

## Getting to Specifics: VPAN Drills Down — Dr. Rhonda Higgins, Program Director

After my first full quarter as program director, I can honestly say how surprised — and unsurprised — I truly am: Surprised that this program can tackle as many issues and initiatives as it does, while at the same time unsurprised because of the caliber of the team and the strength of their work ethic. As we close out this quarter and enter the next, we see a trend emerging: As VPAN continues to grow, our focus becomes more specific and our approach more specialized.



**Dr. Rhonda Higgins**

### Suicide Prevention

The Veteran Suicide Review Team (VSRT) finally received their first Next-of-Kin release which means we can start reviewing that case and the particulars around that suicide. This is important, because it enables VSRT to delve into the work of mortality reviews.

The University of Southern California [State of the American Veteran](#) series, which released its fifth study this autumn, examined many issues facing veterans today. We recently met with People Assisting the Homeless (PATH) and their employment program. This was done not for employment purposes but rather to empower all the doors of the multi-modal systems.

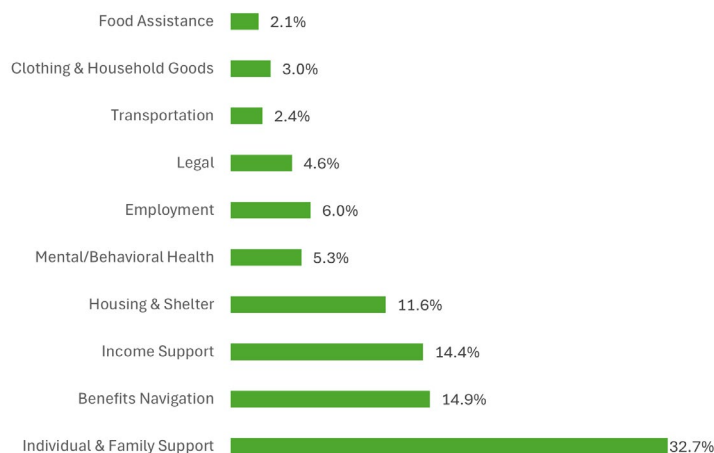
What does that mean? It basically means that veterans are generally not going to talk to clinicians about their problems, but the PATH employment office presents a door through which we can address mental health challenges like

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### FY24 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter Recap (Jul-Sep)

Total Clients Served: 1,018  
 Total Service Episodes: 2,887

#### Service Episode Breakdown



### Support Line Breakdown:

Support Line Total Callers (7/1/23–9/30/23) – 2,888  
 Total Referrals (7/1/2023–9/30/23) – 574

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suicide prevention. Our message to PATH was basically “You guys are a door, so don’t think because you’re not clinical you don’t have power in this space.” Accordingly, we’ve been helping them identify triggers and then connect those vets to VPAN and other resources.

### *Homelessness*

We’re collaborating with the Veterans Administration and USC for a homeless count pilot study. A localized version of the annual Point-in-Time homeless count conducted by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority every winter, this count targets the subpopulation of veterans experiencing homelessness.

During this initiative, which commenced Dec. 7 and will continue through March, USC surveyors in Service Planning Areas 1 and 3 will go out into the streets and fan those areas for homeless veterans in order to connect them with VPAN, MVA or the VA and hopefully transitional housing. This has been done before and significant numbers of homeless vets were found.

### *Packaging Services*

Sometimes it’s all in a word. Veterans may not respond to the words “trauma”, “stress”, or “therapy” but they might respond to “axe-throwing”, “hiking”, or “darts”. In other words, by creating different experiences with different names, it’s easier to foster an environment for stress release without calling it “stress management”.

The goal is to address all those suicide risk factors cited in the USC study. For example, we might target loneliness with bingo, stress management with axe-throwing, and self-esteem with the female veterans’ “Battle Boutique” recently held by the Los Angeles Veterans Collaborative at Patriotic Hall.

### *Justice-involved Veterans*

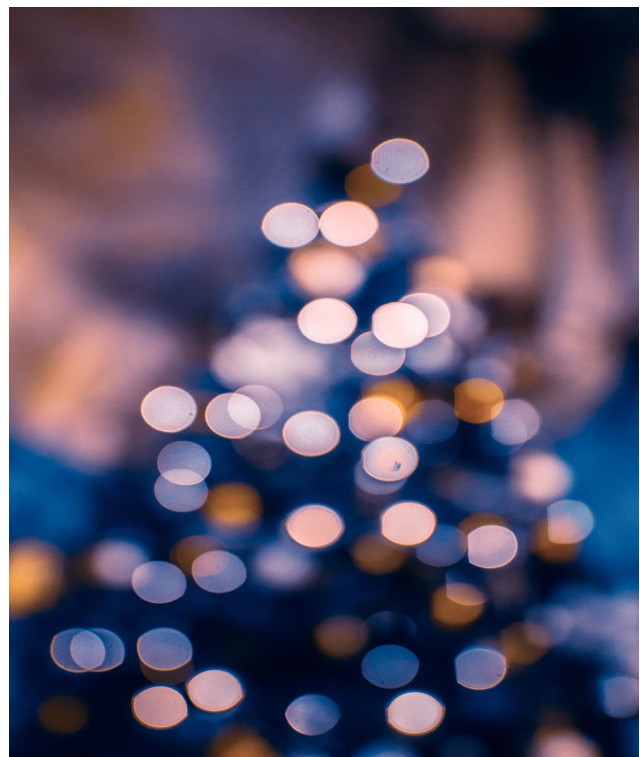
For those veterans who find themselves involved in the justice system, we’re partnering with VA, MVA and the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department to design a curriculum on how to bridge the gap between incarceration and reintegration into the community.

### *Aging*

We’re homing in on this subpopulation specifically, partnering with other agencies, collaborating and sharing resources to identify ways to address needs common among seniors like loneliness.

### *Challenge and Promise*

As you can see, there’s a lot going on! This space is filled with challenges, but it’s also brimming with promise. Every month, every quarter, every year that goes by...we see more, we learn more, we grow more. This is the work, and it’s exciting to behold.



## ▶ OTH Discharge, Criminal Record No Barrier to VPAN Finding Housing for Veteran

A few days after formerly unhoused veteran Anthony Wimberly moved into his new home on the West LA VA Campus, he hosted some very high-profile guests: Governor Gavin Newsom and First Lady Jennifer Siebel Newsom, along with U.S. Vets President Stephen Peck.

But to the former Marine and California native, who suffered racial discrimination and disparities during his time in service and spent decades without a place to call home, the real VIP visitor is Veteran Peer Access Network (VPAN) Case Manager Simone Bent.

“When I met Simone, things started happening,” Wimberly recalls. “[Bent] kept hope alive. She kept pushing and got me in... it’s a blessing.”

Born in Jamaica, Bent is a veteran herself – though she never expected a military career would be in her future. “I grew up in Jamaica and the military was just never part of my plans for the future,” said Bent. “But it happened because of school.”

Her experience as an Army medic and being released on a medical discharge informed Bent’s approach to helping Wimberly find his forever home: “When I got out, I didn’t have such a thing [as a Battle Buddy]. I treated the situation [with Wimberly] as, ‘What would I want done for me? What kind of advocacy would I want to see for myself?’”

Bent credits VPAN’s culture of collaboration and, specifically, her colleagues, for solving a case as tough as Wimberly’s. He was repeatedly denied housing due to his background – a criminal record and an other-than-honorable (OTH) discharge – and the more rigid rule of tenant-based vouchers. “The tenant-based vouchers can be denied more easily,” Bent explained. “So, we went the PBV [project-based voucher] route. Once we identified the right resource then he was housed relatively quickly.”

Bent worked closely with VPAN Mental Health Service Coordinator Liza Rodriguez and Medical Case Worker (MCW) and DMH VPAN Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH) Team Lead Sergio Lopez. The collaboration and unflagging commitment to Wimberly’s case meant he found his way from a homeless shelter to a cozy apartment on the VA’s West LA Campus in a speedy two months, from beginning to end.

“Engagement is so key. That is one of [Simone’s] strengths. She’s able to engage with the veteran,”

Rodriguez noted, adding that Lopez also gave Wimberly constant encouragement as well, sharing success stories of other veterans whom he’s helped to find housing in the same building.

“I gotta give it to the veteran,” Rodriguez said. “He lost hope for a minute. It can be a bit discouraging but the fact he was willing to try again helped get him housed so quickly. He was willing to trust us and try again. He was at a point where he was ready.”

Bent couldn’t agree more: “Never tell them that they don’t qualify for something...there’s always a way. To anyone who is reading this article just reach out to us. We are here to help.”

With the unwavering dedication of his VPAN team, Wimberly’s journey took a hopeful turn. And today, he’s serving as a positive inspiration to fellow veterans who face similar challenges. His days of social isolation are over, and he’s happily engaged in daily activities with peers in his new residence.

“I love my new place,” Wimberly enthused. “I like the facility – it’s really nice. It’s a pleasant environment. I’ve met quite a few friends here.”

With Bent’s continued support, Wimberly is working with the Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles (LAFLA) to expunge his criminal cases and with the Inner-City Law Center to upgrade his discharge status.



*VPAN Case Manager Simone Bent catches up with her client, Marine veteran Anthony Wimberly in his new apartment on the West LA VA north campus.*

## ▶▶ Community Health Worker Delivers VPAN ‘Homie Hook-Up’ to Down-on Luck Veteran Family of Five

Edward “Eddie” Aguirre had always been self-sufficient and proud of it. For more than 30 years after separating from the Army, the veteran supported his family without ever filing for disability benefits, or even seeing the inside the of a VA clinic. Things were going so well that, in 2019, Aguirre and his wife, Vickie Jo, decided to pursue their lifelong dream of owning and operating a record store.

Then the pandemic hit.

“The pandemic was hard on us,” Aguirre recalled. “We struggled to make ends meet. During this time, I began to face some health challenges. The stress of running a small business, the pandemic, depleting financial resources took a toll. We were asked to leave the home we were renting. With no other resources we began to look into homelessness resources. One of the resources along the way led me to meet Oscar and VPAN.”

After losing their home in Norwalk, Aguirre and his family were living out of their records/collectibles business in Bellflower, but within less than two months lost the business as well. Aguirre used credit card rewards points to pay for hotels, but those soon also ran out.

“Because I was self-employed, many traditional resources and programs were unavailable to me. It was tough,” Aguirre said.

Aguirre’s case was referred to VPAN Community Health Worker Oscar Morales, also a service-disabled veteran. Morales pulled out every tool in the VPAN toolbox to help get Aguirre and his family housed and supported for the long term and pursued all services and benefits for which Aguirre qualified.

Between Morales’ determination and the VA’s accelerated disability approvals process during COVID, it took less than six months for Aguirre to receive his 100% rating.

Morales also drastically reduced Aguirre’s out-of-pocket medical costs by helping him register with the VA. “I took him to the VA in Long Beach so he could get registered,” Morales said.

“[Oscar] guided me through the necessary steps to access veteran resources for healthcare,” Aguirre said. “He was tenacious with his efforts to let me know what exactly was available to me. I wouldn’t be service-connected without him.”

Morales even helped the Aguirre family move into their new home. “His new house is really nice,” Morales said. “He even has an avocado tree and a lime tree.”

### Peer in Profile: Oscar Morales

**Job Title:** Community Health Worker assigned to SD4

**Time with VPAN:** Almost one year

**Past Life:** 7 years with the LA County Sheriff’s Department

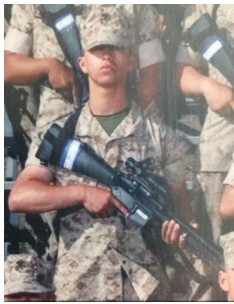
**What Attracted You to VPAN:** “Growing up, my dad taught us to always give back. There’s always gonna be somebody out there who has it 10x worse than you.”

**Military Background:** USMC logistics. Deployed to Afghanistan in March 2011 for 8 months. Daughter was born the same day he deployed. “I didn’t know what she looked like for the next several weeks.”

**What He Likes About VPAN:** “We assist veterans to maneuver through difficult situations and help alleviate some of the stress they’re going through. We help them combat the ‘system’ and expose them to resources and benefits they may not be familiar with. Its peer support. We’re the Homie hook-up.”

**Hobbies/Interests/Passions:** Being a professional chef. “It’s been a lifelong dream since I was four years old. I watched all the PBS chefs growing up.” Oscar even attended the Institute of Culinary Education in Pasadena.

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**Oscar Morales: Then and Now**

Aguirre agrees: “We have found a new home. I’ve begun addressing my health issues through the resources available to me. I’ve even been able to make an addition of a dog to our family. Although we closed our brick-and-mortar location, my passion is still my career path and that’s something that a lot of people never get to experience. I’m grateful for the experience. There’s more work to do but it’s a process.”

Asked what advice he would give to other veterans facing similar challenges, Aguirre emphatically replied: “Don’t wait for anything. Reach out, exercise every option, exhaust every resource. And when you think you’ve gone through all of them start over. Keep going.”

## ▶▶ A Lifeline for Veterans and Military Families, VPAN Support Line Answers the Call

No matter when, where, why, or how an LA County veteran or military family member finds themselves in need of support, the VPAN Support Line is a confidential and safe space they can turn to seven days a week, including holidays. Empathetic, trained veteran and family member peers field roughly 1,000 calls each month, with no challenge too difficult – whether it is divorce/separation, food or income insecurity, suicidal ideation, PTSD, unemployment/underemployment, or lack of housing. We recently sat down with VPAN Program Manager Nancy Pelayo to talk about how the Support Line came into existence, what it’s doing to change veteran and military family members’ lives for the better, and where it’s headed in the future.

### *How did the VPAN Support Line get its start?*

“The idea for a support line started before COVID hit. With the large number of veterans we have here in LA County, our LA County Board of Supervisors passed a motion to expand the services of VPAN, which included a support line that was specific to veterans and their family members. The VPAN Support Line was created as a response to provide accessible emotional support. COVID really afforded us the staff to be able to develop a support line. This was a meaningful project people could work on from a confidential telework site. We had a lot of borrowed resources, but also our internal services to make the line happen. At some point we had about 35 disaster services workers deployed on the line. These are peer support workers: Veterans responding to other veterans, military family members responding to other military family members.”

### *How has the VPAN Support Line evolved since then?*

“Now we have permanent staff on the support line. Our training has really been quite significant for agents on the line, including crisis intervention and psychological first aid. We provide an array of languages support – 18 threshold languages (including Spanish, Vietnamese, Mandarin, Tagalog, and Korean). We also have immediate services to people who call the line, which was not the case during Covid and we’re able to meet with that veteran perhaps within 24 hours. Most of the callers are seeking more than just emotional support over the phone; they may be looking for a way to connect with a larger community. For example: A veteran calls expressing signs of loneliness because they lost a spouse. The support line agent will ask what location the veteran is in and they will introduce them to VPAN services such as group events with other veterans like coffee meetings or hikes. They will also ask if they want to meet in-person to discuss the other support services. Then the agent creates a referral with relevant information and it is sent out to the VPAN team based in the veteran’s home area. A large number of the calls that we receive through our call center are for short-term services. The veteran peer can meet at the veteran’s home or anywhere the veteran feels more comfortable. Because geographic VPAN centers are defined by the five LA County Supervisorial Districts, the caller’s address and zip code are collected for this reason.”

### *What is the purpose and mission of the VPAN Support Line?*

“To connect to those veterans that we may not otherwise connect with. Oftentimes, veterans will not ask for help. This is another way to bring in those veterans who may not want to be identified. Our calls are confidential. We want to create a “no wrong

*Continued on page 6*

door approach” and increase community awareness. The line helps with the overall mission of decreasing veteran suicide and homelessness, unemployment and under-employment.”

### ***Who staffs the VPAN Support Line?***

“Veterans and military family members. You have veterans from all military branches, except for Space Force (yet). The connection is almost immediate [between veteran peer agent and veteran]. We now have budgeted staff that are permanent to our program. Right now, there are 19 permanent agents on staff.”

### ***What can callers expect when they contact the VPAN Support Line?***

“Really empathetic listening. They call the line and will be connected to another peer. We have the ability to transfer calls to a more urgent dispatch – if they are in a crisis, we can directly transfer to the crisis line within the L.A. County Dept of Mental Health (Option #1) The support and resources are free and confidential. There’s also direct referrals to the VPAN Field Team (these are boots on the ground). We’re a seven days-a-week program, so one day a veteran may man the line, another day they will be in the field. This provides a cross-training environment. We are also open on holidays, 9am to 8pm. Very few veteran organizations are open 7 days per week.”

### ***What is the future of the VPAN Support Line?***

“We would like to add some sort of chat feature to the line. The younger generations sometimes want an online-only option for communicating rather than a voice call. Texting is something that we’re also looking at. We are continuing to build our agents’ competency and getting to know the callers better who are calling the line. We’re also investing in more outreach efforts and training for our agents on the line and in the field.”

## **L.A. COUNTY VETERAN SERVICE AWARDS**

### ***Quarterly Awards – 1st Qtr, FY2024***

Supervisory District: JVS-SD1 (VPAN)  
Program Manager: LEO CHIRINOS (JVS-SD1)  
Veteran Service Officer: GLADYS ROMERO (MVA)  
Support Service Staff: KRISTINE PAPAZYAN (MVA)  
Battle Buddy: RUDY ANDRADE (JVS-SD1)  
Support Line Agent: ADAM CASTILLO (DMH VPAN)  
Community Partner: ROCIO PALMERO (US Vets)  
Creative Solution: JANET SABER (DMH VPAN)  
Volunteer: LOLA ANDRADE (JVS-SD1)

### ***Monthly Awards – October 2023***

Veteran Service Officer: CHERRY VILLAENUEVA (MVA)  
Support Service Staff: JORGE REYNOSO (MVA)  
Battle Buddy: CLAUDIA SEGURA (DMH VPAN)  
Support Line Agent: no nominees  
Community Partner: ELIZABETH LOPEZ (JVS-AJCC)  
Creative Solution: SANDRA LOPEZ (Gardena Veterans Center)  
Volunteer: MANNY GOMEZ (MVA)

### ***Monthly Awards – November 2023***

Veteran Service Officer: MICHELE FELIX (MVA)  
Support Service Staff: CHUCK JESTER (MVA)  
Battle Buddy: EBELISE TORRES (JVS-SD1)  
Support Line Agent: JORGE MARCIA (DMH)  
Community Partner: ANTHONY RODRIGUEZ (CalVet)  
Creative Solution: no nominees  
Volunteer: P. KWAN NEAL (MVA)



***JVS-SD1 accepts the first award for DMH VPAN Supervisory District of the Quarter.***

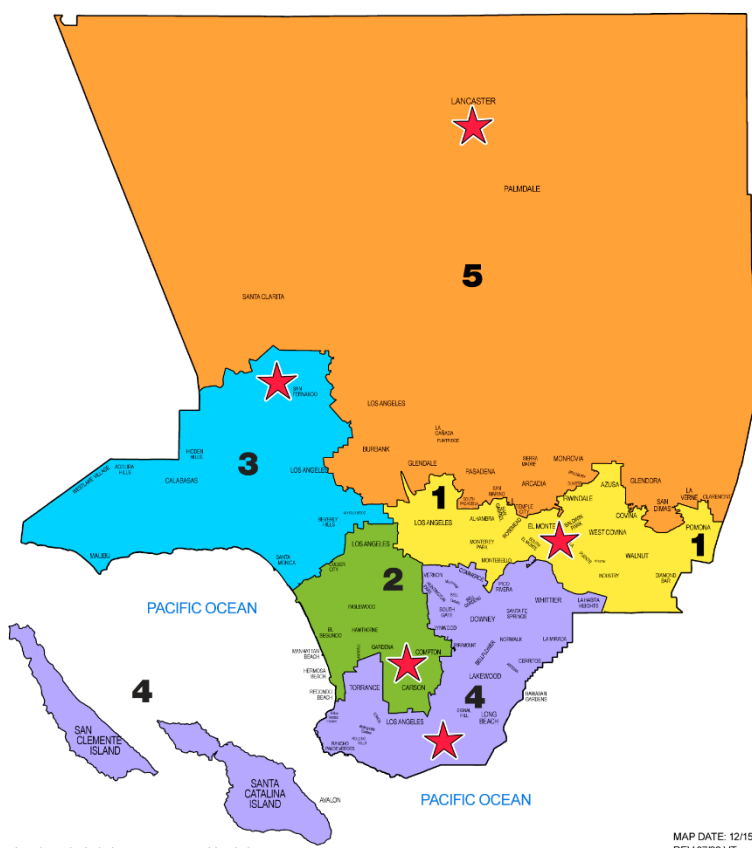
## ►► L.A. County Supervisorial District Map

### ★ 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 30 <sup>th</sup> St E #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: Calendar of Events



Join the network! Los Angeles County Unite Us is holding weekly info sessions as an introduction to how Unite Us connects people with health & social services, as well as a software demo. Please register in advance by clicking [here](#).

**Wednesdays 11:00 AM**

*Los Angeles*  
**Veterans Collaborative**

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.

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

**Connect with us!**

@VeteranPeer

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