

NEVADA COUNTY VETERANS SERVICE OFFICE

Reason for Investigation

The Nevada County Grand Jury (Jury) received numerous complaints regarding the Nevada County Veterans Service Office (VSO). The complaints allege that the VSO mishandles claims, dispenses inaccurate or incomplete information, and does not adequately advocate for veterans. Additionally, anticipating that an increase in need for services from the VSO will result from the returning veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Jury decided to investigate the level of service received by veterans.

The Jury is authorized under sec. 925 of the California Penal Code to "...investigate and report on the operations, accounts, and records of the officers, departments, or functions of the County."

Background

The Nevada County Veterans Service Office

- Is a liaison agency for veterans, their widows, and dependents
- Assists veterans with changes of status, compensation and pension claims, educational benefits, insurance claims, disability claims, hospitalization, and burial benefits
- Is responsible for advising persons seeking benefit claims to the appropriate agency
- Is here to serve those who have served us and facilitates access to the benefits received by the veterans and their dependents, which are considered an obligation from a grateful nation

The VSO was established in the 1940s, as its own stand-alone department and continued in that status until 2000 when it was placed under the Human Service Agency retaining its status as a Department. In 2006, it was moved again, into the Social Services Department, this time as a Division. With this move, the Veterans Service Officer ceased being a Department Head in the County structure, and now reports to the Social Services Director.

The VSO is staffed with two full time employees who are responsible for providing the services previously enumerated and a permanent, part-time office assistant.

The current budget is approximately \$196,000 of which \$45,000 is funded by the State, with \$151,000 coming from the County. The State's funding is dependent on the number of claims submitted by the VSO to the Veterans Administration.

Method of Investigation

The Jury interviewed numerous individuals regarding their VSO experiences and reviewed pertinent documents relevant to the services provided by the VSO. Members of the Jury visited the VSO in Grass Valley.

The Jury corroborated anecdotal evidence through interviews with multiple, independent sources, including complainants, the Director of Social Services, VSO employees, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) experts, the current Veterans Service Officer, a Veterans Affairs Consultant, two former Veterans Service Officers, the Assistant Veterans Service Officer and VSO volunteers.

Findings

1. There are two permanent Veterans Service Representatives who handle claims. One of these is the Veterans Service Officer, the other is the Assistant Veterans Service Officer. There is also a permanent, part-time office assistant, who effective in April 2008 works 10hrs./week for the VSO; previous to that, the office assistant was a temporary employee who was utilized approximately 30 hrs./week
2. Since 2006 the VSO, on occasion has given incorrect and misleading information to veterans and their families, and has not always been timely in the handling of claims.
3. Van service, originally established by a previous Veterans Service Officer has been reduced from three to two times per week, between the Auburn Medical Clinic and the Reno Veterans Administration Hospital.
4. Placing the VSO under the Social Services Department was intended to enhance intra-county agency co-ordination of services for veterans and their family members.
5. Since 2006 disharmony among the VSO employees has had a marked effect on the ability of the office to provide services to Nevada County veterans.
6. Only a small percentage of the 12,000 veterans living in Nevada County seek assistance through the VSO. There are pockets of under-served and housebound veterans living in Nevada County who are currently not being adequately served by the VSO.
7. The anticipated return of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan and expanded outreach services will exceed the current capacity of the VSO.
8. In 2007, because of disharmony in the VSO, the Social Services Director engaged a Veterans Affairs Consultant to analyze the operations and staffing of the office.

9. The Social Services Director is addressing the issues identified in the Consultant's report and is implementing a number of the recommendations including those relating to staffing, training, and co-ordination of services.
10. The Nevada County veteran's community is unaware of the VSO's organizational structure, and in particular, the roles played by the Social Services Department and its Director in the support and oversight of the VSO mission.

Conclusions

1. The complaints concerning the VSO received by the Jury were found to have merit.
2. Veterans need a VSO they can trust and have confidence in when working with that office.
3. There are pockets of underserved and housebound veterans living in Nevada County who would greatly benefit from an expanded out-reach program and a mobile VSO unit.
4. The part-time office assistant position does not allow sufficient time to meet the needs of the VSO clientele.
5. The current staffing of the VSO may well prove insufficient to adequately address the needs of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.
6. There is a lack of awareness by veterans as to where to go to resolve issues regarding the VSO.
7. Elimination of the current disharmony within the VSO is necessary if that office is to effectively meet its responsibilities.
8. The Social Services Director is taking an active and continuing role in resolving the issues within the VSO.

Recommendations

1. The BOS should support the Social Services Director's ongoing efforts to resolve the problems that currently exist at the VSO.
2. The BOS should authorize funds for the Social Services Department to enable the VSO to extend veteran out-reach services and provide a mobile-assisted office to effectively aid hard-to-serve and housebound veterans.
3. The BOS should authorize funds for the Social Services Department to enable the VSO office assistant position to be a permanent, full-time position.

4. The BOS should direct the staff to study whether co-ordination of veteran service referrals for other County benefits is adequate to meet the needs of veterans and their families.
5. The BOS should direct staff to request the Veterans Administration to restore van service to its previous level.
6. BOS should direct the staff to update the VSO website. It should include the departmental structure with contact information for the Social Service Director and an organizational wall chart with this information should be posted at the VSO.
7. The BOS should direct staff to periodically determine the satisfaction of services provided by the VSO. These surveys should originate from and be mailed back to the Social Services Department to assure confidentiality.

Required Response:

Nevada County Board of Supervisors October 20, 2008

NEVADA COUNTY SUPERIOR COURT
201 Church Street, Suite 6
Nevada City, CA 95959
(530) 265-1311

+ to Health Comm
for review for adlog
8/27/08
accepted by
Comm 9/11/08

ROBERT L. TAMIETTI
Assistant Presiding Judge

August 15, 2008

Larry Schwartz, Foreman
Nevada County Civil Grand Jury
950 Maidu Avenue
Nevada City CA 95959

Dear Larry:

I have reviewed the letter & material enclosed in response to the report on "Nevada County Veterans Service Office", submitted by Ted S. Owens, Chairman of the Board of Supervisors, and have asked the Deputy Jury Commissioner to forward the letter & accompanying documents on to you.

Thanks to you and the other members of the Grand Jury.

Sincerely,



ROBERT L. TAMIETTI
Presiding Judge of the
Civil Grand Jury

RLT:cjm

COUNTY OF NEVADA

STATE OF CALIFORNIA

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August 12, 2008

The Honorable Judge Robert Tamietti
Presiding Judge of the Nevada County Grand Jury
Nevada County Courthouse
201 Church Street
Nevada City, CA 95959

Re: Board of Supervisors' Responses to the 2007-2008 Nevada County Civil Grand Jury Report, *Nevada County Veterans Service Office*.

Dear Judge Tamietti:

The attached responses by the Board of Supervisors to the 2007-2008 Nevada County Civil Grand Jury Report, dated June 17, 2008, entitled *Nevada County Veterans Service Office*, are submitted as required by California Penal Code Section 933.

These responses to the Grand Jury's Findings and Recommendations were approved by the Board of Supervisors at their regular meeting on August 12, 2008. Responses to Findings and Recommendations are based on either personal knowledge, examination of official County records, information received from the County Executive Officer, or the Board of Supervisors and County staff members.

The Board of Supervisors would like to thank the members of the 2007-2008 Grand Jury for their participation and effort in preparing their Reports, and their participation in the Grand Jury process.

Respectfully submitted,

Ted S. Owens
Chairman, Board of Supervisors

**NEVADA COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS RESPONSES TO
2007-2008 CIVIL GRAND JURY REPORT
DATED JUNE 17, 2008**

Nevada County Veterans Service Office

Responses to findings and recommendations are based on either personal knowledge, examination of official county records, review of the responses by the County Executive Officer, or testimony from the Board of Supervisors and county staff members.

A. RESPONSES TO FINDINGS

- 1. There are two permanent Veterans Service Representatives who handle claims. One of these is the Veterans Service Officer, the other is the Assistant Veterans Service Officer. There is also a permanent, part-time office assistant, who effective in April 2008 works 10 hrs/week for the VSO; previous to that, the office assistant was a temporary employee who was utilized approximately 30 hrs/week.**

Agree.

- 2. Since 2006, the VSO on occasion has given incorrect and misleading information to veterans and their families and has not always been timely in the handling of claims.**

Agree.

On occasion the Veteran Service Office provided incorrect and misleading information to veterans and their families and/or was not timely in the handling of claims.

- 3. Van service, originally established by a previous Veterans Service Officer, has been reduced from three to two times per week, between the Auburn Medical Clinic and the Reno Veterans Administration Hospital.**

Disagree.

The Nevada County van service did not run between Auburn Medical Clinic and Reno. The van program transported individuals from Grass Valley Veteran memorial Building and Reno Veterans Administration Hospital. The program was reduced in 2006 from three days per week to two days per week by the VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System, under the previous Veteran Service Officer. Current service is two days per week, the same service level that existed in mid-2006, under the previous Veteran Services Officer.

An established demand for van service is needed before VA Sierra Nevada Health Care System will review increasing days. In 2008 (January 1 to June 30) 82% of the van trips did not meet capacity. In 2007, 85% of the van trips did not exceed capacity.

On average, five of the seven seats were filled per ride. Staff will continue to track van utilization and request additional days when demand grows. The demand will be evaluated by monitoring weekly ridership and the number of vacant seats. This will be

accomplished by a monthly report generated by VSO staff and reviewed by the Director of Social Services.

- 4. Placing the VSO under the Social Service Department was intended to enhance intra-county agency coordination of services for veterans and their family members.**

Agree.

- 5. Since 2006 disharmony among the VSO employees has had a marked effect on the ability of the office to provide services to Nevada County veterans.**

Agree.

- 6. Only a small percentage of the 12,000 veterans living in Nevada County seek assistance through the VSO. There are pockets of under-served and housebound veterans living in Nevada County who are currently not being adequately served by the VSO.**

Agree.

- 7. The anticipated return of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan and expanded outreach services will exceed the current capacity of the VSO.**

Partially agree.

Although an increase is anticipated, County specific data does not exist to support projections that anticipated return of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan and expanded outreach would exceed the current capacity of the VSO.

- 8. In 2007, because of disharmony in the VSO, the Social Services Director engaged a Veterans Affairs Consultant to analyze the operations and staffing of the office.**

Agree.

- 9. The Social Services Director is addressing the issues identified in the Consultant's report and it is implementing a number of the recommendations including those relating to staffing, training, and coordination of services.**

Agree.

- 10. The Nevada County veteran's community is unaware of the VSO's organizational structure, and in particular, the roles played by the Social Services Department and its Director in the support and oversight of the VSO mission.**

Partially agree.

There is opportunity to increase community awareness regarding the VSO's organizational structure and the role played by the Social Services Department and its Director in the support of the VSO mission.

B. RESPONSES TO RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. The BOS should support the Social Services Director's ongoing efforts to resolve the problems that currently exist at the VSO.**

The recommendation has been implemented.

The BOS, through the CEO and the Director of Health and Human Services, has been supportive of the Social Services Director's efforts to resolve organization issues that exist within the Veterans Service Office, including the creation of a 0.5 FTE administrative support position, the hiring of an outside consultant to assess and make recommendations to improve office operations, the restructuring of office hours and the implementation of personnel changes.

- 2. The BOS should authorize funds for the Social Services Department to enable the VSO to extend veteran outreach services and provide a mobile-assisted office to effectively aid hard-to-serve and housebound veterans.**

The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.

Utilizing existing resources, VSO staff will be conducting monthly outreach activities to North San Juan, Penn Valley and Truckee in the next three months. Existing resources include office locations at the Family Services Center in North San Juan, the Nevada County Joseph Center in Truckee, and the Nevada County Public Health Mobile Services Van. The VSO intends to maintain these as on-going outreach activities.

- 3. The BOS should authorize funds for the Social Services Department to enable the VSO office assistant position to be a permanent full-time position**

The recommendation requires further analysis.

The 0.5 FTE administrative support position is a permanent position that has been recently created, boosting the total positions in the office to 2.5 FTE. Prior to its creation, the office had been operated on a permanent basis with only two full time positions, assisted periodically by temporary clerical staff. We plan to operate this current fiscal

year with the 2.5 FTE and will evaluate whether this addition is sufficient to meet the needs of the office.

- 4. The BOS should direct the staff to study whether coordination of veteran service referrals for other County benefits is adequate to meet the needs of veterans and their families.**

The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented during the current fiscal year.

The Department will review a sample of client records to gauge the current level of referrals to other benefit programs as compared to the number of programs that clients are potentially eligible for.

- 5. The BOS should direct staff to request the Veterans Administration to restore van service to its previous level.**

The recommendation will not be implemented.

Current utilization does not warrant additional van days at this time. In 2007, 85% of the van trips did not exceed capacity. In 2008 (January 1 to June 30) 82% of the van trips did not meet capacity. Staff will continue to track van utilization and request additional days based on service demand.

- 6. The BOS should direct the staff to update the VSO website. It should include the departmental structure with contact information for the Social Service Director and an organizational wall chart with this information should be posted at the VSO.**

The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented during the current calendar year, working with County Information Services staff.

- 7. The BOS should direct staff to periodically determine the satisfaction of services provided by the VSO. These surveys should originate from and be mailed back to the Social Services Department to assure confidentiality.**

The recommendation has been implemented.

The VSO routinely conducts customer service surveys of veterans served by the office. DSS has recently changed the process by which surveys are mailed directly to veterans served with a returned envelope to the Social Services Director to assure a higher level of confidentiality.