vets] we are talking about.

Jimmy: Getting the word out. Our district is huge – each one of the cities have their own challenges. The biggest challenge is distance. We have a lot of unincorporated cities – no chamber of commerce, no city councils. So we need to find community partners in these remote areas.

WHAT LESSONS HAVE YOU LEARNED ABOUT IT?

Leo: It's critical that we continually re-educate ourselves on what veterans need so we can design the next outreach opportunity. The policies are changing, the finances are changing...what they needed 10 years ago might be different now.

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Outreach 101: How to Build Successful VPAN Events

(continued from page 3)

Jimmy: Most leaders have an idea of what people want...but it really boils down to learning to listen to the team. The peers are the ones in the community themselves. The more senior veteran organizations play the biggest role across the board. Instead of me trying to recreate the wheel I'm trying to adapt to what they've done already and then amplify it. Also, make sure they are getting something tangible out of the event – that they are being acknowledged. This also motivates other veterans to attend.

YOU BOTH HAVE A VERY ROBUST OUTREACH SCHEDULE. WHAT'S THE PATH FROM IDEA TO EXECUTION?

Leo: A lot of people want to see the buy-in: who are the partners that are going to be there? It's important to get federal (VA) and local buy-in from the county supervisor's office and congressman. I try to get the "save the date" out specifically to federal, state, and local officials first and then plan from there.

Jimmy: I bring the idea to the staff, then we do a big brainstorming session. I start with a question: we want to hold an outreach event, how do we reduce some of the challenges? Then, who do we have available in the community to help with a venue – American Legion, Key Club, Lions Club? Then I start thinking about transportation, is there something close by where people can take public transportation? We contact the venue and then we start asking about capabilities.

Then one of two things happen: I cut the idea out or I cut the venue. We create a flyer that describes what will be happening at the event – partners want to see a flyer to get approval from their bosses. I usually plan 2-3 months ahead. If it's a big event I plan three months in advance at minimum, which is especially important to get buy-in from government officials.



Leo Chirinos as Santa Claus with Battle Buddy Angel Velasquez and Squad Leader Veronica Hernandez delivered toys and good cheer to American Legion Post 279 during the 155th CSSB (Combat Sustainment Support Battalion) Army Reserve Holiday Family Day in Temple City in December.

YOU'VE HOSTED CREATIVE EVENTS LIKE AXE-THROWING AND DATE NIGHT AT MEDIEVAL TIMES. HOW DO YOU COME UP WITH SUCH CREATIVE IDEAS?

Leo: It takes a lot. We kind of keep our head on a swivel. The draw is to get the new veteran faces. We came up with an event because of the SAG-AFTRA [Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists] strike. People out of work were asking if there were resources. So we held an event specifically catering to people working in Hollywood. This was in Jimmy's area, so he worked with us to hold it there.

Jimmy: Community leaders will just kind of have a conversation on a whim with you. That's where a lot of my ideas come from. We see a challenge and we want to tackle it. When I hear this idea and they make it seem like it's impossible I always say, well let's see what we can do. They're looking for someone to run with their ideas.



JVS-SD1 was visited by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Air Division's Air Rescue 5 during VetCon, a veteran resource fair, in City of Industry last November.

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Outreach 101: How to Build Successful VPAN Events

(continued from page 4)

It becomes a potluck of community and service members and resources and volunteers. They leave it up to VPAN for the planning, leading, and execution. For example, we know that a lot of retired veterans are coming back to work, so we tapped into resources for returning to work with a workshop on LinkedIn at our AV Expo.

Leo: VPAN gives us flexible guidelines for how creative we can be.

HOW DO YOU GAUGE WHETHER THESE EFFORTS ACTUALLY RESULT IN AN INCREASE IN SERVICES?

Leo: Depending on the event we will have an Eventbrite or some type of tracker. It's hard to track. But we try to get the list of attendees and see who signs up. The intake forms are usually how we gauge it.

Jimmy: We do a sign-in sheet – I'm focused on a tangible sign-in sheet. We offer, for example, a free meal if they sign the sheet. I compare the numbers of people that show up to previous events. I added age to the sign in sheet so I can gauge who is coming in. I realized from this that a good 70% of my clientele were 66+. We also do sign-in sheets for our Veteran Service Organizations, so the veterans sign in when they go get services. I provide them the sheet and then they give me a copy back.

We're constantly competing with ourselves. We know we are successful when we have less influx afterwards because so many services were addressed that day.

Leo: Yes. Then we go back to the drawing board.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE OTHER GROUPS ABOUT CREATING OUTREACH OPPORTUNITIES?

Leo: Be open to hearing the needs of the community. A lot of it is just being open to new ideas.

Jimmy: It's ok to use the old concepts but don't be afraid to be bold, don't be afraid the criticism that may come.

Leo: Oh, it comes.

Jimmy: Don't call your baby ugly in the first week of a new idea. Give yourself that week to let it marinate in people's minds. One thing I was taught in the Marines Corps was you don't quit. Don't be afraid of change.

EACH OF YOU PICK ONE OF YOUR FAVORITE OUTREACH IDEAS FROM THE OTHER DISTRICT.

Leo: The one I really liked that he did was the axe-throwing. Something different. That was my favorite. Also, the AV Expo.

Jimmy: Medieval Times. I really want to do something like that. We were able to get the family involved and that was a great thing.

Leo: We wanted to make it [Medieval Times] a date night. That was the whole premise behind it. I still get calls, "Are you guys going to do another one?"

WHAT EVENTS ARE ON THE HORIZON FOR EACH OF YOUR DISTRICTS?

Leo: March 16 we will have another event at the Nixon Library. They actually reached out to us this time. The veteran plus-one is free of charge, and you get a complimentary breakfast. We're pushing that out. We're going to be at the LA County Fair on Memorial Day weekend with a "Heroes Corner". That one's nice because it doubles as a day to just go to the fair and hang out.

We're hosting a Rage Room for female veterans day in June. They want to go break some stuff.

We are also planning a 3-day Heroes in the Shadows Homeless Veteran stand down in El Monte at Whittier Narrows Recreational Park on April 5th-7th. This is the only multi-day stand down in the San Gabriel Valley.

Jimmy: We're thinking of doing more women's events. When it comes to the women's events, the men stay out of it. Our men are just in a supporting role. We are also planning to hold an LGBTQ+ resource fair in North Hollywood. These are ideas on the burner.

Higgins

(continued from page 1)

Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, which means she's not going far and will still be serving veterans and their families.

Finally, Dr. Natalie Betlachin (Clinical Psychologist II) is leaving us for a promotion to take on some very important work as a supervising psychologist with the new CARE Court. We appreciate her time with us as our in-house expert on suicide prevention, and we will miss her.

In keeping with the line from Billy Joel's old song *Say Goodbye to Hollywood*, "life is one series of hellos and goodbyes," so as we bid farewell to personnel we've gotten to know personally, we also look forward to getting to know a continuous stream of new hires. As of this writing, that includes three administrative and two community health worker positions.

Whether it's in the field engaging with veterans in crisis or collaborating with our colleagues here at Patriotic Hall, VPAN will continue to "get personal" because that's where the need is and, as mental health professionals, that's just who we are.

“I feel very blessed”

VPAN comes to aid of former Army Reservist...twice



VPAN Psychiatric Social Worker Julie McGuire with Army veteran Nonna Waterman.

When VPAN Psychiatric Social Worker Julie McGuire met Nonna Waterman, she had gone through a lot of medical trauma and was experiencing housing insecurity. This was Waterman's second time seeking refuge and help from VPAN during a crisis.

“I watched my roommate go from a sane to unstable person and had to replace my doorknob with one that locked to feel safe inside my room,” Waterman said. This led to six months of housing insecurity.

In addition to housing woes and feeling her “spirit was broken,” Waterman was suffering from multiple injuries, including bilateral fractures in both legs, that made it difficult for her to move around.

Waterman's first experience with VPAN was overwhelmingly positive – and VPAN counselors helped her climb over a hurdle of common misinformation to get the services she deserved.

“People had been telling her she isn't really a veteran because of her time spent in the Army Reserves,” McGuire recalled. “She didn't know what to expect and did not think she was eligible for services.”

VPAN counselors successfully filed her service claim and she started receiving medical benefits. “I felt like someone cared enough to listen – I felt seen and heard,” Waterman said.

“The paths were very defined and easy to follow. Looking back, it was simple, but the process was stressful.”

Because VPAN peers worked to build her trust, Waterman felt comfortable reaching out to VPAN a second time when a housing crisis struck and she was living in convalescence with no one to turn to.

McGuire, an Air Force veteran, identified Waterman's linkage needs and provided the support needed. During the client's first experience with VPAN, she connected Waterman to mental health and a VSO for support with a disability compensation claim.

During her most recent experience with VPAN, Waterman was in need of housing support. Her experience was unique because her roommate's behavior was unstable, causing Waterman to be concerned about her shelter in addition to her own safety.

“Nonna is an extremely unique and special person,” McGuire said. “I started working for VPAN in May 2020 and Nonna was one of my first clients. This second time around she came to VPAN for housing, and I connected her with MHALA [Mental Health America of Los Angeles], but Nonna practically found her specific housing location fairly independently. Nonna is resourceful and isn't afraid to put in her own elbow grease. She called locations herself, that's sometimes half the battle is the endless calls. Nonna earned her ‘palace’ because she put in the work for it.”

Waterman was almost in tears when she first visited her new home, which she calls “my little palace.”

“I feel very blessed,” Waterman said. “Like someone gave me a new lease on life.”

Asked what advice she would give other women veterans in her situation, Waterman said: “You are worth it, you are valuable, you are precious cargo. As a woman veteran and as an Army veteran – stand proud.”

VALENTINES FOR VETS: Rep Tony Cardenas (CA-29) stopped by the VPAN Rally Point in Sherman Oaks (Goodwill-SD3) to deliver valentines made by district school children for veterans in what has become an annual tradition. He also presented the team with a flag flown over the U.S. Capitol.



BUFFALO SOLDIERS: The VPAN team at Goodwill-SD3 hosted a special Black History Month event in Woodland Hills honoring the Buffalo Soldiers, U.S. Army regiments of African-Americans formed after the Civil War to serve on the frontier.

RECENT EVENTS



VETS EXPO: JVS-SD5 hosted more than 300 Antelope Valley veterans and family members who had the opportunity to take part in professional workshops including resume-building and registering for benefits. More than 50 regional organizations from throughout the region offered everything from employment services to transitional housing for those experiencing homelessness.



VETS & BASEBALL: DMH VPAN took a swing at Veteran's Day Batting Practice at Dodger Stadium in November.



JVS-SD5, led by Program Manager Jimmy Guevara, was selected by their peers as Supervisorial District of the Quarter for 2nd Qtr, FY2024.

L.A. COUNTY VETERAN SERVICE AWARDS December 2023

Veterans Service Officer: Joel Castellanos (MVA)
Support Service Staff: Jose Garcia (MVA)
Battle Buddy: Gerardo Perez (JVS-SD1)
Support Line Agent: Scarlet Adewale (LACDMH VPAN)
Community Partner: Jessica Peak (ELAC)
Creative Solution: No Nominees
Volunteer: Michael Miser (LACDMH VPAN)

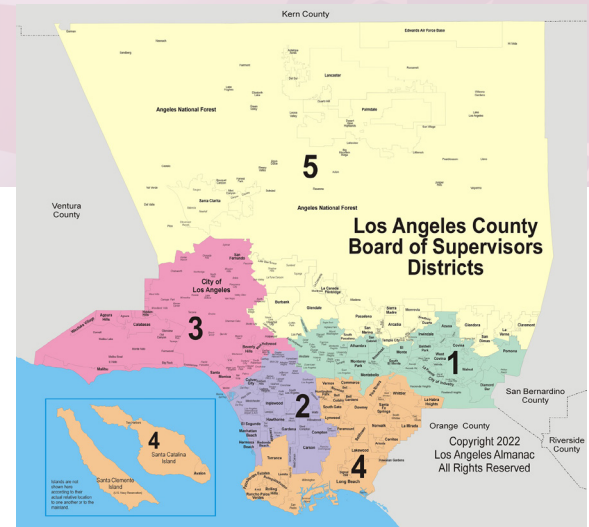
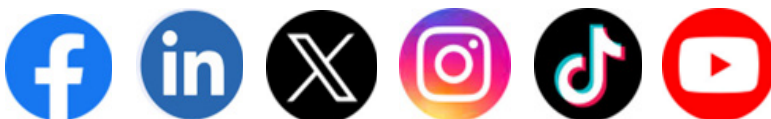
January 2024

Veterans Service Officer: Emmanuel Lopez (MVA)
MVA Support Service Staff: Joaquin Enriquez
Battle Buddy: Angel Velasquez (JVS-SD1)
Support Line Agent: No Nominees
VPAN Support Service Staff: Theresa Espinoza
Community Partner: Marco Diaz (JVS-SoCal)
Creative Solution: Phillip Chaidez (LACDMH VPAN)
Volunteer: Josue Batrez (VPAN/MVA)

Quarterly Award Winners for Q2 FY2024

Supervisorial District: JVS-SD5 (VPAN)
Program Manager: Bryan Palomera
(Battleship Iowa-SD2/SD4)
Veterans Service Officer: Cherry Villanueva
MVA Support Service Staff: Jorge Reynoso
Battle Buddy: Claudia Segura (LACDMH VPAN)
Support Line Agent: Jorge Marcia (LACDMH VPAN)
Community Partner: Anthony Rodriguez (CalVet)
Creative Solution: Sandra Lopez (Gardena Veterans Center)
Volunteer: Manuel Gomez (MVA)

KEEP UP WITH VPAN!



L.A. County Supervisorial District Map

Rally Point Locations

SD	Agency	Location
1	JVS SoCal	1180 Durfee Ave. South El Monte, CA 91733
2	Battleship IOWA	5155 Rosecrans Ave. #101 Hawthorne, CA 90250
3	Goodwill SoCal	13400 Riverside Dr. #100 Sherman Oaks, CA 91423
4	Battleship IOWA	250 S. Harbor Blvd. San Pedro, CA 90807
5	JVS SoCal	38345 30th St. E #A-1 Palmdale, CA 93550

VPAN Headquarters: Bob Hope Patriotic Hall
 1816 S. Figueroa St., 6th Floor
 Los Angeles, CA 90015

Click [here](#) for a more detailed view and to see which district your zip code falls under.

LACDMH Veteran Support Line: (800) 854-7771, option *3

To connect with a veteran or military-related family member, call the support line available 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily including holidays or visit us online at <https://dmh.lacounty.gov/veterans>.

Interpreter services available. ¡Hablamos Español! The support line is staffed by L.A. County staff and volunteers who are veterans or military family members.

Quarterly Dispatch Staff

Editor: W.R. Wilson
Writers: Elisa Modugno, W.R. Wilson
Graphics: Ann Brandstadter



Richard Nixon Presidential Library Veteran Appreciation Day

HONORING ALL WHO SERVED



We cordially invite you to join us for a special breakfast at the Nixon Library's Rose Garden, in partnership with the esteemed SD-1, Veteran Peer Access Network. The occasion is to celebrate the birthday of former President Richard Nixon and pay tribute to our brave Veterans, who have served our country with selfless dedication. This event presents a valuable opportunity to recognize and honor their service and commitment.

We hope that you can join us for this significant event.



**March 16, 2024. Event starts at 10:00
AM and ends at 1:00 PM**



18001 Yorba Linda Blvd, Yorba Linda, CA 92886



FREE through RSVP only

Seats are limited, so be sure to RSVP by **03/08/2024**

RSVP: Joe Leal (909) 200-8960 or by email joe.leal@jvs-socal.org



RICHARD NIXON
FOUNDATION ★ LIBRARY ★ MUSEUM



VETERAN SUPPORT LINE



Referrals/Linkages

- Mental Health
- Substance Misuse Support
- Housing
- Healthcare
- Education
- Legal Services
- Social Connection/Recreation
- Miscellaneous
- Workforce Development and Employment

Veteran Support Line



Call (800) 854-7771, *3



**9 A.M. to 8 P.M. Daily,
Including Holidays**

Interpreter services are available.

¡Hablamos Español!

Support line is staffed by LA County staff and volunteers who are veterans or military family members.

Learn more at dmh.lacounty.gov/veterans



LOS ANGELES COUNTY
**DEPARTMENT OF
MENTAL HEALTH**
hope. recovery. wellbeing.