

## **KINGS COUNTY VETERANS SERVICES**

### **SUMMARY**

In light of the large Veteran population residing within Kings County, the Grand Jury decided to do an investigation of the scope and nature of Veterans' services available to and/or provided within the County.

The following County Departments were evaluated by the Grand Jury:

- Kings County Public Guardian/Veterans Services Office – The Grand Jury concluded that a number of essential services were made available to local Veterans through the collaborative efforts of the Veterans Services Office working in conjunction with other local entities, such as the Kings County Behavioral Health Department's Veterans Services Unit. It was apparent to the Grand Jury that the Veterans Services Office was effectively providing crucial services to Veterans in an accessible and proactive environment.
- Kings County Behavioral Health/Veterans Services Unit – The Grand Jury was also impressed with the partnership between the Veterans Services Office and Kings County Behavioral Health (KCBH) Veterans Services Unit who work collaboratively to complement their respective services to Kings County Veterans. KCBH provides essential mental health services to Veterans, including alcohol, drug and crisis intervention. In the very near future, KCBH will open the county's first residential crisis housing for local Veterans. KCBH also provides mental health services to Veterans by partnering with a number of other resource support networks.
- Veterans Resource Center – On April 6, 2016, the Hanford branch of the Kings County Library opened a Veterans Resource Center for the purpose of providing Veterans with information and answers concerning claims and benefits which might be available to local Veterans, including directing them to the Kings County Veterans Services Office.

- Collaborative Justice Veterans Treatment Court – Veterans who have been charged with criminal offenses may be eligible to participate in a multi-Departmental collaboration between the Veterans Services Office, the KCBH Department and the Superior Court of the State of California. The Veteran is required to attend regularly scheduled Court hearings and to participate in various programs, including drug and alcohol counseling, drug testing, domestic violence counseling and other programs in order to successfully complete his/her program. Successful completion of the program can also result in the expungement of the triggering offenses from the Veteran’s official Court record.

The Grand Jury found the concept of the Collaborative Court to be enlightened and was particularly impressed by its consistently high successful “graduation” rate.

In addition to the county departments, the Grand Jury also examined:

- Kings County Housing Authority - The Grand Jury was also impressed by the Kings County Housing Authority’s collaboration with the Veterans Administration supportive housing program which assists Veterans and their families to qualify for subsidized housing under the auspices of the Housing and Urban Development Department (HUD). Additionally, the Housing Choice Voucher Program allows very low-income Veterans’ families to rent, lease and even purchase, safe and affordable privately-owned housing.
- Other Veterans’ organizations – The Grand Jury also interviewed representatives from two non-governmental Veterans organizations, the American Legion and “Our Heroes’ Dreams”. The Grand Jury was impressed at the scope and variety of the programs and membership benefits of those self-help Veterans organizations.

## **BACKGROUND**

California Penal Code §925 provides: “The grand jury shall investigate and report on the operations, accounts, and records of the officers, departments or functions of the county...”

## **METHODOLOGY**

The Kings County Grand Jury conducted interviews with representatives of Kings County Veterans Services, Kings County Behavioral Health Department, Kings County Housing Authority, the Kings County Collaborative Courts and Veterans Service Organizations. The Grand Jury also attended a Collaborative Court session and conducted research online, including the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) website.

## **DISCUSSION**

### Public Guardian /Veterans Services Office

In Kings County, the Office of Public Guardian and Veterans Services Office are combined into one department and are facilitated by the same staff. Kings County is now the only county in California to incorporate both entities into one office. This collaboration between the Public Guardian Services and Veterans Services appears to enhance their effectiveness in their delivery of services.

### Public Guardian

“The Public Guardian provides a vital service to persons unable to properly care for themselves or who are unable to manage their finances. The service is provided through a legal process known as conservatorship.

Initially, the primary responsibility was for the finances of persons civilly committed to psychiatric facilities. As society evolved and laws changed to meet new social challenges, the role of the Public Guardian broadened to include more responsibility for the care of the individual. The landmark LPS Act of 1969 and subsequent changes to the Probate Code meant that the Public Guardian became the substitute decision maker for vulnerable populations of the county with grave mental disabilities.”

(<http://www.countyofkings.com/departments/general-services/public-guardian>)

Currently the Public Guardian manages approximately 89 conservatorships throughout the county and 95 “Representative Payee Services” involving Social Security disability incomes.

### Veterans Services Office

During the course of the Grand Jury's investigation, it was discovered that the term "Veteran" might not be accurately understood. The generally accepted definition is that a Veteran is anyone who served on active duty in any of the Armed Forces regardless of time in service, service in combat zones, or location. For example, a female who served in the U.S. Navy during peacetime for four years has the same Veteran status as a male who served in the Army for 30 years. Unfortunately there are still many individuals who served in the Armed Forces who are not aware that they have Veterans' status or who consider themselves Veterans.

At the present time, there are approximately 12,500 Veterans residing in Kings County and the Veterans Services Office provides services to approximately 2,500 of those individuals on an ongoing basis each year. The Veterans Services Office is also the liaison or 'gateway' to the Federal Veterans Administration's claims and benefits departments. Benefits which are available to Veterans include:

- Disability benefits
- Benefits for surviving children, spouses, and parents of Veterans
- Pension benefits
- VA healthcare enrollment
- Burial benefits
- Veterans Administration Home Loan program
- California Veterans (CalVet) Home Loan program
- Identification cards and Driver's License Identification
- College Fee waiver program for children of disabled Veterans

### Driver's License Identification Program:

In November 2015, the California Department of Veterans Affairs and the California Department of Motor Vehicles launched the Veteran Driver's License Initiative. This allows California Veterans to obtain a "Veteran" designation on their California Driver's License. In order to obtain a Veteran designation, the Veteran must first go to a County Veterans Services Office for the necessary paperwork. This Veteran designation enables California Veterans to access certain privileges, benefits, or compensation associated with being a Veteran without the need to carry and produce their Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty (DD Form 214). The designation also allows Law Enforcement representatives to easily identify

Veterans and can also alert them to a possible nexus between allegedly criminal behaviors by Veterans which may in fact be the result of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) or other service-related mental or physical conditions. The drivers' license designation could also be useful in tracking Veteran suicides in California, which California does not presently track.

#### Kings County Behavioral Health (KCBH)/Veterans Services

One of the most significant partners collaborating with the Veterans Services Office in assisting local Veterans is the Kings County Behavioral Health Department.

The primary mission of Behavioral Health is to provide mental health services, including alcohol, drug and crisis intervention to residents of Kings County, including Veterans, a number of whom are also homeless.

#### History:

The passage of Proposition 36 in California brought significantly more dollars to every California county and enabled Kings County to increase and maintain comprehensive mental health services to the citizens of Kings County, including its Veterans. In 2006, Behavioral Health became a separate Department within the Kings County organizational structure, but has not and does not receive Kings County general fund monies. Certain provisions of Proposition 36 continue to provide primary funding for mental health services, especially for substance abuse intervention and treatment.

#### Staffing:

KCBH has a staff of 33 employees, three of whom are dedicated to providing services to Veterans. However, at present, KCBH does not have a subject-matter expert on Veterans' Services on its staff. Historically, the California community mental health systems were never intended to address the needs of Veterans. At present, KCBH actively partners with the Kings County Public Guardian and Veterans' Services Office to provide mental health services to Veterans in a coordinated and proactive manner.

KCBH is soon to have the first-ever local residential crisis house within Kings County, which will initially house six adults. Additionally, KCBH presently has local realtors scouting for additional new sites for KCBH to build additional local residential facilities in the future.

The KCBH Recovery Support Services Coordinator has a number of case management options for individuals who struggle with severe mental illness. The Coordinator is linked to the following resource support networks:

- Kings View Center
- Veterans Administration
- Kings County Court / Judges
- Probation Department
- Prosecutors and defense attorneys
- Kings County Sheriff's Office
- Jail / Intake Processes

Approximately two years ago, the Veterans' Administration was poised to establish a local Veterans' Clinic, which would have addressed homelessness. It would also have made the benefits of the Veterans Administration available without the need to travel to Fresno to access those benefits. KCBH representatives told the Grand Jury that they were unsure why the clinic project did not go forward, and suggested that the suspension of those efforts may have been due to staffing shortages within the Veterans' Administration.

#### Veterans Resource Center

On April 6, 2016 the Kings County Library opened a Veterans Resource Center at the Hanford Branch Library. The resource center utilizes trained "work-study" personnel to answer questions that Veterans may have concerning available claims and benefits and may direct them to the Veterans Services Office at the Kings County Government Center. "Work-study" is a program offered by the Veterans Administration that allows Veterans attending college to work for the Kings County Veterans Services Office.

#### Collaborative Justice Veterans Treatment Court (CJVTC)

Veterans returning from wars or military service may have serious emotional as well as physical wounds. These mental health issues may go unobserved and untreated. As a result, Veterans may "self-medicate" by turning to alcohol or drugs, which can bring those Veterans into the criminal justice system for anti-social behaviors whose root cause may be an underlying mental health problem.

The Collaborative Justice Veterans Treatment Court engages Veterans who have been charged with criminal offenses in a comprehensive judicial program of treatment and rehabilitation services. The ‘collaborative’ aspect of the program is based upon a multi-departmental effort between the Veterans Services Office, Kings County Behavioral Health Department and the Justice Department.

A Veteran may be eligible for participation in the treatment program, regardless of his/her type of discharge from the service. However, charges of serious crimes such as murder or sexual assault will disqualify a Veteran from participating in the program. The program is voluntary and includes regular court appearances before a designated Collaborative Court Judge. Once the Veteran has successfully completed the program, the offenses may be expunged from their records per a Court order.

#### Program Rules:

The program is structured to provide every opportunity for participating Veterans to “pay their debt” to society while also requiring maximum accountability on the part of the Veterans. To maintain eligibility, the Veteran must attend all court-ordered treatment modalities, including drug and alcohol counseling, educational classes, program events and self-help meetings. Participating Veterans must also submit to random drug and alcohol testing.

There are four phases to the CJVTC program. Each phase consists of specific treatment objectives before moving on to the next phase.

Phase 1 takes approximately 13 weeks

Phase 2 takes approximately 13 weeks

Phase 3 takes approximately 26 weeks

Phase 4 (aftercare) takes approximately 26 weeks.

Successfully completing a phase of the program may take longer if a Veteran fails to fully comply with any court-ordered requirements. Upon completion of the CJVTC program, there is a celebratory graduation ceremony. Successful graduates may also continue to receive ongoing support through the VA Services or through KCBH. The CJVTC program also offers Veterans support in securing employment, such as assisting in the preparation of resumes.

### Homeless Veterans and Housing

There are several programs available through the Kings County Housing Authority for low-income Veteran families and homeless Veterans to receive subsidized housing.

- Housing and Urban Development, VA supportive Housing - This is a program developed through collaboration between the Veterans Administration and The Department of Housing and Urban Development. This program uses a multi-pronged approach to move Veterans and their families out of homelessness and into permanent housing by dealing with the economic effects of homelessness as well as the Veteran's clinical needs, such as treatment for drug addiction or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The Veteran must meet the definition of homeless as defined in the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (2009), be eligible for VA health care services, and must need case management services.
- Housing Choice Voucher Program - Housing choice vouchers allow very low-income families to rent, lease or purchase affordable privately-owned rental housing.

### Veterans Organizations

The Kings County Grand Jury interviewed representatives from two of the Veterans Organizations that operate in Kings County, the American Legion and "Our Heroes' Dreams".

#### American Legion:

Chartered by congress in 1919 after World War I as a patriotic Veterans' organization, the American Legion focuses on service to Veterans, Service members, and their communities.

Post 3 – Hanford CA - Is an all-volunteer membership-driven organization that is composed of multiple sub-organizations such as the Auxiliary, The Sons of the American Legion and The American Legion Riders. Meetings are held the first Tuesday of the month. Presently, Post 3 has 280 members.

#### Programs:

Boys State – Is an educational program sponsored by the American Legion in which high school students become involved in the operation of their local, county, and state governments. The program began in 1935 and includes activities such as legislative sessions, court proceedings, law enforcement presentations, assemblies, bands, chorus and recreational groups.

Boy Scouts Troop 432 – Is a local Boy Scout group founded in 2013. The Boy Scouts of America is a values-based youth development organization that provides programs for young people to build character, to become familiar with the responsibilities of participating in citizenship, and to develop personal fitness.

Other projects and organizations supported by the American Legion include the Special Olympics, Valley Children’s Hospital fund-raising telethon and a Vietnam Wall, which is presently sited in Dinuba, CA.

#### Our Heroes’ Dreams:

Our Heroes’ Dreams is a non-profit organization founded in Hanford, CA for the purpose of improving the lives of Veterans and their families by helping them accomplish goals and aspirations which they might otherwise be unable to achieve due to their disabilities. The organization operates programs such as a Healing Safari, Veterans Community Response Corps, Operation 22, the Adrenaline Program and other counseling services.

- Healing Safari: Veterans and their families attend various camps that include skydiving, riding elephants and swimming with dolphins.
- Veterans Community Response Corps: Is an emergency response program in which Veterans are trained by the American Red Cross and the Navy’s Emergency Response and Search and Rescue teams to be able to provide community assistance in the time of a natural or a man-made disaster.
- Counseling programs: These programs include PTSD counseling in conjunction with family, financial, marriage, spiritual, and personal growth counseling.
- Operation 22: Is a program designed to heighten public awareness of the twenty-two (average) Veteran suicides that occur each day. The program is also developing a ranch to assist 900-1100 Veterans a year.

- Adrenaline: Allows Veterans to be certified to scuba dive and sky dive, to go sailing, to water and snow ski, and to attend fishing and hunting trips. The purpose of such activities is to motivate participating Veterans to become re-engaged in an active and involved life style.

## **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Finding 1**

The Grand Jury finds that the Kings County Veterans Services Office provides a variety of crucial services to local Veterans and does so in a proactive and collaborative environment which includes multiple organizations and resources. This approach effectively enhances the ability of Veterans and their families to access essential support services.

### **Recommendation 1**

None

### **Finding 2**

The Kings County Behavioral Health Department's primary mission regarding Veterans, a number of whom are homeless, is to provide them mental health services, including alcohol, drugs and crisis intervention. The Grand Jury finds that the services provided are proactive, accessible and beneficial to Veterans in crisis or needing treatment.

### **Recommendation 2**

None

### **Finding 3**

The Kings County Behavioral Health Department does not have a subject-matter expert on Veterans services currently on their staff, which limits the scope of their services to Veterans.

### **Recommendation 3**

The Kings County Grand Jury recommends that the Kings County Behavioral Health Department intensify its efforts to obtain a Veterans subject-matter expert on its staff.

### **Finding 4**

The Kings County Behavioral Health Department will soon have its first local residential crisis house which will provide housing for six adults. Currently the KCBH is out looking for additional suitable sites to expand its crisis housing capacity.

**Recommendation 4**

None

**Finding 5**

The Collaborative Justice Veterans Treatment Court provides a unique opportunity for Veterans who may have ended up in the criminal justice system through pre-existing mental conditions, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, to pay their debt to society through voluntary participation in a Court-supervised, multi-disciplinary environment.

**Recommendation 5**

None

**COMMENTS**

The Grand Jury thanks all those interviewed during the course of this very informative investigation into the services available to Veterans throughout Kings County.

**REQUIRED RESPONSES:**

None

**INVITED RESPONSES:**

Public Guardian/Veterans Services Office

Kings County Behavioral Health Department