

Orange County Veterans Initiative

**Year 2 Program Summary
February 2018**



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Executive Summary

In the second year of the Orange County Veterans Initiative, and in partnership with the Orange County Real Estate Industry, OCCF awarded over \$820,000 to fourteen Orange County nonprofits helping returning military veterans successfully integrate back to civilian life. The grants are part of OCCF's Orange County Veterans Initiative (OCVI), formed in 2011 and expanded in 2015 in response to findings from *The State of the American Veteran: The Orange County Veterans Study*. OCVI aligns donors, businesses and community leaders to focus on key goals to improve critical services so that veterans:

- ❖ Know where to go in Orange County to get the services they need
- ❖ Develop trusting relationships with community providers
- ❖ Are connecting early and proactively to services they and their families need
- ❖ Obtain employment in career-oriented opportunities and positions

Through the first two years of the initiative, grantees reported serving 11,051 veterans and their family members. The following program summary highlights the background of OCVI, accomplishments from the second year of the grant program, an analysis of partnerships formed and lessons learned. While the initiative has only recently been formed, this report demonstrates the rapid success of OCVI grantees and their partners in serving veterans and their families.

Background

In response to the needs identified in the 2015 study, OCCF launched a grant program for nonprofit organizations focused on four funding areas:

1. Improving assessment and referral services for veterans and their families
2. Transition support programs utilizing a peer navigator and/or case management model
3. Improving educational outcomes for veteran students
4. Employment support programs that incorporate a peer navigator and/or case management model

OCCF, along with the OC Real Estate Veterans Initiative selection committee, chose the following proposed initiatives based on the nonprofits' innovative solutions and documented ability to sustain programing and scale services across the county:

- ❖ 211 Orange County received \$50,000 to continue to build the Military and Veteran's Central Clearinghouse for resources and referrals directed at veterans and their families, including a comprehensive, searchable database, a 24-hour telephone helpline and facilitated referrals.
- ❖ Child Guidance Center received \$85,000 to expand Strong Families, Strong Children (SFSC), a consortium of five nonprofits (Child Guidance Center, Human Options, Children and Family Futures, Families Forward and Veterans Legal Institute) offering a coordinated, community-based approach to serving veterans and transitioning service members and their families, including children.



- ❖ Easter Seals Southern California received \$75,000 to support its Bob Hope Veterans Support Program in Orange County. The program is a results-oriented, career advancement program that provides participants with assessment, employment-related guidance and holistic support from job specialists who are veterans.
- ❖ Goodwill Industries of Orange County received \$75,000 to advance the work of the Tierney Center for Veterans Services which focuses on supporting the transitioning veteran with the goal of financial independence for the veteran and their family. Additionally funding is going toward funding emergency grants for student veterans.
- ❖ Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund received \$50,000 to support their Education and Career Transition Assistance program which empowers veterans to succeed in life outside the military by providing assistance with education coordination, as well as direct support to further career, education and transition goals.
- ❖ Strength In Support received \$30,000 toward their individualized Peer-Mentoring program which provides support to help new veterans and their families build relationships and deal with isolation, while offering practical support to overcome struggles related to deployment and reentry.
- ❖ Volunteers of America LA (VOA) received \$75,000 to continue to expand its Orange County Battle Buddy Bridge (B3) program which connects local veterans with necessary resources to promote their successful reintegration into civilian life in Orange County.
- ❖ Working Wardrobes received \$60,000 for their VetNet program which is a comprehensive employment support program designed to serve veterans and their family members through a multi-faceted, holistic approach including case management, peer navigators, social services referrals, mental health, legal services, career training and placement.
- ❖ zero8hundred received \$75,000 to enable them to open an Orange County branch of their highly successful Military Transition Support Project which matches active transitioning military members with community partners and provides intensive peer navigation services to create a strategic plan for reintegration into civilian life In Orange County.
- ❖ The following colleges and universities received grants to provide support services to student veterans including: scholarships, emergency grants, adaptive technology purchases, peer navigation, case management, mental health services and employment support.
 - Cal State University Fullerton: \$75,000
 - Irvine Valley College: \$50,000
 - Saddleback College: \$35,000
 - UCI: \$60,000
 - Vanguard University: \$23,000



Outcomes to Date

OCCI grantees exceeded initial estimates to address gaps in services for veterans. In the second year of the grant program, a total of 7,756 veterans and active duty military service members were reached through assessment and referral, transition support or employment support services. Of those 5,602 veterans and active duty military service members were provided a holistic range of services, along with 858 of their children and 236 spouses/partners. Of the veterans served approximately 71% were male and 29% of female. Across the funding areas of the program, grantees reported:

Assessment and referral services for veterans and their families

- ❖ 2,154 assessment and referral services were provided to veterans and their family members
- ❖ The top needs requested were: 1,763 referrals for housing, 879 for basic needs and 350 for family services

Employment support programs

- ❖ 142 veterans received employment support
- ❖ 98 of the veterans who received job placement assistance were placed in full-time career employment

Transition support programs

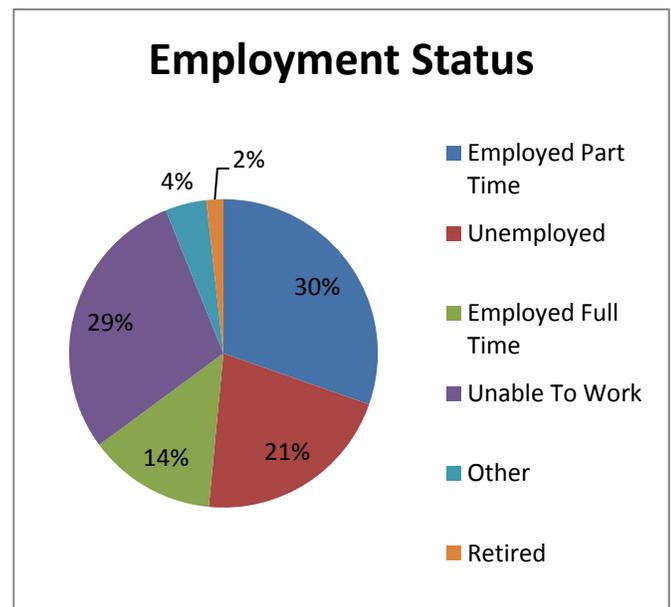
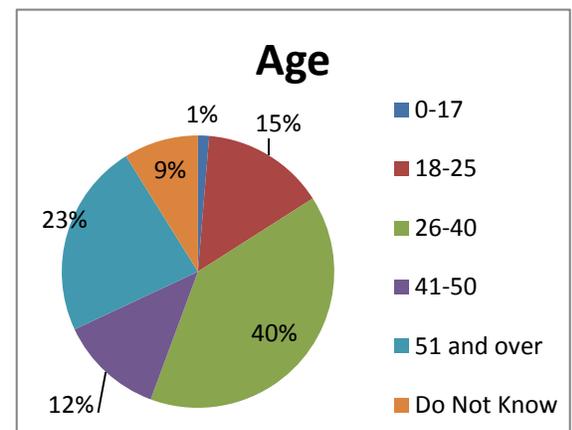
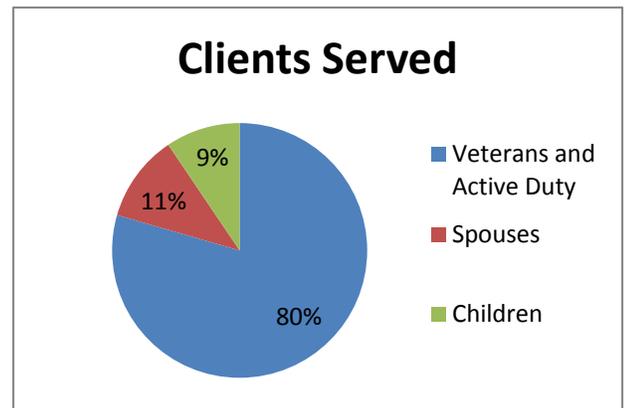
Key to transition support, OCCF encouraged programs that utilized a peer navigator or case management model.

A **Peer Navigator** (e.g., certified Peer Specialist, Peer Support Specialist) is a person who uses his or her lived experience in the military, plus skills learned in formal training, to coordinate and deliver services across all areas of need (e.g. mental health, substance abuse, legal, housing, employment, education, etc.) to facilitate successful transition to civilian life. Grantees reported:

- ❖ 947 veterans connected with a Peer Navigator

Case management is defined as assessing, securing, coordinating, and monitoring the appropriate services and interventions for veterans and their families necessary for successful transition to civilian life. Grantees reported:

- ❖ 525 individuals received case management services



Highlights by Grantees

While the collective progress of the grantees is impressive, each individual grantee accomplished important milestones in the second year of the grant program which are highlighted below:

Transition, Employment and Health Highlights

Each individual grantee accomplished important milestones in the second year of the grant program which are highlighted below:

2-1-1 Orange County (211OC)

- Facilitated 728 referrals to Peer Navigators
- Conducted outreach at general and veteran specific events leading to an increase of 6.4% in veterans accessing 211OC for services compared to year 1

Child Guidance Center, Inc.

- Improved wellbeing, family interaction and family health for 145 children
- Enrolled and assessed 40 families for basic needs, mental health and substance abuse services
- SFSC participated in over 300 outreach events to increase awareness, build trust and collaborate

Easterseals Southern California

- Established stronger relationships with student veteran organizations and centers at Vanguard University, Saddleback College, California State University Fullerton, University of California Irvine and Irvine Valley College resulting in more referrals for Easterseals services
- Employment secured for clients with an average hourly wage of \$21.00

Injured Marine Semper Fi Fund

- 116 Orange County veterans were served through the grant funding
- Cultivated relationships with and/or referred veterans to 16 other veteran-serving OC nonprofits including 8 from the OC Veterans Initiative grantees

Strength in Support

- Expanded peer mentor programs at Santiago Canyon College, Saddleback College and Orange Coast College which has increased requests for counseling services

Tierney Center for Veteran Services Goodwill of Orange County

- Expanded case coordination and peer navigation efforts to the veteran community
- Connected 390 veterans to a Peer Navigator
- Launched program with colleges to provide student veterans and families with emergency financial assistance

VOALA - Battle Buddy Bridge

- Provided Peer Navigator support 489 veterans and active duty service members
- Increased collaboration with local colleges, providing connections for veterans to on-site veteran student peer navigators



Working Wardrobes for a New Start

- Of the 222 veterans enrolled into the program, 85 have been placed in career-potential employment positions through this grant at an average hourly wage of \$19.07

zero8hundred

- 32 transitioning service members and their families have enrolled for up to 21 months of personalized support as they transition into the Orange County community.
- 19 veterans were connected to Peer Navigators
- Delivered education and outreach to over 9,000 service members and their spouses prior to their transition from US Armed Forces through presentations at on-base and community based transition workshops.

Educational Institution Highlights

Educational Institutions provided a total of 40 scholarships to student veterans to bridge the gap from the exhaustion of GI benefits with scholarships ranging from \$2,500 - \$3,000. Additionally 75 students received emergency grants with an average grant of \$926 and a range of \$50 to \$2,100.

California State University, Fullerton Veterans Resource Center

- Provided 15 scholarships to student veterans who had exhausted or nearly exhausted their GI benefits and would have been unable to continue paying for their education

Irvine Valley College

- Provided education support for 439 veterans and active duty service members

Saddleback College

- Provided 49 emergency grants and 77 gas or grocery cards to veterans

UC Irvine Veteran Services Center

- Supported 26 veterans with bridge the gap scholarships

Vanguard University

- 2 scholarships provided to student veterans
- Referred 4 veterans to Easter Seals who provided employment support through their Veteran Counselors



Partnerships

Organizations also reported that the more partners they network with, the more assistance they are able to provide to veterans. Collaborating with other grantees has provided organizations with a broad knowledge of resources available making them better equipped to connect those in need with those who are able to help. Goodwill for example was able to provide rent-free office space, allowing partners to interact with staff daily and increase referrals to and from Goodwill. Similarly, when Strength in Support found out that Semper Fi Fund was meeting veterans in public places, they offered use of their office. SFSC has worked closely to ensure that partners also include a “family needs” question on their intake forms and send SFSC applicable referrals. University grantees have been able to share their application processes and criteria so that students can better qualify for emergency funds.

Every organization was able to list a partnership or collaboration that enhances their ability to provide more comprehensive services to veterans. Consistent follow-up by both organizations and their veterans has helped provide a feedback loop which is essential for positive outcomes and case management.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

OCVI grantees are actively addressing the challenges they experienced in the grant year by building innovative solutions into their programming. Some of the challenges they described in their narrative reports to provide services to veterans include:

- ❖ Veterans are often reluctant to ask for assistance or to accept “handouts”, leading to difficulty reaching families
- ❖ Veterans rely on word of mouth before approaching a program, limiting effectiveness of recruitment
- ❖ Visibility of programs remains hard to achieve in the broader service landscape
- ❖ High rates of staff turnover limits program effectiveness
- ❖ Staffing levels need to parallel new services and supports to ensure that staff are not overworked
- ❖ Universities lack of capacity to serve all eligible student veterans
- ❖ Complex injuries require individualized approaches

Grantees also highlighted these challenges that OC veterans and their families are facing:

- ❖ High cost of housing in the region creates additional burden for financial stability
- ❖ Connections to stable, high paying employment remains a challenge for veterans trying to live in an expensive community such as Orange County
- ❖ Veterans in need of employment, often require additional services
- ❖ Orange County lacks services specific to female veterans
- ❖ Some veterans have legal issues connected to their discharge status that need to be addressed to help them successfully transition
- ❖ Veteran students have difficulty navigating university policies

To better access veteran families, one grantee opted to include both their Peer Navigator and Case Manager at intake so that both basic needs and clinical needs could be assessed. Each veteran has unique needs that need a customized approach to achieving outcomes, which can be better addressed with both the Navigator and



Manager present. Many veterans simply lack connections to resources to ensure a successful transition to civilian life. One organization has been setting expectations with veterans and ensuring they are prepared for the lengthy process and set realistic expectations for what they may be able to achieve in the time they are in the program. Despite resources for employment, health and education, there is a lack of resources for preventative needs such as a veteran who is not currently homeless but may need assistance finding affordable housing. Veterans may simply be reluctant to ask for help or assistance due to personal pride or stigma, many organizations are working on creating a paradigm shift toward more receptivity to receive resources with their clients.

Success Stories

Not to be forgotten amongst the data are the lives of veterans and their families who are profoundly impacted by support from OCVI grantees. While it is impossible to highlight every journey, these few individual stories demonstrate a small fraction of the enormous impact of OCVI grantees and their services.

Irvine Valley College for example, provides the ability to intervene and counsel students on the “spot” when they are in need. The story below highlights the importance of making sure veterans feel comfortable walking in and simply asking “Hey Wes got a minute”:

One veteran who had been homeless, lived in several areas and finally came to IVC became an active member of our VRC and work study. His major was engineering but he had an unbelievable math comprehension that he did not know about. He began seeing Dr. Wes for his mental health and he became an intern with one of our Math faculty and we offered him to tutor math and mentor our veterans in our VRC. This build his self-esteem, he became stable in his home life and changed his major to Math. He was accepted at Berkeley this last spring. He is aspiring and doing so well. This young Marine came to us lost and without purpose and he found his purpose and developed his skills that were already there he just needed to find them and has aspired since then. Proud day at IVC.

Veterans frequently leave the service with employable skills but without the necessary connections needed to find sustainable employment. This story from Easter Seals shows the importance of having a knowledgeable nonprofit partner who will invest time and resources into a successful outcome:

Ray is a California National Guard veteran who had been unemployed for almost a year. Ray was referred from a neighbor and veteran advocate. In August 2016, Ray accepted a position as a supervisor at Yamaha Motor Corporation in Orange County. At the time Ray was informed the position would only be temporary. Once employed, Easterseals funded Ray to achieve an IBM Work/Production Scheduling Program certification anticipating it would result in a permanent position. It did! Ray shared, “I want to thank everyone for your help getting my career back on track. Starting April 2017 I will be a permanent employee at Yamaha Motor Corp. Life seemed very dismal at best and it is friends and family that believe in you and raise you up when you are down. Thank you for all your support and friendship.”



Collaboration between grantees can also help provide successful outcomes for veterans facing a variety of challenges, such as the subject of this story provided by Strong Families, Strong Children:

Transition to civilian life was a challenge for Tim, an Army Veteran who served in both Iraq and Afghanistan. When Tim returned home from the service, his mother, Margaret became the caregiver for Tim and his two children, ages 13 and 4. When they sought help from SFSC, Margaret reported that Tim's ex-wife left the children in Tim's care and moved to Northern California, and that apart from the children experiencing significant adjustment issues, she was concerned about Tim's wellbeing and the family's growing housing and financial issues. Tim reported an array of combat related medical conditions resulting from an IED (Improvised Explosive Device), combat-related PTSD, and a sleep disorder that contributed to an opioid dependence. At that time, Tim also had limited VA treatment and indicated significant barriers in obtaining medical care. SFSC's Clinical Case Manager and Peer Navigator began the family need's assessment, and determined the family would benefit from counseling, housing, financial, and legal services. Both children were referred to Child Guidance Center for individual and family treatment, while Tim and Margaret were referred to Families Forward for financial planning and assistance to maintain the family home, and to Veteran's Legal Institute to address Tim's service-connected VA rating that needed to be adjusted. A referral to the Veteran's Service Office was offered so that Tim could re-engage with his VA medical teams, and to support Margaret as she began the process for the VA Caregiver Program. For the past year, Tim has been receiving VA medical and mental health care, and Margaret has been getting needed support to care for her son. The eldest of the two children has participated in counseling services and has progressed from being an isolated and timid teenager to feeling more secure and confident about herself and her family. Margaret reports that the SFSC services have helped her feel a renewed sense of hope in her son's and grandchildren's future, and Tim reports that he is grateful he has a second chance to make things better for his family.

