



— ORANGE COUNTY —  
**V**ETERANS  
— INITIATIVE —

**2021  
PROGRAM  
SUMMARY**

The Orange County Real Estate Luncheon

Orange County  
  
**Community**  
Foundation





# INTRODUCTION

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.

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 \$5 million into 17 nonprofits across Orange County to advance the work in each of these focus areas and ultimately better support veterans and their families. OCVI nonprofits regularly convene as the OCVI Cohort to share data and referrals, collaborate on projects, and ensure veterans' needs are met.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of our veteran community. This report will share what this new reality has meant to our veterans, their families, and the OCVI members serving those who have served our country. Each has had to adjust to stay at home orders and the isolation it has created, the risk of contracting COVID-19, and the effects of the current economic turmoil.

During this time, OCVI Cohort members stayed focused on their missions and worked collectively to serve veterans and their families during this crisis. In 2021, OCVI partners served over 6,000 veterans and their families. Now with the pandemic beginning to slow, partners are continuing to work to meet the demands on veterans and their families.

# COVID-19 & VETERANS: YEAR TWO

OCVI Cohort members have been a critical resource in the communities they serve, as they deliver key services and promote programs that support the well-being, educational attainment, and economic resilience of veterans and their families. Early in the pandemic, there was a sudden and significant demand for basic needs by OCVI clients. The trust created through the network allowed the OCVI Cohort members to make referrals more freely as well as collectively identify and meet emerging needs.

## Basic Needs

As the pandemic lingered, basic needs such as access to food and clothing remained persistent. Partners were increasingly met with other ongoing needs from military connected families. Rental assistance, housing, and utility support remained critical as the ongoing affordability issues continue in the housing and rental markets. Mental health services also remained stretched to capacity to meet the veterans' demand. Educational partners pivoted to devote a larger share of their resources to meeting these basic needs of veterans and their families.

### Top 3 Basic Needs:

- Housing
- Food/clothing
- Childcare

## Families

Strong Families, Strong Children (SFSC) conducted a survey of their veteran and military-connected family clients to identify which pre-existing concerns intensified as the pandemic wore on into 2021. Families reported the lasting impacts of the pandemic, which include an increase of mental health/psychiatric concerns for both parents and children; challenges with balancing work, childcare, their children's education, and family obligations, a reduction or loss of wages and need for financial assistance, limited housing options or risk of homelessness, difficulty in accessing academic support for children, food insecurity, and reduction in quality of life.

**757 veterans  
reported having  
children under 18**

All these issues predate the pandemic, but have exacerbated and endured as a result of the health crisis. SFSC called this an "all-society response" that comprehensively addresses the varying levels of need veterans and their families have experienced during this period. Leveraging the skills and resources of community partners during this grant period has allowed for a more coordinated and community based approach to meet the needs of this underserved and vulnerable population.



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# COVID-19 & VETERANS: YEAR TWO

## Employment

Through OCVI, 162 veterans were able to find full-time employment, with a salary range of \$15 – \$36 an hour. Workforce readiness training has emerged as a necessity, as the technological demands of current employment continue to grow. Employment partners have begun to “upskill” clients so they may more easily find employment.

Currently, a significant challenge employment providers face is finding veterans who are looking for full-time work. What they have found is that it is not a lack of access to employment that is hindering veterans, but the effect that full-time work might have on their other income sources. For example, due to income caps on the Housing and Urban Development Department's Veterans Administration Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) vouchers along with increased unemployment benefits, it was difficult to find veterans who wanted full-time work placements. Veterans wanted to work, but did not want to lose other benefits that had been supporting them and their families.

**162 veterans found full time employment**

## Health

The pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the mental health of youth and families, exacerbating challenges that existed long before the pandemic. Veteran students for example, experienced significant isolation over the last two years. When compounded with the already difficult process acclimating to the educational system, veterans students required an advanced level of intervention by mental health professionals and peer navigators. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed each family's experiences at home, at school, and in the community, and the impact on their mental health has been overwhelming.

**825 veterans were referred for mental health services**

## Education

Despite significant challenges, student veterans continue to persist and graduate from higher education. The transition to remote learning meant that for universities, a high percentage of students had never stepped foot on the campus or visited the Veteran Resource Centers. As a result, schools developed new outreach strategies to engage or reengage these students.

**986 students were served by Veteran Resource Centers**

## Providers

Nonprofits themselves have suffered from burnout, employee turnover, supply delays, and declines in client access. While in-person programming resumed in 2021, the sudden emergence of the Omicron variant forced a pivot back to online-only resources, adding further strain to an already taxed workforce. Now as the pandemic eases, OCVI members are pivoting to reengagement campaigns to inform clients, veterans, and their families of the programming and services available. This is particularly important on college campuses, where many veterans are returning to full-time, in-person school.



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## COHORT ACCOMPLISHMENTS



Since its onset, OCVI members have been strengthening the network of veteran serving organizations. In 2021, OCVI funded an Operations Manager specifically focused on the partnerships between members co-located at the Tierney Center for Veteran Services (TCVS). This individual serves as the main point of contact between all organizations in the center with the goal of improving collaboration between partners to effectively serve veterans and their families and increase the number of veterans served. The Operations Manager has been able to create internal processes that have increased the efficiency of TCVS, streamlined reporting, and assumed duties and responsibilities in the absence of the TCVS Director role.

The pandemic has not deterred the Cohort members from creating new partnerships to meet emerging veterans' needs. Members shared collaboration efforts with the current tenants at the TCVS and service providers increased during the past two years. For example, multiple grantees have embraced the “Ask the Questions” campaign. This campaign was created to train OC service providers in modifying their intake forms to ask two questions: “Have you or a member of your family ever served in the military regardless of discharge status? Do you have children?” By asking these questions, nonprofits are better able to connect families to services they are eligible for but not yet utilizing. OCVI grantees have incorporated the questions, and UCI has successfully brought the campaign to its 100-strong membership group, with the county, state and VA also contributing.

Additionally, In June 2021, OCVI grantees had the opportunity to partner with other non-profit organizations, including Support the Enlisted Project (STEP), to raise over \$188,000 in a 24-hour Giving Day Campaign, Stand & Salute.

In 2021, TCVS was successful in restarting the Vocational Assessment Program with the VA, allowing them to provide long term work assessments on veterans. They were also able to restart the VA Work-Study program which is funded by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Reengaging with this partnership allowed TCVS to provide work experience to veterans enrolled in college. This program also identifies TCVS as an approved learning facility for higher education in the California State University System in which they have a Memorandum of Understanding with California State University, Dominguez Hills.

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## COHORT ACCOMPLISHMENTS (CONT)

This year, each Irvine Valley College (IVC) work-study student was assigned a caseload of new and continuing veterans that they connected with throughout the year via phone, text, and email to offer support, guidance, and resources. Providers like IVC fill the gap in mental health support needed as veterans continue to navigate the various bureaucratic systems they are forced to rely on, such as the VA Healthcare system

A wide variety of partners reported maintaining some valuable online resources that have proven effective during the online-only phase of the pandemic, while also preparing for in person training and programs. Many organizations worked hard to ensure financial assistance gets directly to clients in the form of emergency grants.

### **Orange County Veterans and Military Family Collaborative (OCVMFC)**

Beyond direct services, OCVI invested in University of California, Irvine to serve as a facilitator for the OCVMFC. On top of providing facilitation during joint meetings of the partners, UCI also focused on coaching organizations to engage in the culture of collaboration. UCI was able to partner with the OC Health Care Agency on training and certifying over 80 individuals from veteran serving organizations with Mental Health First Aid training and certification. This training aims to make mental health first aid as common as CPR, by teaching about recovery, resiliency, and how to intervene when someone is experiencing a mental health emergency.

To address some of the challenges of veteran employment within our region, the OCVMFC has increased their social media presence by 50% by specifically having an active profile on LinkedIn, a platform where employers and those seeking employment spend time researching opportunities and companies. Additionally, the employment working group has added Entrepreneurship as a focus area.

The OCVMFC is part of the OC Veteran Entrepreneurship task force that is using a multi-tiered approach to develop veterans to become entrepreneurs with partners including nonprofits, the Small Business Administration, legal partners, and a legislative team working on passing a Veterans Business Enterprise Act through Congress which would bring additional dollars into OC to launch these ventures and support veteran businesses.





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# SUCCESS STORIES

Not to be forgotten amongst the data are the lives of veterans and their families who are profoundly changed by each OCVI cohort member. While it is impossible to highlight every journey that was supported by OCVI funds, these few stories were selected to illustrate how veterans' lives are positively impacted.

## **From Strong Families, Strong Children:**

A veteran spouse was referred to the SFSC program due to her recent, difficult separation from her husband who was the main financial provider. With the ongoing support of her Peer Navigator the mother of two was connected to a community employment resource for job training to secure additional income. She worked closely with the SFSC Housing partner who helped her secure rental assistance through the American Legion, and an apartment close to her children's school. Meanwhile, SFSC's legal partner helped this mother with divorce mediation/resolution. Once these immediate needs were taken care of and the family achieved some stability, they were able to access SFSC's mental health services to help their family function better as they moved through these difficult life transitions.

\*All identifying information has been changed/altered to protect the family's identity.

## **From Goodwill Industries of Orange County:**

After eight years serving in the U.S. Air Force and Air National Guard, Alysia made the transition from military back to civilian life and moved across the country for a fresh start. Following a period of time in business school, Alysia next took the leap into entrepreneurship and started her own cleaning business. And then the COVID-19 pandemic arose and changed everything. With her business struggling and her young daughter being home due to school closures, Alysia fell suddenly on hard times financially—so much so that she received a three-day eviction notice from her landlord. The Tierney Center was able to provide Emergency Services Support funding to keep Alysia and her daughter in their home, as well as connect them to other needed resources and services during this challenging period. With the Tierney Center's help, Alysia is now continuing her higher education and looking forward to a bright future.



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# CONCLUSION

As mentioned, OCVI Cohort members demonstrated an impressive ability to pivot efficiently and effectively to meet the needs of veterans in Orange County during the global pandemic. As the impacts of the pandemic continue into 2022, there will be continued need for services for our veterans in Orange County. We know that the OCVI cohort members are prepared and ready to serve them in increasingly innovative ways.

As SFSC noted:

“If these last two years of living through the pandemic has taught us anything, it is the importance of acting in a coordinated way across sectors to get ahead of societal challenges and respond by coming together collaboratively to address the array of issues that inevitably surface. In today’s world, cross-sector collaboration is becoming necessary to produce the systemic change necessary to guarantee everyone has access to the care they are seeking.”





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## GET INVOLVED

The Orange County Veterans Initiative is a collaborative fund of the Orange County Community Foundation. The impact of this program is the result of many leveraging their knowledge and charitable giving. Please contact the Orange County Community Foundation if you or your funding organization would like to join this collective effort. Some ways you can be part of this effort include:

- Become an Orange County Veterans Initiative funding partner
- Sponsor or attend the Orange County Real Estate Annual Luncheon
- Explore where your funding priorities align with Orange County veterans needs
- Attend a Funder/Nonprofit Convening
- Stay abreast of the opportunities, funding gaps, and needs identified by OCVI
- Connect and volunteer with one of the OCVI cohort members
- Provide employment, mentoring, or internships opportunities to veterans

## THANK YOU TO OUR OCVI CONTRIBUTORS

### OC REAL ESTATE LUNCHEON

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Founded in 1989, the Orange County Community Foundation (OCCF) works with donors, strengthens the local nonprofit sector and works to find solutions to community needs. Since its inception, OCCF has awarded more than \$870 million in grants and scholarships, ranking the organization as the 3rd most active grantmaker among all U.S. community foundations. For more information, visit [oc-cf.org](https://oc-cf.org) or call 949-553-4202. Be a part of our conversation on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). View OCCF's 2021 annual report [here](#).