



A Tradition of Stewardship
A Commitment to Service

NAPA COUNTY GRAND JURY 2013-2014

APRIL 22, 2014

FINAL REPORT

**VETERANS
SERVICE and OUTREACH**

County Veterans Service Office

I. SUMMARY

The 2013-2014 Grand Jury undertook an investigation of the County Veterans Service Office (CVSO). The CVSO provides services to military veterans, dependents, and their families. Its primary task is to assist veterans in identifying and applying for benefits that veterans are entitled to receive from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). This task breaks down into two primary components: actual assistance in claim processing, and outreach to veterans residing in Napa County to ensure awareness of benefits available from the VA. The CVSO provides other services for veterans as well.

The 2013-2014 Grand Jury concludes that the CVSO does a first-rate job of assisting veterans with the actual processing of their claims. However, it takes too long for veterans seeking benefits to obtain assistance and the outreach by the CVSO in recent years has been marginal at best due to inadequate staffing.

The focus of this report is the Napa CVSO that serves approximately 11,400 veterans. Veterans residing at the Veterans Home of California in Yountville and veterans attending Napa Valley College are serviced by their own Veterans Service Representatives (VSRs). The operation of these offices is outside the scope of this report.

The CVSO has conducted its business with a single Veterans Service Officer (VSO) in the past several years. In fiscal year 2013-14 the County authorized the addition of a second position, for a VSR. As of the writing of this report the position has not yet been filled.

It is not knowable at this time whether the addition of the second position will resolve the existing claims processing backlog, as well as allow the CVSO to engage in effective outreach to veterans residing in Napa County. The Grand Jury strongly urges a yearly assessment of these issues through annual reports to the Board of Supervisors.

To assist the reader, the frequently used abbreviations in this report are as follows:

CVSO: County Veterans Service Office
VSO: Veterans Service Officer
VSR: Veterans Service Representative
VA: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
CDVA: California Department of Veterans Affairs

II. BACKGROUND

The VA administers a wide range of benefits and services for veterans, their dependents, and their survivors. Major benefits include medical care, veterans' compensation, veterans' pension, survivors' benefits, rehabilitation and employment assistance, home loan guarantees, life insurance coverage, and cemetery benefits. The eligibility for most VA benefits is determined following discharge from active military service, with certain benefits requiring service during wartime.

The California Department of Veterans Affairs (CDVA) provides additional assistance for California veterans, including education, employment, health care, housing advocacy/assistance, funding assistance for CVSOs, and the promotion of legislation for veterans.

Section 970 of the California Military and Veterans Code authorizes the Board of Supervisors of each county to appoint a VSO, provides that the VSO must be a veteran, and continues: "It shall be the duty of the county veterans service officer to administer the aid provided for in this chapter, to investigate all claims, applications, or requests for aid made pursuant to the terms of this chapter, and to perform any other veteran related services as requested by the county board of supervisors." As specified by state law, VSOs are veterans; they are trained in claims processing; they receive certifications from the VA and the CDVA.

There are over 100 CVSOs in California counties. In contrast, there are only four VA offices in California, with the Oakland office being the nearest to Napa County. Most California veterans (over 65%) live outside a VA office service area. Thus, the preponderance of day-to-day personal assistance, counseling, guidance, and direction for California veterans is provided by county CVSOs. CVSOs track and quantify the monetary benefits that veterans in their areas receive through their claims processing efforts, but the intangible benefits of their work are equally real, and cannot be overstated.

Veterans often have difficulty identifying the entitlements that they are eligible to receive. Many are intimidated, even to the point of immobility, by the challenges in presenting a properly documented claim to the VA. They count on the CVSOs to be their advocate. The CVSOs, in turn, seek to provide a safe, thoughtful, and empathetic environment for California veterans. They strive to ensure that a veteran's dignity is maintained through what can be a complex, difficult, personal, and stressful claims process. The same is true for other services that are provided through CVSOs.

In Napa County, the CVSO is an office within the Services for Older Adults Division of the Napa County Health and Human Services Agency. The Health and Human Services Agency is one of eighteen departments of the Napa County government. The CVSO is currently staffed with a single VSO, with a VSR to be added in 2014. The CVSO has a half-time assistant assigned to it, with a full-time assistant planned when the VSR joins the office.

CVSOs in California are funded through a combination of county, state, and federal funds. The total cost of the Napa CVSO in fiscal year 2013-14 was \$178,000. Of this amount 79% came from Napa County.

Over the last eight years the Napa County contribution in support of its CVSO has averaged \$124,437. California has supplemented this funding over these years in an annual amount ranging from \$25,361 to \$43,111. On average, Napa County has funded 76% of the total expense of the CVSO. In 2013, California had a one-time, \$2.3 million surplus for CVSOs, of which \$23,000 went to Napa County. This additional funding provided the stimulus for the addition of the VSR position in the CVSO. There is no indication that the State will generate similar surpluses for distribution to the counties in the future.

According to 2010 U.S. census data, 11,400 veterans reside in Napa County. This veterans' population lives within a county area of approximately 788 square miles. The majority of veterans live in or near the City of Napa. There are also a significant number of veterans in the cities of American Canyon and Calistoga.

Napa County veterans range in age from 18 to more than 85 years and are of widely varied socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. Through 2012 (latest available year), the Napa CVSO had provided assistance to 1,435, or 12.5%, of the 11,400 veteran residents. VA benefits obtained through the work of the CVSO have significantly impacted the lives of Napa veterans and their families. The aggregate annual dollar value of VA benefits achieved through the work of the CVSO has increased over the last several years to a new high of more than \$3.5 million in new benefits in fiscal year 2012-13 (latest available year).

In Napa County, the number one reason that veterans do not receive benefits to which they are entitled is that they do not know the benefits exist. The second reason is that they do not think that they qualify for benefits. The third reason is that they perceive it to be too much of a hassle to pursue their claims with the VA. The VSO can overcome each of these reasons, but it can require significant one-on-one time with each veteran to do so. It may also require significant research. For example, a veteran might not recall the specific ship or battle that must be identified in pursuing a specific claim with the

VA. The process requires one-on-one meetings between the veteran and the VSO (or VSR), along with significant follow-up as a claim is documented.

At the present time (in the absence of a family emergency, such as “I have just lost my husband” or “I have just lost the family home”), it can take a veteran as much as four weeks or longer to schedule a one-on-one meeting with the VSO. Currently, the CVSO mostly limits its outreach to a monthly orientation for veterans in a conference room next to the CVSO office. There is not an active campaign in place to seek out the large pool of veterans who have never sought assistance from the CVSO. Many County veterans are not aware of what a VSO might accomplish for them.

The Napa County website contains information about veteran services but these services are not easy to locate. The website home page makes no reference to them. If a veteran does not know to enter “veteran” as a search term on the Home Page, <http://www.countyofnapa.org>, it is difficult to locate the extensive information available for veterans on the website.

While the Napa CVSO has no responsibility for the Veterans Home of California in Yountville, there is a constant exchange of information between the Napa CVSO and the counterpart office at the Veterans Home. Napa Valley College has its own VSR serving student veterans on campus but the Napa CVSO has limited interaction with the campus VSR outside of referrals for the filing of claims.

III. METHODOLOGY

Interviews conducted:

Staff in the Services for Older Adults Division, Napa County Health and Human Services Agency

Documents reviewed:

1. Veteran information page, Comprehensive Services for Older Adults, County of Napa website
2. Cal Vet Subvention Payment Manual to Counties (2013)
3. Napa CVSO Monthly Reporting Sheets, 2007-13
4. Napa CVSO State Annual Funding, 2005-13
5. Napa County CVSO Annual Budgets, 2005-13
6. 2012 Annual Report, California Association of County Veterans Officers, Inc.
7. Economic Impact of Federal VA Benefit Payments Made to California Veterans, Center for Strategic Research (2011)

8. Taking Care of Placer County Veterans Today and Tomorrow, 2011-2012 Placer County Grand Jury
9. Home Page, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
10. Home Page, California Department of Veterans Affairs
11. California Veteran Population by Counties, California Department of Veterans Affairs (2011)
12. California Veteran Population by Ethnicity, California Department of Veterans Affairs (2011)
13. Snapshot of California Veterans: Distribution by Race, Ethnicity, and Gender (September 30, 2012)
14. Resolution No. 2012-165, Designating the Napa Veterans Advocacy Coalition as the County's Veterans Support Group, Napa County Board of Supervisors
15. Veterans Service Division Procedure Manual for Subvention and Medi-Cal Cost Avoidance, California Department of Veterans Affairs (July 1, 2012)
16. Medi-Cal Cost Avoidance Program, Total Federal Funds, California Department of Veterans Affairs (January-June 2013, FY 2012-13)
17. State Legislative Priorities, California Association of County Veterans Services Officers (2013-14)
18. Public Hearing on California Veterans Services, Counties Work in California and Across the Nation (April 23, 2013)
19. A Guide for Returning Veterans, Napa Valley College (PDF)
20. Scholarship and Grants, 64 available websites, California Association of County Veterans Services Officers, Inc.
21. Agenda Summary, Veteran Services Program, Hiring Veteran Services Representative and Reclassifying VSO as Supervisor, Health & Human Services (February 11, 2014)
22. Napa County Public Services Employees Job Description, Veterans Services Officer, Class Code 3690 (2007)
23. Newspaper articles, editorials, letters to the editor regarding veterans in Napa County

IV. DISCUSSION

A. The Napa County CVSO Provides Valuable Assistance in Claims Processing

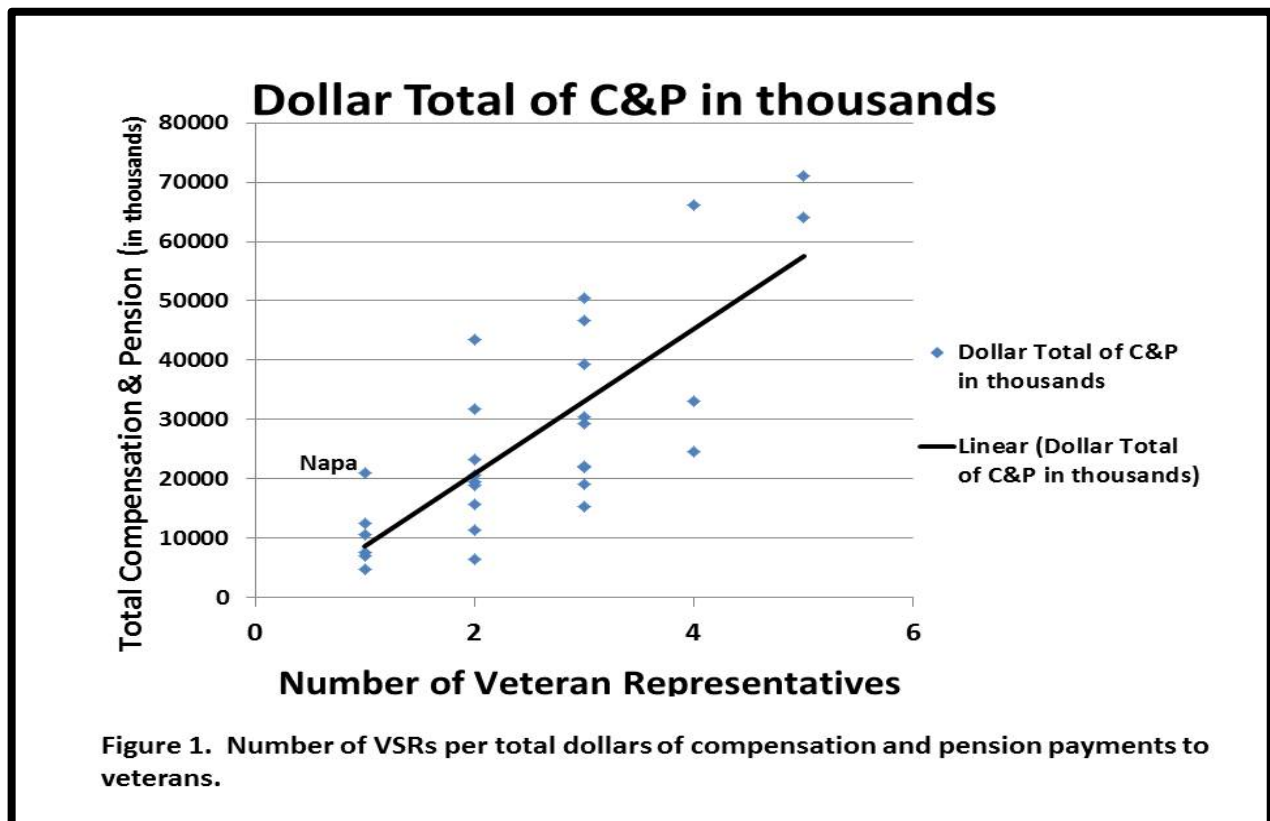
Veterans can file their own claims for benefits but are often not successful. Typically, the claim is not complete and the VA responds by seeking more information. The back-and-forth between veteran and the VA can continue for a year and a half until the VA rules on the claim. On the other hand, when a VSO submits a fully developed claim on behalf of a veteran, the VA acts on the claim within six months or less. Pension

claims for low-income veterans are typically resolved within six weeks. As a matter of policy, the Napa CVS SO discourages veterans from applying for VA benefits on their own. Rather, it strongly encourages veterans to apply through the VSO who is skilled in VA filing forms and understands VA processes and procedures.

CVSOs maintain statistical information that shows their success rate with the VA based on the percentage of claim grants and the monetary value of the awards. The Napa CVS SO has a 98% grant approval rate. This high rate reflects that almost all claims submitted through the Napa CVS SO are granted, and is the seventh highest grant approval rate in California.

As important, Napa veterans more often receive a higher disability rating than veterans in other counties. The CVS SO prepares them well for their VA examinations. They are prepared to explain their issues, including the impact of their disabilities on themselves and their families.

Finally, the total annual value of approved claims has been rising in the last several years for veterans in Napa County. In 2013, the monetary value of approved compensation and pension claims totaled more than \$3.5 million dollars. The total in compensation and pension claims for the last seven years exceeds \$21 million.



When the Napa CVSOS is compared to other CVSOSs, Napa's cumulative total of \$21 million in compensation and pension claims over the last seven years significantly exceeds the amount achieved by other counties with CVSOSs staffed by a single VSO (or VSR), as illustrated in Figure 1.

B. Napa County Greatly Benefits from the work of the CVSOS

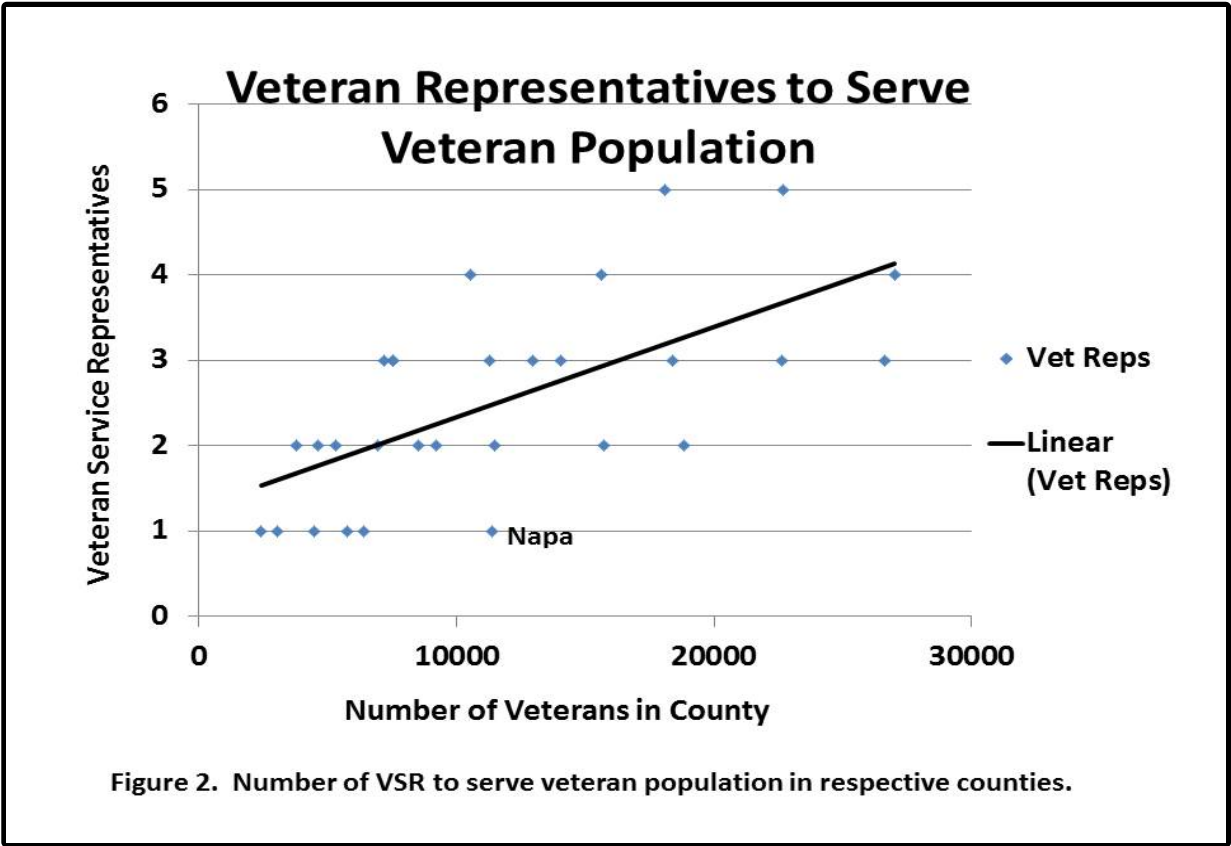
Typically veterans spend most, if not all, of their benefit money on life's necessities. Thus, in assessing the economic value of a CVSOS, it is important to take into account the multiplier effect from the veterans' dollars spent within the local economy. While opinions differ, it is generally accepted that the multiplier is at least three. Thus, the multiplier impact of the \$3.5 million dollars that was realized in 2013 may be \$10 million (or more), with most of these dollars likely to be spent in Napa County. In short, the combined Napa County general fund and State expense of about \$150,000 (the current cost of the CVSOS office) has an outsized impact on economic activity, to the benefit of both local business and the County itself.

The Placer County 2011-2012 Grand Jury undertook to examine the economic impact of federal benefit dollars for veterans and their families in Placer County. It cited the results of a study by the Center for Strategic Economic Research (CERS) that sought to quantify the benefits to the County from an annual expense of \$381,554 in support of its CVSOS. According to the study, "The Placer economy benefits from a total of roughly 105 jobs, \$14.2 million of output, and \$4.9 million of employee compensation with a state and local tax impact of \$1.1 million resulting from the direct spending supported by veteran benefit payments obtained by the Placer County CVSOS." While there is no such similar study for Napa County, there is general recognition that the direct benefits from veteran benefit payments at the county level are substantial.

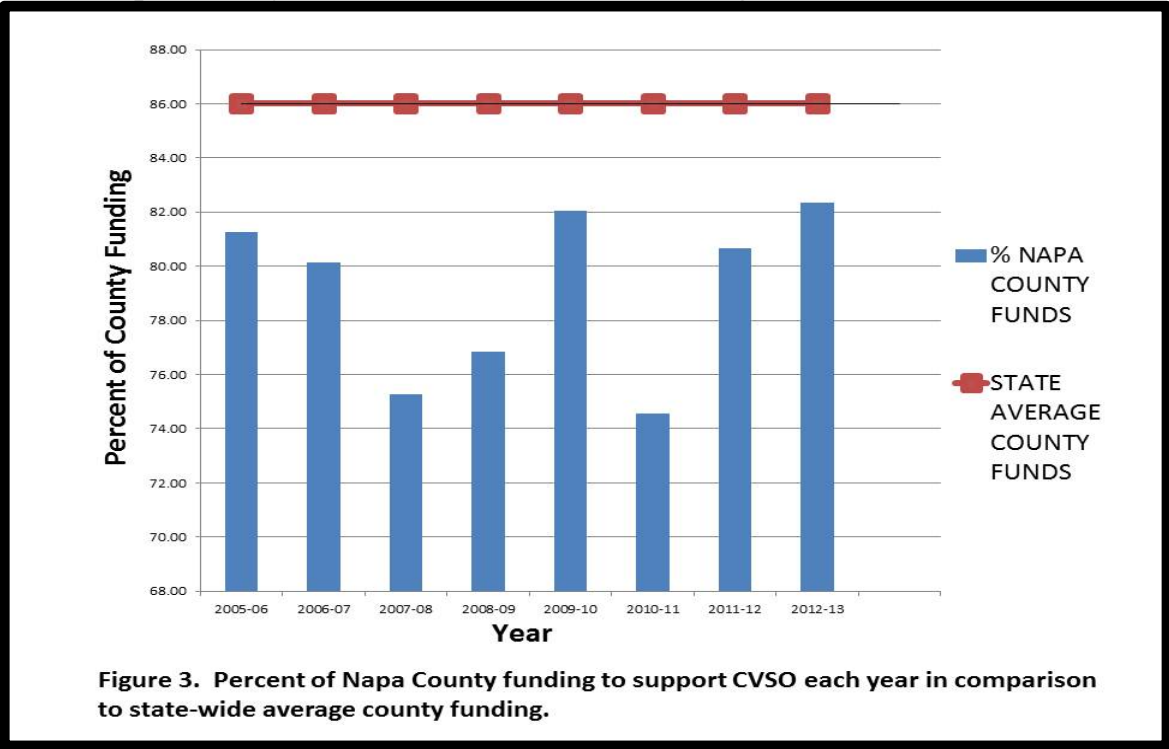
In short, the Napa CVSOS, with a single VSO, has done well in augmenting the federal veteran benefit payment dollars flowing into Napa County. There is also a vast unmet need, as evidenced by the small percentage (12.5%) of Napa County veterans that have taken advantage of the County's CVSOS service to date, and the significant wait time for an appointment with the VSO. The unmet needs means that Napa County is losing the benefit of substantial federal dollars and their multiplier effects that could be supporting local economic activity.

C. The NAPA CVSOS Has Suffered from a Shortage of Staff and Funding

As Napa County now moves to add a VSR, raising the number of accredited officers from one to two, it seems clear that the significant backlog in scheduling interviews and the absence of significant outreach is attributable to the small size of the Napa CVSOS. Napa County, with 11,400 veterans, has been understaffed compared with other smaller



counties with small veteran populations. These counties include Butte, El Dorado, Humboldt, Kings, Lake, Madera, Marin, Mendocino, Nevada, Santa Cruz, and Yolo. Each of these counties has more than one VSO (or VSR) to serve its veterans. Figure 2 shows that Napa County has been an outlier with a single VSR:



Not surprisingly, Napa County underfunded its CVSOS in the last several years when compared with the statewide average. The statewide average of county funding in past years has been 5% to 10% greater than that of Napa County, as illustrated in Figure 3:

Some backlog is inevitable. Based on the foregoing, it can come as no surprise that the average scheduling backlog in Napa County stands at four to six weeks, in comparison to a state wide average of three weeks. The 2013-2014 Grand Jury recommends that Napa County strive to be best in class, with a backlog limited to two weeks. This would result in approximately 80 veterans being seen in a two-week period.

As noted above, Napa County in 2014 is adding a VSR, and the funding for the office is increasing, including the one-time state distribution in 2013. Napa County should strive in the future to be at no less than the statewide county average in CVSOS funding.

D. CVSOS Administration: Insufficient Outreach

There are a number of well-established reasons why veterans often do not obtain the benefits to which they might be entitled:

- They do not know that the CVSOS exists
- They are not aware of benefits applicable to their situation
- They think they will not qualify for the benefits
- The process is “just too difficult” to complete
- They suffer from emotional trauma that impairs their ability to pursue claims on their own

Effective outreach can overcome each of these reasons. The most important outreach is visiting the veterans in their homes. The VSO (or VSR) needs to be able to visit veterans who are unable or reluctant to come to the CVSOS. The CVSOS should routinely reach out to organizations, clubs, and events where veterans are likely to congregate.

Elsewhere in California, CVSOSs, banding together, make joint use of media outlets such as newspapers, radio, and television, to advertise their services. The CVSOS should join any similar effort in the North Bay counties.

Napa County provides veterans’ services information on its website, but some veterans may not be web savvy and may struggle to find helpful information. Younger veterans, who do not search for “veteran” within the website, may not think to navigate into programs accessed through the “Comprehensive Services for Older Adults” webpage.

It is also important that County employees, as they provide guidance to those seeking services, recognize that they might be dealing with a veteran and direct the veteran to the CVSO. County administrators should ensure that their employees understand that any service record with the military makes that person a veteran.

Finally, the CVSO should initiate a Veterans Identification Card program, as other counties now do. An identification card can assist veterans in obtaining discounts from companies offering discounts to veterans. A key consideration is that such a program encourages veterans to come into the CVSO. The VSO (or VSR) can then explore if the veteran has benefit opportunities with the VA or is in need of other assistance.

V. FINDINGS

- F1. The Napa CVSO provides a critical service by assisting veterans to identify and apply for benefits they are entitled to receive.
- F2. There are 11,400 veterans in Napa County that are within the service area of the Napa CVSO.
- F3. As of 2012 (the latest available data), the Napa CVSO has assisted a total of 1,435 veterans through the VA claims process.
- F4. The Napa CVSO has a claims granting rate of 98% from the VA, ranking it seventh among all California counties.
- F5. The amount of new claim benefits received by Napa County veterans through the CVSO has increased steadily over the last several years, reaching a new annual high of \$3,496,513 in 2013.
- F6. In recent years Napa County has understaffed and underfunded its CVSO in comparison to other, small California counties.
- F7. The Napa CVSO presently has a backlog of four to six weeks in scheduling non-emergency meetings with veterans.
- F8. Due to understaffing, the Napa CVSO in recent years has not engaged in effective outreach to veterans in Napa County.
- F9. Many veterans do not have documents on their person that identify themselves as veterans.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

- R1. The Napa CVSO should set a goal of scheduling a meeting with a veteran within a two-week period.
- R2. The Napa CVSO should develop an outreach program that ensures that veterans in Napa County are fully aware of its services, including that it will make home visits.
- R3. The Napa CVSO should report annually, in writing, to the Board of Supervisors on the effectiveness of its outreach programs, including not just what it has done but what in its assessment should be done.
- R4. Napa County should implement changes to its website that facilitate the finding of veteran services on its website.
- R5. The Napa CVSO should make available a Veteran Identification Card for Napa County veterans to enable veterans to receive additional benefits from Napa County businesses with special benefits for veterans.

VII. REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to California Penal Code section 933.05, the 2013-2014 Grand Jury requests responses from the following governing body:

- The Napa County Board of Supervisors

It is requested that the official responding to the recommendations certify above his or her signature that the responses conform to the requirements of section 933.05 of the Penal Code.

VIII. COMMENDATION

The 2013-2014 Grand Jury commends the CVSO for its high grant rate of 98% and for achieving record benefit results in fiscal 2012-13.

The foregoing report was approved by the 2013-2014 Grand Jury in regular session on April 15, 2014.

/s/

Alan Galbraith

Foreperson, 2013-2014 Grand Jury