

[VIEW FROM HQ](#)

Change is in the Air

Nancy Pelayo, LACDMH VPAN Program Manager



First quarter sees change in scenery, personnel

VPAN continues to adapt and evolve as we round out the 1st quarter of the county's Fiscal Year 2024, which began July 1.

Personnel

The joint L.A. City and County homeless emergency declaration enabled us to hire an additional thirteen staff with 90-day probationary periods, which bring us close to 45 Department of Mental Health (DMH) staff assigned to VPAN. In the field, our contracted providers—those Community-Based Organizations (CBO) which staff each of the five Supervisorial Districts (SD)—are nearly at capacity after a period of sustained turnover, minus four pending positions.

The latest personnel to arrive in recent days is Dr. Rhonda Higgins, who assumes overall responsibility for VPAN as well as some other programs at DMH. She brings a wealth of experience and insight to her new role, and we are grateful to have her. [Read more about Dr. Higgins on page 2.]

It's always a good thing to bring on more people because that means more veterans and their families are being served.

Locations

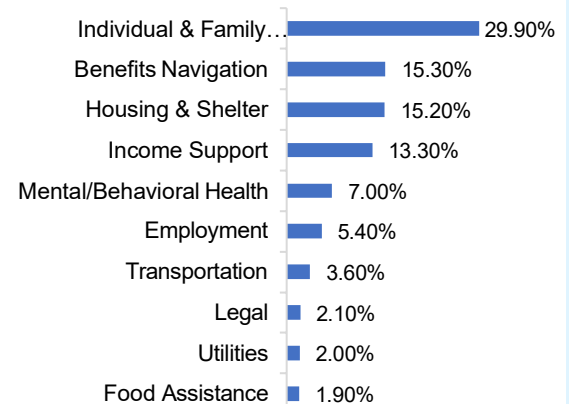
SD2: The Battleship Iowa organization, which has held the contract for SD4 for the last two years, added SD2 to their territory under the leadership of Program Manager Bryan Palomera. They subsequently signed a new lease for their Rally Point in Hawthorne, which coincides with a reinvigorated outreach program.

(cont. – Page 7)

FY23 4th Quarter Recap (Apr-Jun)

Total Clients Served: 1,057

Top 10 Client Service Needs



Support line breakdown:

Total number of callers: 3,485
 Total referrals: 614

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“I’m in a position to make a difference.”

New program manager returns home, leveraging experience to face new challenges

Dr. Rhonda Higgins interviewed for her new job online, but not for any medical or Covid-related reasons.

She did it because she was living in Ghana.

The Gardena native returned home after a Covid sabbatical in Africa became a two-year working sabbatical, during which she sought to bring mental health awareness to the continent. In Ghana, for example, she said there’s awareness but seeking help is still stigmatized so the emphasis is on compassion. In Rwanda, on the other hand, they’re more receptive to mental health therapy because of the horrific genocide of the late 1990s.

But her journey starts here, in L.A. After growing up in Catholic schools, Higgins attended California State University at Northridge for an undergraduate degree in psychology and Pepperdine University for a graduate degree in clinical psychology. While earning her Ph.D. in forensic and clinical psychology at Alliant University, she moved to Miami, Fla., for an internship and post-doc supervisory training which included testifying about a defendant’s competency to stand trial or whether they were not guilty by reason of insanity.

It was during this time that she became acquainted with veterans in the justice system.

“I got introduced to a lot of veterans and it was a challenge getting services for them,” Higgins recalled. “It didn’t matter what their discharge status was; once the mental health jacket was attached to them and criminal charges were brought, it was much more challenging to get them services.

“It opened my eyes to where the barriers lie when it came to getting services or even seeking

services. They don’t open up to others easily, but they do with other vets which is a much better engagement style to get them to talk, open up and identify what their needs are.”

The connection for Higgins is personal. A number of uncles and cousins have served, with some still active in the Navy, Marines and Army. “My first experience with the veteran population was being a family member,” she said. “My family members did have a hard time after they returned home. It was a struggle. I was young then, but I could see my family struggle to provide them support.

“You were very excited to see them, catch up, share pics, but sometimes they come back and they’re not the same person. So, you deal with all those things like nightmares, daymares, depression, Fourth of July being a hard time with the fireworks. As a family we just weren’t prepared for what we didn’t know was going to happen.”

She applied this experience to the veterans she encountered on the job, “scouring the community for services” and when they weren’t eligible for Veterans Administration benefits, connecting them with other resources for veterans within the community.

Her record in Miami speaks for itself. During her tenure, the recidivism rate was less than 2%, 30% were employed, 37% were enrolled in school and more than 70% were housed.

Her success there led to becoming a vendor with the L.A. County Department of Mental Health, reducing recidivism, working with those on probation and parole and getting them reintegrated into the community (cont. – Page 7).



From Despair to Hope

One Army Veteran's Journey

Community Health Workers (CHWs) are the unsung heroes in our midst. These dedicated individuals bridge the gap between communities and healthcare systems, ensuring that everyone, regardless of background or circumstance, has access to the care they need. Through personalized outreach, education, and advocacy, CHWs empower individuals to take control of their health, navigate complex medical systems, and ultimately lead healthier lives. The story of Pete



The Salazar family came from humble beginnings in 1940s Colorado.

Salazar and Christopher Waters is a testament to this invaluable work.

Salazar's journey highlights the profound impact of community health. Born in Denver and drafted into the Army in 1963, Salazar spent two transformative years serving as a clerk-typist and military police officer in Germany. "Like a light went on," Salazar recollects, "where most people were drinking beer, I started reading Dostoevsky. That's where I began to understand that I was just existing, but I wanted to talk to people."

After his Army stint, Salazar traversed a wide-ranging professional landscape: from the State Department's hallways to bustling construction sites, finally anchoring in academia at Cal State LA with a focus on history. "From teaching to

ascending the educational ladder as vice-principal and principal, teaching always held a special place in my heart. And, oh, I dabbled in entrepreneurship with a couple of donut shops," Salazar reminisces, his eyes gleaming with a mix of pride and nostalgia. But beneath these achievements, silent battles raged within.

Waters, a dedicated community health worker, met Pete at a pivotal moment in his life. Waters recalls, "He was my first client in crisis." The LAPD C.A.M.P. officers handled the situation with a mix of compassion and firmness. Salazar, reflecting on that period, admits, "I thank God for my military experience because you learn to take orders, and I followed theirs."

Now 83, Salazar's battles weren't against external enemies but internal demons. "The psychotherapy taught me I had scared my family," Salazar shares, his voice tinged with regret. He continues, "I've come to understand the dark side that my family was afraid of. That's where my anger was: 'Why do I have to grow old? Why can't things stay the same?'"

Waters recounts the initial challenges, "When I met him, he wasn't connected to the VA at all." Salazar was living in isolation, a shadow of his vibrant self. Waters' intervention, however, was transformative. "I drove him down to the West LA campus, we got him enrolled, and he began receiving health care, mental health support, and



Army veteran Pete Salazar shows Christopher Waters a kaleidoscope he made.

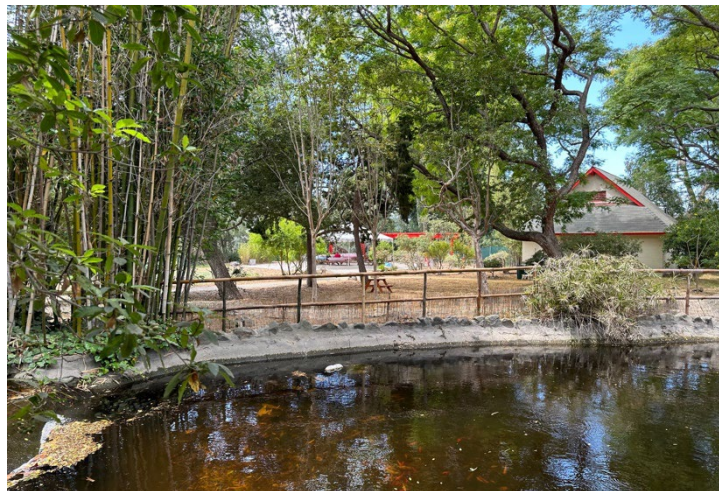
even optometry services." Salazar's reconnection with the VA brought more than just medical assistance; it brought camaraderie.

(cont. – Page 8).

Saving a sacred space

SD3 comes to the rescue of fish, humans

The green expanse of the Japanese garden in West LA, often described as an oasis of serenity amidst urban hustle, found itself caught in the grip of the COVID-19 pandemic. The discovery of a broken restroom line left the VA authorities with a decision: to fix the underlying issue or to close the garden temporarily. Opting for the latter, a gem spanning 3.5 acres with its seven symbolic koi ponds — each representing



The gardens feature outdoor meeting spaces where veterans can gather amidst the tranquility.

one of the seven chakras — was left to face the slow creep of neglect. Today, only five of these original ponds remain, a somber testament to the toll taken.

As the weight of the garden's closure bore down, the Bandini Foundation, its longstanding steward, found its role minimized. In these dark hours, a beacon of hope emerged in the form of a young koi enthusiast. Funded by Brentwood schools and further supported by "Mr. Fish", this young individual ensured the survival of the koi

IN THE COMMUNITY

fish and ignited the first sparks of revival for the languishing garden. While a complete restoration seemed a daunting task, the immediate mission was clear: a thorough cleanup to breathe life back into this space.

Yet, this endeavor required more than just individual effort; it called for community



John Follmer in front of the iconic ponds and garden he helped to save.

collaboration. Enter VPAN's Goodwill-SD3, the unsung heroes determined to restore the garden to its former glory. Recognizing the garden's significance to the veterans of West LA VA, they lept into action. Rallying support and resources, SD3 became the driving force behind the garden's revitalization.

In the midst of the challenges faced by the Japanese garden, Follmer, a true "battle buddy," stepped up. Through thick and thin, Follmer championed the revitalization efforts, ensuring the garden remained a sanctuary for veterans. Thanks to Follmer, the garden stands today as a beacon of hope, healing, and community support.

Their success in this endeavor underscores the essential role VPAN teams play across all five supervisorial districts. Each team, assigned to a specific geographic area, becomes deeply familiar with its unique needs and challenges. This expertise enables them to provide tailored support to veterans, ensuring they have the resources and environments (cont. – Page 8).

Four-legged therapy

Wolf Connection Offers Unique Healing Experience in Angeles Forest

This summer, the vast, serene expanses of Angeles National Forest became the setting for an extraordinary journey of healing and connection. A dedicated team comprised of members from the (VPAN), the Department of Mental Health, and the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department's Veterans Mental Evaluation Team ventured into this natural haven to experience a pioneering therapeutic method involving wolves, particularly beneficial for veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder stemming from combat.

The team's day at the Wolf Connection, a leading therapy center, was replete with immersive activities that combined therapeutic practices with the wonders of the wild. They embarked on hikes flanked by these majestic creatures, feeling the synchrony of paws and feet on the forest floor, an experience as therapeutic as it is unforgettable. The proximity to the wolves, their graceful movements, and their tranquil demeanor provided the team with a unique perspective on the deep connections possible between humans and the natural world.



A particular wolf, Hoven, became an emblematic figure for the day. Rescued in

2017 from a challenging breeding situation in Southern California, Hoven's tale of determination and resurgence resonated deeply with the team, particularly with many combat veterans who saw parallels with their own narratives.

An anonymous peer from the group reflected on the day's experiences, stating, "Walking side by side with the wolves, coming so close to such powerful creatures – it has been a transformative experience that I'll cherish."

This impactful day of bonding and therapeutic exploration was organized by Cristina Barraza of Southern California Grantmakers. Her



Wolves work the line as both parties develop mutual trust.

vision ensured that what started as a mere team-building exercise evolved into a profound exploration of innovative healing practices, reflecting VPAN's commitment to forward-thinking approaches in veteran care.

As the team retreated from the forest, they carried with them renewed vigor and camaraderie. Just as VPAN stands as a beacon of innovation in serving veterans, the experience at Wolf Connection showcased their vast potential in therapeutic care. Together, they remind us that with a fusion of tradition, innovation, and nature, profound healing and connection are ever within reach.

Through VPAN, Peer Support Helps Veterans Get Off the Streets and Into Services



Lead Housing Specialist Liza Rodriguez (left) and Program Manager Anh Tran (right) discuss VPAN's work in linking veterans and their families to services, including housing, across Los Angeles. VPAN works with VA and other organizations to coordinate transitional and permanent supportive housing for homeless veterans.

For many veterans returning to civilian life, knowing what benefits and services they're eligible for can be a challenging task. The maze of options can be overwhelming for even the most connected veterans. If a veteran is struggling with homelessness, substance use issues or health concerns, these issues can make the process even more difficult to navigate.

That's where [Veterans Peer Access Network \(VPAN\)](#) comes in. The nation's first-ever

community-driven support network serving Veterans and their families, VPAN is an LA County Department of Mental Health (LACDMH) program that works with VA and other partners to link veterans to the services they've earned.

"Somebody who's living on the streets or just got out of prison, they don't have a lot of people in their corner," VPAN Peer Support Specialist and Army veteran Lucy Morales said. "They know they can come to us."

All staffers at VPAN are either Veterans or MilFam (meaning they're family members of Veterans or active-duty service members).

With this deep connection in place for all individuals on the team, empathy is a key element of operations at VPAN. The staff truly understands the unique needs of this population and works every day to meet Veterans and their families wherever they are.

From VALOR to VPAN

Before it became VPAN, both Anh Tran, VPAN program manager, and Liza Rodriguez, VPAN lead housing specialist, worked for its previous incarnation: a DMH program called Veterans and Loved Ones Recovery (VALOR). VALOR was a program that focused specifically on meeting the acute mental health needs of Veterans.

Under the leadership of Army Veteran Jim Zenner (now the director of the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs of LA County), and with the support of a County of Los Angeles Board of Supervisors motion, VALOR transformed into VPAN and began to offer a broader range of services. These include peer supportive services, help with housing support, substance misuse support, workforce development and employment, healthcare, education, legal services, social connection/recreation, and miscellaneous needs.

(To continue reading this story, click [here](#).)

Change is in the Wind

(Cont. from page 1.)

SD3: Goodwill SoCal under the guidance of Program Manager Daniel Hermosillo finally made the move from their less-than-ideal space in Granada Hills to an impressive, new Rally Point in Sherman Oaks. The last location was not easily accessible, so the CBO acted upon that feedback and created a plan of action to address it. Although they've been in the space since July, their grand reopening will be Oct. 6. This event is open to the public and will be from 10AM to 12:30PM at 13400 Riverside Drive at 13400 Riverside Dr. Suite 100, Sherman Oaks Calif. 91423.

SD5: In July, JVS-SoCal held a grand reopening at their new Rally Point in Palmdale. It's not nearly as remote as the previous location in Lancaster, and Program Manager Jimmy Guevara continues to collaborate with other organizations to unite and streamline services, making them more accessible in the process. The team at SD5 had the privilege of hosting Congressman Mike Garcia (CA-27) at their new place on Sept. 8.

Mobility

Months of coordination with the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (MVA) has paid off and we can finally announce that their Veteran Service Officers will be permanently stationed 3 days/week at each of the five Rally Points. This will facilitate more in-person appointments with veterans closer to home, helping them avoid driving long distances or experiencing long wait times.

The Veterans Administration is bringing still more resources to bear, recently unveiling a mobile medical unit pilot program set to launch in November. These specially equipped Mercedes Sprinter vans will initially be co-located with VPAN in each SD once a month during Phase I, and depending on need will increase that presence to twice per month during Phase II.

This is a particularly beneficial development for SD5, which is by far the largest and most remote of the five districts, meaning veterans often must make a day trip just in order to be seen at the West LA VA hospital in Brentwood. Instead,

veterans who are eligible for VA healthcare will be able to visit the mobile unit and receive vaccinations, wound care, prescription refills, mental telehealth appointments and more.

VPAN is also partnering with the VA to create access points at each of the Rally Points through the Community Engagement and Reintegration Services (CERS) program. This means VA outreach workers will be on site one day each week, rounding out a roster of various providers at our Rally Points for a kind of one-stop shopping experience. For example, the VA staff present will be available for veterans experiencing homelessness to connect with transitional housing almost immediately on their way to becoming permanently housed.

Every quarter there's always more to report because every quarter there's always more to do. What matters is that VPAN continues to match that ops tempo by remaining flexible, agile and persistent: Flexible in our approach, agile in our response and persistent in our efforts. This, combined with the right people in the right places doing the right things, ensures that VPAN will continue to meet the mission.

“I’m in a position to make a difference.”

(Cont. from page 2.)

Now that she's returned from Africa, Higgins is excited about the challenges before her. “I’m in a position where I can make a difference,” she said. Drawing on her own experience, she observes that “the traditional mental health model isn’t going to work [with veterans].”

VPAN isn't the only program where Higgins has the opportunity to make a difference at LACDMH. Her portfolio also includes Enhanced Case Management for high-risk individuals, Preventing Homelessness Promote Health for those experiencing homelessness, and a women's wellness recovery program in Compton which is a peer-led program to help female residents remain self-sustainable in the community.

With this much on her plate, Higgins recognizes she can't do it alone. Rather, it takes

a village, and that analogy takes her back to Africa and her encounter with a “life tree”.

The tree, she said, provides spiritual benefits and the leaves have spiritual cleansing properties like sage. “I was gathering leaves and the villagers saw me climbing the tree and they came out to shake the tree and help me get the leaves. They were trying to help me gain the spiritual benefits.

“I was thinking ‘you guys don’t even know me,’ but we were all one.”

Replace the leaves with veterans and the village with VPAN, and Higgins has the beginnings of a truly productive working relationship.

From Despair to Hope

(Cont. from page 3.)

“We have that bond,” he says, “we can talk about the good and the bad.”

Their journey, though filled with challenges, rekindled Salazar’s zest for life. “I’m working on my vocal cords and joining a gym,” he says with renewed energy.

The road to recovery was one of partnership, “We sat down here in this living room and mapped out a road to recovery together,” Waters reminisces.

Salazar admits, “I’m grateful to Waters. He’s invested so much time and energy. I needed a friend. I’d seen the VA for years but never thought I needed it. Until I did.

Saving a sacred space

(Cont. from page 4.)

conducive to healing and well-being. The

restoration of the West LA VA garden exemplifies the power of community, collaboration, and a deep understanding of district specifics.



Koi fish now thrive in the rehabilitated ponds

It is a testament to SD3’s dedication and the broader mission of VPAN teams everywhere: ensuring that every corner of our districts, every garden, and every veteran gets the specialized care they deserve. Through these efforts, the garden stands rejuvenated, a symbol of hope and resilience for all veterans who find solace within its bounds.

Recently, the garden’s open spaces have been filled with laughter and camaraderie, thanks to a comedy group. They’ve provided a unique six-week program, using comedy as an intervention to help veterans combat PTSD. The success of this program has generated anticipation for new cohorts, with more details to be announced soon.

As the surrounding areas of the West LA VA north campus buzz with new construction and development, the refurbished Japanese garden and its thriving koi ponds stand as a testament to what community engagement and dedicated organizations like VPAN’s SD3 can achieve. Amidst the sprawling VA, this garden offers a slice of nature, serving as both a refuge and a therapeutic tool for veterans seeking solace and healing.

► ► **L.A. County Supervisorial District Map**

★ Rally Point Locations

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

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

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



▶▶ On the Horizon: Upcoming Events

Los Angeles
Veterans Collaborative



LAVC is a structured network of public, private, and government agencies working together to reduce suffering and improve the lives of veterans, service members, and military families in LA County. LAVC meets the 2nd Wednesday of every month. Click [here](#) for more information or to register for upcoming events.

A Battle Boutique for female veterans will be held at Patriotic Hall on Saturday, Oct. 14, from 10:30 AM to 4 PM. This event will offer free professional clothing, hair/makeup, headshots, resume review/mock interviews, employer intros and childcare for participants. Register here: <https://bit.ly/3Eltxbt>

The County of Los Angeles Department of Military and Veterans Affairs and the Veteran Peer Access Network invite you to

an
Open
House

Patriotic Hall will hold its 2nd annual open house on Friday, Oct. 13, from 9 AM to 2 PM. Panel discussions will feature LACDMH VPAN, MVA and the L.A. County Sheriff's Department, followed by lunch and historic building tours for those interested. Register here: <https://bit.ly/3PyugRc>

2nd Wednesday of every month
9:00 AM – 11:00 AM