

# Orange County Veterans Initiative Evaluation

## Executive Summary

### Overview

Orange County is home to a diverse population of veterans and military-connected families who experience various needs as they transition to civilian life. In 2015, the University of Southern California (USC) Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families, in partnership with the Orange County Community Foundation (OCCF), conducted a comprehensive needs assessment of Orange County veterans and their families. The study results identified that the highest needs of veterans and military-connected families were in the areas of transition, education, employment, and physical and behavioral health.<sup>1</sup> In response to these findings, OCCF launched the Orange County Veterans Initiative (OCVI), with initial funding of \$500,000 to 14 nonprofits. In 2016, the Orange County Real Estate Industry (OCRE) joined OCCF, becoming the key financial contributor and a thought partner as the OCVI has grown. Since 2015, the initiative has invested over \$4 million into 17 nonprofits across Orange County (see sidebar) to advance the work in each of these focus areas and ultimately better support veterans and their families.

### Evaluation

In December 2019, OCCF partnered with Harder+Company Community Research to evaluate the overall impact of OCVI on veterans and military-connected families in Orange County over the past five years, specifically in the areas of transition, education, employment, and physical and behavioral health. The evaluation utilized a mixed-methods approach and included a review of existing data, funder interviews, an OCVI cohort member survey, focus groups with veterans and military-connected family members, and a reflection session with OCVI cohort members.

### Findings

The evaluation captured rich data from diverse perspectives and surfaced findings in the areas of tailored support and services in each of the focus areas, collaboration and partnerships, and sustainability.



#### Tailored Support and Services

- OCVI increased the number of support available to veterans and military-connected families.
- Pre 9/11 and post 9/11 veterans have had different experiences accessing services in Orange County.
- Veterans highlight their respect and deep appreciation for peer-support programs and veterans service organizations (VSOs) run by veterans.

#### OCVI Cohort Members

- 2-1-1 Orange County
- California State University, Fullerton
- Strong Children, Strong Families (Child Guidance Center)
- Easter Seals Southern California
- Goodwill Industries of Orange County
- Irvine Valley College
- Lestonnac Free Clinic
- Saddleback College
- Semper Fi Fund
- Strength in Support
- University of California, Irvine
- Vanguard University
- Veterans Legal Institute
- Volunteer of America, Los Angeles- Bat Buddy Bridge (B3)
- Warrior-Scholar Project
- Working Wardrobes for a New Start
- zero8hundred

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.oc-cf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/OC-Veterans-Study\\_USC-CIR\\_Feb-2015.pdf](https://www.oc-cf.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/OC-Veterans-Study_USC-CIR_Feb-2015.pdf)



## Transition

- OCVI facilitated the building of consolidated/unified goals and a network of support for transitioning veterans.
- Cohort members, veterans, and military-connected family members see improvement opportunities for connecting transitioning veterans to services earlier in their active duty career.



## Education

- Campus veterans resource centers and academic programs have served as critical safe spaces for student veterans.
- Funders, cohort members, and veterans all agreed that the achievement of post-secondary educational goals has been an area of success for the initiative.
- Military-connected family members would like to learn more about how to access educational resources available to them.



## Physical and Behavioral Health

- Although behavioral health stigma and coordination with providers continue to be a challenge for veterans, behavioral health services have improved and become more readily available. There is a need for stronger integration between behavioral health and transitional support services.
- Veterans highlighted the need for improved promotion of, and connection to, physical health services.



## Employment

- OCVI has helped increase the number of employment support programs available to veterans and helped veterans sustain higher-paying work.
- Cohort members see a need to continue building connections with employers to support veterans in finding career-oriented positions.



## Collaboration and Partnership

- OCVI has strengthened the trust and collaboration between veteran service organizations in Orange County.
- Veterans and military-connected families recognize and appreciate the collaborative nature and relational approach of Orange County VSOs.



## Sustainability

- Cohort members agreed on the importance of continuing to develop holistic behavioral health and transition services and building collaboration with non-veteran serving organizations in Orange County in order to sustain their work.
- Pursuing collaborative funding efforts will be vital to the veteran service organizations' continued success in supporting veterans and their families.

## Recommendations

Over the last five years, OCVI has impacted each of the four focus areas and has been successful in developing a coordinated system of care to support veterans and their families. Informed by the OCVI evaluation, the recommendations that follow are intended to provide guidelines and suggestions for strengthening the system of care in Orange County and supporting the veteran and military-connected family populations.



### System of Care Recommendations

Increase the cultural competency of non-veteran specific organizations to develop a system-wide approach to prioritizing authentic relationships when working with veterans and military-connected families. Also, consider strengthening relationships with health providers, leadership at local military bases, and non-veteran specific organizations in order to streamline referrals, share data, and ensure veteran and military-connected family needs are met.



### Veteran Specific Recommendations

Continue successful strategy of peer support services as the primary approach to veteran and family support. Implement tailored outreach, case management, behavioral health, and employment readiness services for veterans of different service cohorts, including student veterans.



### Military-Connected Family Specific Recommendations

Inform military-connected families earlier during the transition of the various resources available to their family and how to access them.