

2020 Capacity Assessment of the El Dorado County Department of Veteran Affairs

About

Veteran Affairs was established by the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors to assist veterans, their dependents, and survivors in obtaining services from federal, state and local agencies administering veterans programs. Services include: information, benefit counseling, application assistance, case management, re-assimilation of returning war veterans, rehabilitation of wounded, intercession and appellate advocacy with any facet of State and Federal law providing for their relief and assistance.

Background

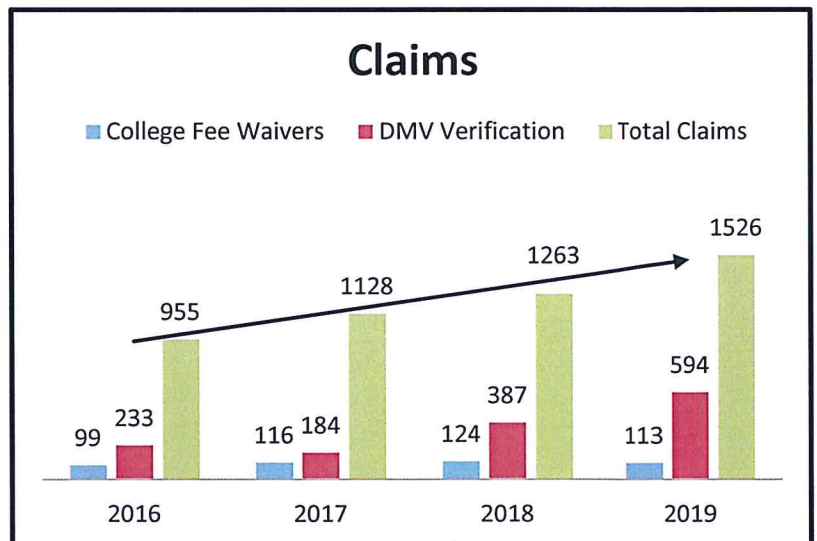
In 2018, a quality improvement project was initiated to identify opportunities to streamline processes and procedures within the department. The following solutions were implemented:

- ✓ Reclassified the Executive Assistant position to Admin Tech to provide greater admin support and structure to the program.
- ✓ Improved staff workload management through planning and prioritization of tasks. For instance, audit preparation is being done throughout the year rather than at one time.
- ✓ Developed a phone tree to help ensure calls were going to the appropriate staff and to improve response time.
- ✓ Utilized extra help and interns to respond to incoming calls.

Though the solutions resulted in a few notable improvements to the program, the impact to our veteran population is severely limited due to the department's capacity.

Challenge

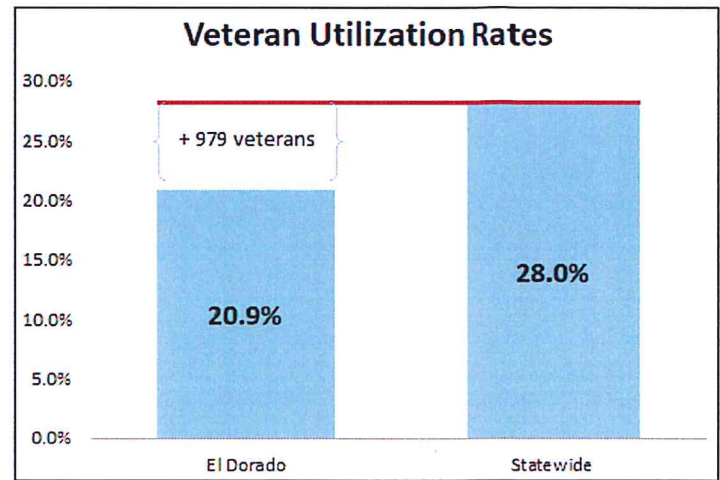
Veteran Affairs has experienced a dramatic increase in claims over the past four years. **Since 2016, claims have increased nearly 60%.** The department anticipates claims to continue to increase as individuals exiting the military services are now encouraged to seek medical care and document their issues while still in the military. That was not the case in the past. The compensation for injuries and conditions caused by a person's military service; the pensions received for war-time service; other federal and State of California benefits earned through active duty, reserve, and National Guard are continuing to evolve and increase. For example, the Blue Water Act extends the presumption of herbicide exposure, such as Agent Orange, to BWN Veterans who served as far as 12 nautical miles from the shore of Vietnam.



In addition, according to the 2020 Annual Report sent out by the California Association of County Veterans Service Officers, Inc. (CACVSO), El Dorado has **13,779 veterans**. It states that 20.9% (2,879) are receiving Comp and Pension claims (based on September 2018 data). This does not include current spouses, surviving spouse, and/or any other dependents that can apply for other benefits on their own right. Comparatively, California utilization of veteran benefits is 28%.

Currently, Veteran Affairs does not have the capacity for marketing and outreach activities. If El Dorado County increases their utilization rates to, at least, match that of the State (28%) by actively marketing our services, an additional 979 veterans would receive benefits.

While claims have steadily increased, staffing levels have remained flat. The department has a total of five full-time employees providing direct services including: three Veteran Service Representatives (VSRs), one Veteran Service Officer (VSO), and one Admin Tech. The office assistant position has been sporadically filled by an extra help position for years.



Veteran Affairs Staffing History						Notes:
	FY 15/16	FY 16/17	FY 17/18	FY 18/19	FY 19/20	
VSO	1	1	1	1	1	
Exec Assistant	1	1	1	1	0	Patricia was reclassified to Admin Tech in FY 19-20
Admin Tech					1	
Sr. VSR	1	1	1	1	0	The Sr. VSR was underfilled as a VSR in FY 19-20
VSR	2	2	2	2	3	
Total	5	5	5	5	5	

The current level of staff is insufficient to handle the workload. Veteran Affairs is unable to consistently provide reception coverage, accommodate walk-in clients or respond to the call volume received on a daily basis. It currently takes staff, on average, ten days to return phone calls. Appointments are booked out anywhere from 2 to 6 weeks and wait times vary from 30 minutes to 3 hours depending on what services are being sought which has resulted in a number of complaints. This creates a substantial delay for veterans seeking safety net services, non-emergency medical services, or financial benefits.

In addition, VSRs are responsible for archiving paper files, organizing the office, delivering veteran medals, registering clients in VetPro to provide measurable service metrics, complete client satisfaction surveys, and are responsible for completing claims that can increase funding for Medi-Cal Cost Savings. Due to the current time constraints for these technical positions, these tasks are often remaining uncompleted. Medals are not getting distributed timely, paper files have not been archived for eight years, Medi-Cal claim forms are not being returned to Social Services Income Support as apart of VA medical cost avoidance program. During the last audit cycle, approximately 400 claims had not been attached into VetPro which puts State funding at risk.

The veterans benefit system is complicated and benefits are highly individualized. Without professional assistance, many veterans lose benefits they have earned by their service - often thousands of dollars a year. - 2020 CACVSO Annual Report

Recommendations

In order to better serve our veteran population, ensure veterans are receiving timely access to the services for which they are eligible, market our services and support the department’s growing workload, HHSA is recommending that the Board of Supervisors approve adding one full-time office assistant and one full-time Senior VSR.

The anticipated result and benefit of these full-time permanent positions will improve client services by providing clients with immediate phone availability and reception; increase appointment availability thereby reducing wait times; and free up VSRs to focus on their technical services related to technical claim development, case management, claim submission and meet the ongoing changes of state and federal directives.

Budget Impact

The two new positions (Office Assistant I/II and Sr. VSR) are estimated to cost a total of \$170,428. That estimate includes wages, benefits and indirect costs. The positions would be funded primarily with County General Fund and may be slightly reduced via the Vehicle License Plate program funding.