

Calaveras County Civil Grand Jury

Veteran Services Office: No Veteran Left Behind

May 26, 2023



SUMMARY

In the process of reviewing previous Grand Jury recommendations, the 2022-2023 Calaveras County Grand Jury (CCGJ) has identified improvement opportunities for the Calaveras County Veteran Services Office (CCVSO). With the resources allocated, CCVSO staff provides a high level of service to each veteran encountered. Past issues with consistent staffing and organizational changes have improved recently. However, the Grand Jury was able to identify areas that would help increase and upgrade service. With over 4000 veterans in the county and a small staff in CCVSO, any turnover in office staff will affect the quality and quantity of service to veterans. Succession planning and an increase in support staff would help provide consistent operations in times of staff turnover, vacations, or absences due to required training or other work.

GLOSSARY

The list below identifies acronyms used in this report.

BOS	Calaveras County Board of Supervisors
CACVSO	California Association of County Veterans Service Officers
CCGJ	Calaveras County Grand Jury
CCVSO	Calaveras County Veterans Services Office
CEO	County Executive Officer
FTE	Full Time Employee
HHS	Calaveras County Health and Human Services Agency
PTE	Part Time Employee
VA	U.S. Veterans Administration
VSO	Veterans Services Officer
VSR	Veterans Service Representative

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury began their inquiries by reviewing the recommendations made by the 2020-2021 Grand Jury. News articles and the CCVSO web page provided additional information for understanding the role of CCVSO. Several interviews were conducted with staff and other county employees associated with CCVSO. Documents related to budget, services, and operations were also reviewed.

BACKGROUND

CCVSO has been housed in rented office space in Valley Springs at the Jenny Lind Veterans Memorial District building since 2018. Walk-in services are available for veterans; appointments can be made electronically or via telephone.

According to the California Association of County Veterans Service Officers (CACVSO) 2022 Annual Report, funding for county Veteran Services Offices within California comes from county paid budgets with county funds. Due to the flexibility of the California state budget, ideally those funds are replenished by various appropriations of state funds. For fiscal year 2022-2023, CCVSO

budget was \$235,301 and 3.5 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) employees. There were approximately 4003 veterans in the County in fiscal year 2021-2022. There were 872 in-person office visits and 1,926 contacts via phone or email. CCVSO staff assists the veteran, spouse, or family members to access benefits to which they are entitled.

The U. S. Veterans Administration (VA) claims filing process can be a daunting experience. The support provided by CCVSO guides veterans through the process with less stress, better accuracy, and more positive outcomes than that experienced by veterans who try to do it themselves. The services are provided in a comfortable and convenient environment making it more manageable for the veterans.

CCVSO staff can help overcome obstacles with empathy and guide the veteran through what can be a highly complex process. Depending on the complexity of the claim, the preparation for filing a claim can take anywhere from a few minutes to several hours. CCVSO staff are trained to be up to date on eligibility requirements for benefits to which a veteran or their family are entitled. Sometimes the beneficiaries are unaware these benefits exist. CCVSO can guide them in applying for these benefits. This can require in-person meetings between the veteran and the VSO or the Veterans Service Representative (VSR). In addition, the VSO and VSR spend considerable time doing research which can become a time-consuming and lengthy process.

DISCUSSION

Succession Planning

Current CCVSO staff have years of experience and extensive knowledge and training to assist veterans in obtaining their benefits. Although the department has a small staff they are productive and efficient in serving our veterans. Some of their work is routine while other work is highly technical requiring specialized training. On a daily basis the work of the VSO and VSR is varied and can be complicated. As such, the sudden unexpected loss of either of these staff members can be very disruptive to the smooth operation of the department. Attempts have been made in the past to create an effective CCVSO Policies and Procedures Manual. This task has proved challenging due to the very issue it is meant to support, namely staff turnover. Also, the variety of tasks and training required does not lend itself to a simple staff manual.

The 2019-2020 Calaveras County Grand Jury (CCGJ) recommended that a Policy and Procedure Manual be developed but it has not been completed. In their response to the Grand Jury report, both CCVSO and the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors (BOS) agreed with this recommendation. However, due to staffing issues, it was never completed. For short and planned absences of staff, the remaining staff is able to adjust to accommodate the needed work until the return of the missing staff member. However, even these short interruptions result in inefficiencies and delays.

Staffing

CCVSO staff assists veterans, their dependents, and their survivors with filling out forms to obtain benefits. They advise and assist veterans and their dependents in obtaining benefits provided for them by County, State, and Federal Law. VSO acts as an advocate and case manager for veterans in need of such services. The VSO position is differentiated from the VSR position, primarily due to the complexity of casework and required supervision. The VSO must be an Accredited

Representative as prescribed by the Code of Federal Regulations 14.629(a)(1)(i)(ii). The VSO must take ongoing required education to stay up to date on current benefits.

In fiscal year 2021-2022, CCVSO submitted 407 new claims for veterans' benefits resulting in awards of \$3,060,000 averaging over \$7,500 per award. Once claims are submitted, CCVSO staff helps track the status of the claim and attempts to make annual contact with the veteran to determine if changes or additional claims are appropriate. This is not always possible as the limited staff is not always able to contact each veteran. The 407 veterans with new claims in fiscal year 2021-2022 were added to those of the previous year and the years before. This generates a significant amount of administrative work with record keeping, contacts, and scheduling appointments.

Claims filed within California by a county VSR have a more favorable VA approval rate, resulting in increased benefits. The percentage of professional VSRs to veterans in California is lower than in other states. Thus, an increase in the number of VSRs or means of improving their efficiency will increase the benefits to veterans and bring more money into the county. Administrative tasks performed by the VSO and VSR take time away from working directly for the veterans.

The 2019-2020 CCGJ determined that the two temporary Part Time Equivalent (PTE) clerical positions allowed the office to operate efficiently. These positions were funded through a federal grant that ended on September 30, 2020. The cost of hiring an additional full or part-time administrative employee would be offset by the economic stimulus for the county via increased veterans' benefits.

FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code §933 and §933.05, the Grand Jury requests responses within 60 days from elected county official(s), and within 90 days from governing bodies. In order to be included and published in the next Grand Jury report, invited responses must be received within 90 days.

After conducting interviews and reviewing reference documents the Grand Jury findings and recommendations are as follows:

F1. Since the goal of completing a CCVSO Policies and Procedures Manual was not met, current staff is tasked with training new employees.

R1. The Calaveras County Grand Jury recommends the current CCVSO staff complete and implement a CCVSO Policies and Procedures Manual, which includes a personnel succession plan by December 31, 2023.

Required Responses

None

Invited Responses

Director of Health and Human Services

Veteran Services Officer

Director of Adult Services

F2. VSOs and VSRs have to perform clerical duties due to only having part-time administrative support.

R2. The Calaveras County Grand Jury recommends that BOS and the County Executive Officer (CEO) provide CCVSO funding for an additional FTE or PTE administrative position by December 31, 2023.

Required Responses

Board of Supervisors

Invited Responses

Director of Health and Human Services

County Executive Officer

COMMENDATIONS

C1. The Calaveras County Grand Jury commends the staff of the CCVSO for their effective work and dedication to all veterans.

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify the individuals interviewed. Penal Code §929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.

REFERENCE SOURCES

2020-2021 Calaveras County Grand Jury Report

2019-2020 Calaveras County Grand Jury Report

Calaveras County Veterans Services, <https://veteranservices.calaverasgov.us/>

U. S. Veterans Administration, <https://www.va.gov/disability/get-help-filing-claim/>

California Association of County Veterans Service Officers,
<http://www.cacvso.org/>

California Association of County Veterans Service Officers 2022 Annual Report,
<http://www.cacvso.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Veterans-Annual-Report-2022-2.pdf>

Napa County Grand Jury Report, 2013-2014,
<https://www.napa.courts.ca.gov/system/files/gj-13-14-veterans-service-outreach-e.pdf>

Calaveras County FY 2022-2023 budget