

# OC LEADER BOARD | Opinion, Analysis, Insight

## How to Give Local Veterans The Welcome Home They Deserve

For many of Orange County's approximately 130,000 veterans, navigating the transition from military service to civilian status is one of the greatest challenges of their lives. Which is why, eight years ago, a group of concerned **Orange County Community Foundation (OCCF)** donors came together to provide initial grants to nonprofits serving our local veterans and their families.

But have we done enough?

The more questions we asked, the more we discovered that what veterans needed most wasn't clear—even to the organizations devoted to their service.

There was only one answer: Gather every bit of data possible, and start an in-depth analysis. In 2015, OCCF commissioned the first-ever "State of the American Veteran: The Orange County Veterans Study" in partnership with **University of Southern California**, and discovered alarming results.

The study found that veterans faced unemployment rates of nearly 30%, and among the veterans working full time, 35% had jobs at or below the poverty level. Further, nearly 20% reported a lack of consistent housing, and mental health screenings revealed an urgent need for support.

These startling results led to the launch of the **Orange County Veterans Initiative (OCVI)**—one of OCCF's first community leadership initiatives—designed to align donors, businesses and community leaders to address the immediate issues facing our county's veterans and their families.

In 2015, OCCF teamed with **Patrick Donahue**, chairman and chief executive of real estate firm **Donahue Schriber**, who rallied his industry to support Orange County veterans and families by relaunching an annual OC Real Estate Luncheon. This year, he received **California State University-Fullerton's** Vision and Visionaries Distinguished Alumnus award and was recognized by **CREW-OC** with its annual **SPiRE Award** for Superior Performance in Philanthropy.

**Shelley Hoss**, who has been president and CEO of the Newport Beach-based OCCF since 2000 and was previously honored as one of the Orange County Business Journal's Annual Women of the Year, interviewed Donahue about efforts to improve the lives of some of our county's most treasured citizens.

**Hoss:** What inspired you to host the first Orange County Real Estate Luncheon?

**Donahue:** The study data was utterly shocking. Nearly three-quarters of post-9/11 veterans left the military without jobs, 44% tested positive for post-traumatic stress disorder and 19% considered attempting suicide. We knew the private sector had to do something, so we brought back the Orange County Real Estate Luncheon with a focus on veterans. We in the real estate com-

munity here in Orange County have been incredibly fortunate. So, we asked ourselves, what could we do to treat our veterans with the respect and dignity they deserve? How could we make an impact?

I'm immensely proud of how the industry has gathered around this cause to truly make a difference. 2019 marked our fourth annual luncheon, where we gathered more than 600 top real estate and financial professionals to raise over \$700,000. By working with our selection committee and OCCF, we know the proceeds are going directly to impactful nonprofit veteran service organizations right here in Orange County. Last year, the OCVI awarded \$918,000 in grants to 13 nonprofits serving the critical needs of OC veterans and their families.

**Hoss:** How have you seen donors, businesses and the community come together?

**Donahue:** The collaboration has been impressive in its efficiency and effectiveness. Between the OC Real Estate events and OCCF's efforts, OCVI has granted over \$3 million to nonprofits in the last four years to serve more than 17,000 veterans and their families with assistance in transitioning to civilian life, building employment readiness and job skills, and addressing physical and mental health needs. We have also empowered more veterans to earn associate and bachelor's degrees and obtain employment in career-oriented opportunities and positions.

**Hoss:** A perfect example of this collaboration in action has been The Tierney Center for Veterans Services at **Goodwill Orange County**. Tell me about more about this, and plans for "The Hub."

**Donahue:** The launch of the Tierney Center was another game-changing moment for OC veterans. The Tierney Center is designed to support the overall needs of the veteran population and their families through a collaborative response and one centralized location. Its initial success in drawing key partners to their one-stop site quickly expanded in scope and vision, becoming what is now known as The Hub—a true center of gravity for veteran services in Orange County. A mix of community partners working together offers employment assistance, career counseling, education resources, tools to address underemployment and benefits, legal assistance, women veterans' resources, financial counseling and assistance, Chapter 31 services, and much more. There's more to do, but we've seen great progress so far.

*Together, OCVI and the OC real estate community are fueling the efforts of high-performing nonprofit veteran service organizations to build and expand their capacities to serve a broader audience—to make sure no one is left behind.*



By Shelley Hoss and Patrick Donahue



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