

2017-2018 GRAND JURY REPORT

Riverside County Department of Veterans Services - Accessibility

Background

In 1930, the Riverside County Board of Supervisors (BOS) established the Riverside County Veterans Services Department (Veterans Services) to assist veterans, their dependents and survivors in securing the maximum allowable benefits from federal, state and local agencies. The main office is located at 4360 Orange Street in Riverside, California. The stated mission of Veterans Services is:

To promote and honor all veterans, and enhance their quality of life and that of their dependents and survivors through counseling, claims assistance, education, advocacy, and special projects.

Veterans Service Representatives (Representatives) play a critical role in the veterans' advocacy system and they are often the initial contact in the community to provide information and referral services. Representatives are Riverside County employees, rather than employees of federal or state government. They are trained and accredited by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Since they can work closely with many different veterans' organizations, they are capable of obtaining significant benefits for qualified veterans. According to Veterans Services statistics reported for Fiscal Year 2016-2017, the combined annual value of federal monthly payments and one-time benefits obtained for veterans was \$33,980,251. Riverside County ranked second among large counties in California, based on the utilization rate for veterans receiving benefits.

Veterans Services also reduces the size of the Welfare/Medi-Cal rolls because they substitute federal dollars with Riverside County general assistance dollars. The Veterans Services Department itself receives no federal funding for their budget. The California Department of Veteran Affairs, however, administers three revenue programs which are available to all California counties:

- The County Subvention Program – a grant that reimburses counties for a portion of their administrative costs and for workload units performed

- The Medi-Cal Cost Avoidance Program – county reimbursement for activities Veterans Services staff perform that results in a savings to the Medi-Cal program
- The Veteran Service Office Fund – monies used to expand Veteran Services, from the sale of veteran license plates, are shared by California counties statewide

Fifty percent of the Veterans Service's budget is derived from the State's General Fund and fifty percent is from Riverside County's General Fund. As stated on the Riverside County Open Data website, Veterans Services receives \$1.9 million which is 0.03% of Riverside County's \$5.71 billion budget.

Methodology

Interviews:

- Sworn testimony of the Director of Veterans Services
- Several Veterans Services Employees
- Several Veterans

Documents and Websites reviewed:

- California Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Resource Book, January 2016
- California Association of County Veterans Service Officers, Inc., Annual Report and Directory, 2018
<http://www.cacvso.org/>
- Internal Audit Report 2018-005, Auditor/Controller, County of Riverside, regarding Veterans Services, December 28, 2017
- Veterans Services Website
<http://veteranservices.co.riverside.ca.us/opencms/>
- County of Riverside, State of California, Fiscal Year 2017/18 Adopted Budget, Volume 1, page 298, Veterans Services, November 2017
- Riverside County Open Data Website, Veterans Services, July 1, 2017 through March 12, 2018
<http://budget.countyofriverside.us>

Visited:

- Riverside and Indio Veterans Services Offices
- Blythe Veterans Administration Clinic

Findings

1. A ramp leading to the main Veterans Services facility in Riverside is not in compliance with the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards because there are no handrails (Attachment 1). The Auditor/Controller's Report (Internal Audit Report 2018-005, dated December 28, 2017) states:
...The 2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design, Section 405, identifies a ramp as having a slope of greater than 1:20 and requires handrails for ramp runs with a rise greater than six inches. The facility entrance has two elevated runs heading toward the entrance on each side. When facing the entrance, the run on the left has a slope of less than 1:20, as such it does not meet the definition of a ramp. However, the run on the right has a slope greater than 1:20, qualifying it as a ramp per ADA standards. This same ramp has a run rise greater than six inches and is required to have hand rails. With the rise of the ramp over six inches, the lack of handrails can cause injury to individuals who have difficulty walking. This increases the risk of litigation against the County of Riverside.

The same Auditor/Controller's Report had an estimated correction date of March 1, 2018. Veterans Services requested an evaluation for design plans and an estimate of costs to install the handrails through the Riverside County Economic Development Agency (EDA). EDA referred the issue to the Riverside County Engineering Division. As of May 7, 2018, the Veterans Services Director was still awaiting the requested estimate.

2. Based on Riverside County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) research and interviews, Veterans Services is understaffed. Staffing consists of one Director, one Assistant Director, three Senior Veterans Service Officers, five Veterans Representatives, one Executive Assistant, and five Office Assistants serving at seven locations throughout Riverside County. According to the Veterans Services website, the veteran population is 129,364 which is 5.6% of the Riverside County total population. Countywide, beginning fiscal year July 2016 through February 2018, Veterans Services served and assisted 36,966 in-house clients, handled 60,511 phone calls and responded to 23,803 e-mails. The phone call and e-mail statistics are incoming and outgoing combined.
3. Riverside County Veterans Services offices are closed to the public on Fridays. The Veterans Services Director explained to the Grand Jury that Friday closures allow Representatives to process caseloads steadily and uninterrupted. In-house clients are seen on a first-come, first-served basis. Representatives are rarely able to schedule appointments because they spend whatever amount of time necessary to address the needs of each

client. The field offices are open at limited times throughout the week. Schedules are subject to change without notice if Representatives are unavailable. According to several interviewed veterans, walk-in wait times can be as much as three hours (Attachment 2).

Recommendations

Riverside County Department of Veteran's Services Riverside County Board of Supervisors Riverside County Economic Development Agency

1. The BOS consider installing proper handrails for the front ramp of the main Veterans Services building in Riverside. This will help prevent injuries, possible litigation and conform to ADA standards.
2. The BOS consider approving an increase to the Veterans Services budget for hiring additional staff. This will help alleviate long wait times and limited days of operation at field offices.
3. Veterans Services consider changing Riverside, Hemet and Indio office client walk-in hours to Monday through Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. This will allow an extra day to service clients. The 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. time period should be used as uninterrupted time to process caseloads. Staggered employee working hours would enable the office to remain open during lunch, thereby minimizing delayed service to our veterans.

Report Issued: 06/05/2018
Report Public: 06/07/2018
Response Due: 09/07/2018



(Attachment 1)

Current Veterans Services Office Hours

Main Office:

Riverside
Office Hours: 8:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.
Monday-Thursday
CLOSED – FRIDAY

Branch Offices:

Indio
Office Hours: 8:00 a.m. – Noon and 1:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.
Monday-Thursday
CLOSED-FRIDAY

Hemet
Office Hours: 8:00 a.m. – Noon and 1:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.
Monday-Thursday
CLOSED-FRIDAY

Field Offices:

Banning - Riverside Department of Public Social Service Office
Office Hours: 12:30 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.
3rd Wednesday of the Month

Blythe - Blythe VA Clinic
Office Hours: 10:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.
3rd Wednesday of the Month

Corona - Corona Vet Center
Office Hours: 9:00 a.m. – 12: 00 p.m.
1st & 3rd Thursdays of the Month

Palm Desert - VA Clinic
Office Hours: 9:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.
2nd & 4th Wednesdays of the Month

Murrieta - VA Clinic
Office Hours: 8:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. & 1:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Every Tuesday

(Attachment 2)