

CALIFORNIA VETERANS ASSISTANCE FOUNDATION



THE ALLIANCE

729 Decatur Street, #1, Bakersfield, CA 93308 661-399-2490 www.cavaf.org

Winter 2012

WE ARE KERN COUNTY'S ONLY VETERANS SPECIFIC HOMELESS PROGRAM

FROM THE PRESIDENT

The year 2012 is here and CVAF is ready! From January to December, our calendars are quickly filling up with activities, meetings and goals to be met along the way. We were able to bring on two new staff members, Jenna Speight and James Shepard, and Tim Maples joined our Board of Directors.

January started off with the quarterly Board of Directors meeting and a visit from the Board of Directors from our sister organization in Wisconsin. We honestly think they just wanted to escape winter in Wisconsin for a few days. We have also selected the date for the 14th Annual Kern County Veterans Stand Down, which will

be held on October 11th at Stramler Park.

Nationally, things are looking up. On November 18th, 11,000 new permanent supportive housing vouchers for veterans were signed into law.

— *PRESIDENT, continued on page 4*



KERN COUNTY VETERANS COLLABORATIVE DEVELOPMENT

CVAF joined forces with several veteran community organizations to develop the Kern County Veterans Collaborative. For several years, many veterans have talked about getting a group of agencies to come together to help the veterans and families of Kern County, and finally Vietnam Veteran Vernon Valenzuela called for a meeting. Representatives from the Vet Center, Veterans Service Office, CVAF, Wounded Heroes, the VFW and the Military Order of the Purple Heart came together with Steve Shilling and Tom Corson with the Kern County Superintendent of Schools to develop our strategic plan.

After several months and several meetings, the KCVC had their Strategic Plan in place for the next two years, a Mission Statement, Collaborative Values and Guid-

ing Principles, Objectives and Strategic Priorities. On January 6th, we elected the Steering Committee Officers. They are:

Chair: Vernon Valenzuela, Vet Center
Vice-Chair: Deborah Johnson, CVAF
Secretary/Historian: Vanessa Ramos
Finance: Wendy Porter, Wounded Heroes
Consumer: Casey Schaubshlager, Vet Center
Community Outreach Liaison: Heather Kimmel, CVAF
Community Members: Dave Jackson, MOPH
Wayne Wright: VFW
Mike Penney: VSO
Kelly Tritch: VSO

Our next step is to plan an open meeting to invite individuals and agencies whose desire is to help veterans and families of

our community. It is open to all who would like to participate and get involved. For more information, you can contact Vernon Valenzuela at vernon.valenzuela@va.gov or at 323-VETS or Deborah Johnson at deb.johnson@cavaf.org or at 695-3626.

VET CENTER GRAND OPENING

On September 24th, the Bakersfield Vet Center held its Grand Opening Ceremony in the grounds located at 1110 Golden State Avenue. The Vet Center started helping vets in April of 2009 with Team Leader Vernon Valenzuela as the only employee. They began serving veterans out of an office at the Kern County Veterans Service Department, and then moved to a temporary building while their permanent location was reconstructed. The Bakersfield Vet Center began providing services to veterans at their new home on May 24, 2011.



Army Veteran Dennis Madrid reflects on the ceremony. "It was an event to remember, listening to the Mayor and several prestigious people talk about Vernon and the contributions he made to our veterans. Hearing that was something that just made you feel good inside. The MIA displays set up alongside the ceremony reflected all those who gave their life for our country. It was amazing to see. The roar of the bike club that showed up and all the support by people that paid tribute to the new center and to Vernon was incredible. The different tribes of Indians (that also served our country) burned incense during a blessing for the center and the fragrant scents were enjoyed by all, as

— *OPENING, continued on page 3*

2012 KERN COUNTY VETERANS STAND DOWN PLANING IS UNDERWAY



The 2012 Stand Down is just around the corner. The one day event will be held on October 11, 2012 at Stramler Park.

CVAF was notified this past week that the U.S. Department of Labor would not be offering a grant this year to help agencies with the cost of Stand Down. This loss of funding will impact what CVAF will be able to do without your support. This year we are reaching out to our community for assistance to make the 2012 event even more successful than the years' past. If you would like to contribute, please review our wish list below. Monetary donations are needed to cover the following expenses:

- Breakfast
- Transportation

ID Cards

Tents

We are also in need of the following:

Clothing (Gently Used)

Undergarments (New)

Winter Wear (gloves, scarves, beanies, thermals)

All donations are tax-deductible and can be mailed or delivered to:

CVAF

Attention: Heather Kimmel

729 Decatur Street, #1

Bakersfield, CA 93308

Phone: 661-399-2490

Thank you for your generosity and support.



15 YEARS and COUNTING...



August 2011 marked a very important event for the California Veterans Assistance Foundation. President of the Organization, Deborah Johnson, celebrated her 15th year of employment with the Foundation.

Deborah began her career working with homeless veterans even before CVAF was formed. She began as the Office Manager for the Veterans Assistance Foundation, a transitional housing program based in Wisconsin. She quickly moved up the ranks and worked most of her career in Wisconsin as the Foundation's Executive Director. In 2000, Deborah played an integral part in expanding the programs to California and developing the California Veterans Assistance Foundation.

In 2009, Deborah packed up and moved to California permanently to become the President of the California Veterans Assistance Foundation. Since that time she has continued her focus of helping fellow veterans in need. CVAF would not be able to assist our community's heroes today if it was not for Deborah's dedication and hard work. She is a true leader in our community, and an advocate for those who are not able to speak for themselves.

On behalf of the California Veterans Assistance Foundation, thank you Deborah for all that you have done and continue to do. We truly appreciate everything you do.

NEW CASE MANAGERS JOIN CVAF STAFF



Hi my name is Jenna Speight and I am one of the new Case Managers at CVAF. I was born and raised in California. I enjoy time with family and friends and the great outdoors. I am a Veteran myself; I started my service in 2004 in the Air Force and was stationed in San Antonio, Texas. I received an honorable discharge for an in-service disability. It's an honor to work within an organization whose primary goal is to help Veterans in need; not only with their immediate needs, but to help them gain the skills needed to make a smoother transition back on their own. I am very glad to be given the chance to give back to all who have served before me, with me and after me.

We are excited to have Jenna on board with us, and will be case managing the Resource and Referral Center. She has met and exceeded our expectations in the short time that she has been on the CVAF team. We look forward to seeing how far her desire to help the veterans of Kern County will take her.

Jenna is an asset to CVAF and the Veterans of our community. Welcome, Jenna!



My name is James Shepard, and I am a new Case Manager at CVAF. I am also a former resident of the program (July 2008-September 2010) so I have a very good understanding of program life from a resident's point of view. I am an eight-year Navy Veteran, serving in the surface combatant, amphibious and special boat unit. I am also a Desert Storm veteran. I look forward to serving veterans in my new capacity, because I've been where they are at.

Welcome to the team, James! It is an honor to have you join CVAF as an employee, and bring your knowledge of how to serve the homeless veterans of our community. You are a go-getter who has proven that no challenge is too big. Your knowledge of community resources available for our veterans is a huge asset for the foundation and we are eager to see that knowledge put to use.

A FOND FAREWELL



JR Browning has been a case manager with CVAF since February of 2011. Although he was only a case manager for CVAF for a short period, he made a huge impact on the program and the veterans he worked with.

His ability to empathize with the veterans of our program will be an asset that will be greatly missed. JR leaves us with some final words. "I leave here

with the utmost admiration and respect for the California Veterans Assistance Foundation, your staff and your mission to care for those who have served. Thank you for the opportunity, and I hope to see the program excel even long after I resign."

JR ended his employment with CVAF to pursue his goal of obtaining his Bachelor's Degree. We wish you the best of luck, and know that you will be successful at whatever you do.

SURPRISE STAFF MEETING



The California Veterans Assistance Foundation's Staff works consistently to give back and help veterans of Kern County; from our transitional housing program, to our drop in Resource and Referral Center...and now the Kern County Veterans Stand Down. They do this day in and day out without expecting so much as a thank you. Why do they continue to provide excellent service to

veterans? Because they truly care. It was time that someone gave back to the CVAF staff for all that they do.

The Friday after Stand Down, Lead Case Manager Tunisha Crite was asked to send out an e-mail to have all staff wear their CVAF polo shirts for a picture on the following Tuesday. Once all staff arrived, Operations Director Heather Kimmel and President Deborah Johnson announced that we needed to take the picture at another location...so we loaded up into the vans with Deborah and Heather driving and heading to the secret location.

As the staff talked about the week's events, no one noticed that we were approaching the Westchester Lanes bowling alley. We piled out of the vehicles and

walked towards the doors, but no one thought we were actually going to bowl. As we approached the counter Deborah instructed everyone to get their shoes, and the competition was on.

The CVAF staff split into two teams and went head to head in a bowling competition. After a couple of blunders on the lanes, a ball that was released at the wrong time and came flying towards the chairs, and a couple of balls that had a mind of their own and flew out of the gutter, it was decided! The Operations Assistants are the best bowlers on staff. Sarita Esqueda ended up with three strikes in a row and Nancy Price took the cake with five strikes in a row.

Thank you to all the CVAF staff for everything you do every day!

HIGHLIGHT A VETERAN



Jason S. Recently, former CVAF resident Jason S. left our program to pursue his dream of becoming a chef. We thought it would be nice to follow up with and see how his dream is coming along.

Jason was a resident for a little over a month, and left to go to school in the Bay Area. He is now a student of the culinary program at the Art Institute of California, and is pursuing his dream of becoming a trained culinary artist.

We believe in Jason's abilities as a cook, and when we talked to him, he was almost smiling through the phone with pride and excitement. "Things are going really good," Jason reported. "Just today I had an interview for an upscale restaurant here in the area that makes their own sauces and wants a creative team member. This is amazing to have an opportunity like this."

Jason left a month ago on a train for Oakland. He is living in a school-sponsored apartment, and makes the trip daily into San Francisco to attend classes.

When asked what he gained from his time at CVAF, Jason got right to the point: "You know, CVAF gave me the tools and the motivation to do what I wanted to do. They helped me realize that nothing was impossible with enough effort. They pushed me to do something, and I'm glad that they did." We sincerely hope that Jason's newfound direction engages his passion and helps him become successful. Hearing the pride in his voice made it clear that he made the right decision.

We also asked him what he had to say to those of us here at CVAF. Without hesitation, he cleared his throat and said, "If you keep your head, anything can happen. Push yourself, never give up, and follow your passion."

OPENING, continued from page 1 — was the meal we all shared together."

Since the Bakersfield Vet Center began providing services to veterans, they have helped over 450 of Kern County's heroes. Thank you to the Vet Center team for all they do and their commitment to helping those who served.



Bob Piaro, CVAF/VAF CEO and Vernon Valenzuela, Vet Center Team Leader.

Vet Center's Grand Opening Ceremony.



CHRISTMAS CHEER AT CVAF



Pictured, L-R: Don L., Ross S., Marcus H. and Ryan P. enjoying the gifts provided by the Ladies Auxiliary.



Several residents and staff enjoying the party.



Hitting the chow line, from front to back are: Don L., Rick H., Albert O., Basil S., Randall S. and John H.

Oftentimes, the holidays are difficult for the residents of the program. CVAF strives each year to do something special for the veterans to help make the holidays a joyful time. This year we received community help to put on the best Christmas celebration.

It is tradition for CVAF staff to send out a wish list to the veterans, so that each person will have one gift to open at the party. We had all the shopping done and all the gifts wrapped when President Deborah Johnson received a call from Marla Maples with the VFW Ladies Auxiliary Post 10859. Marla explained, "We would like to donate \$500.00 to the veterans for Christmas...can you use it?" Deborah's response was simply, "YES!"

With the donation from the VFW, we were able to purchase each resident an additional gift! Then Operations Director Heather Kimmel received a donation from a local couple, Linda and Wayne Gibbs, who asked, "Our church would like to collect baked goods to

pass out at your party, would that be okay?" Heather's response was simply, "YES!"

The Residents entered the room where the festivities were held to find a gift awaiting them on their seat, courtesy of the Ladies Auxiliary Post 10859. We then feasted on a traditional Christmas meal of tamales, homemade by Celia Hernandez, a community volunteer.

Once all the bellies were full, the staff presented the residents with the gifts that they purchased for them. It was just then that Mr. and Mrs. Gibbs arrived with dessert and an unexpected additional gift for each of the veterans. The residents were truly blessed this year; the generosity of the community was overwhelming. Case Manager Ron Hernandez said it best, "Words cannot describe this; it is extraordinary!"

A BIG thank you to everyone involved, who made this an extra special Christmas for our veterans here at CVAF.

From the Trenches

CVAF RESIDENTS MAKE IT WORK



Leonard A.

It seems like every time we turn on the news, it's the same story. Unemployment is high, and has been for years. In December, the national unemployment rate was about 8.5% and 13.4% in Kern County, which is an improvement from the last few years. Regardless of the bleak outlook of the job market, a few CVAF residents have managed to find work in a tough economy.

We thought it might be nice to find out how they were able to pull off such a tough task. CVAF resident Leonard A. was a CVAF resident for less than two months before finding employment. He now has a steady job at PCL construction as a welder's helper. "I found a job about three weeks after I started looking," he said, "I applied for a number of jobs, and had quite a few calls, but decided to take the job at PCL." It wasn't very easy for him to get the job, though.

"I remember when I applied for PCL," he told us. "I met a PCL representative at the Veterans Job Fair. I couldn't use a computer,

so I took classes down at the Veteran's Service Office and learned how to fill out my job applications online. Leonard also told us about his difficulty getting to PCL for his interview. "I tried to borrow the bicycle from CVAF, but it had a flat tire, and there was no driver to take me that morning, so I got on the bus at 6:30 that morning and got to PCL by 7:00 a.m. I had to stand in line outside for over an hour to get in and do my interview, but I got in, interviewed and got hired on the spot. In the end, it was all worth it."

No matter what the situation is with the economy or unemployment, persistence is the key. Leonard agrees. "You have to go out and look, that's the only way. I looked constantly. Following up once you apply is also extremely important. I would call people every couple of days to see if they had work for me."

Leonard has taken an important step towards regaining his independence, and he has done it on his own. We would all like to congratulate Leonard on his new job, and for being a great example of what it takes to make it in a tough economy.

THE BAKERSFIELD BLAZE



The Bakersfield Blaze, a minor league baseball team, play their home games at Historic Sam Lynn Ballpark. Opened in 1941, the stadium is well known for facing the setting sun and its shallow 354-foot center field fence. On September 3rd, the Blaze held a veterans appreciation day honouring all of Kern County's Veterans. The Wounded Heroes Fund invited CVAF to participate at this event in setting up an informational booth.

The Wounded Heroes Fund (WHF) is a community-wide organization dedicated to providing assistance to brave service men and women returning home from the bat-

tlegrounds of Iraq and Afghanistan. Wendy Porter, the daughter of a Vietnam veteran, realized that more needed to be accomplished, especially for service members and their families, to resume life after war. She could not help her father and other returning Vietnam veterans. However, as Executive Director of the Wounded Heroes Fund, she is leading the effort to help the men and women who fought for our freedom in the Middle East.

Wesley Barrientos, a member of WHF, threw the first pitch of the game and the festivities began. CVAF was able to assist several veterans at the game, giving them information about resources and the upcoming Kern County Veterans Stand Down. CVAF is excited to partner with the WHF and looks forward to working together again in the future.

PROJECT HOMELESS CONNECT – BAKERSFIELD

On April 21, 2012, the Kern County Homeless Collaborative, through its 10-Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness, will be sponsoring the first annual Project Homeless Connect – Bakersfield. This one-day event will be held as a “street fair” at the corner of 21st and King in Old Town Kern; the hours will be from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

PHC is a resource and service linkage fair for persons who are homeless, to help them accomplish in one day, what might otherwise take them weeks. It is based on a nationally-implemented, best practice model, which is a one-stop-shop of comprehensive support services for people experiencing homelessness.

To put on this event, we need commitment from all sectors of the community to prevent and eliminate chronic homelessness. It is our goal to put as many organizations, individuals and volunteers together to provide a comprehensive array of services for this diverse population. Because it is volunteer-driven, it also offers an amazing opportunity for community involvement and human connection.

Why do we need Project Homeless Con-

nect in Bakersfield? Based on our 2011 Point In Time Demographic Survey, which does a count of sheltered and unsheltered homeless in Kern County, the Kern County Homeless Collaborative identified 833 individuals who were unsheltered. Ninety percent of them live in the City of Bakersfield.

Our goal is to reach 500 homeless individuals and/or families with a wide array of services, to include: medical and vision screening, mental health services, ID cards, housing information, haircuts, transportation, pet care, veteran services, legal services, food and much more.

We would be honored to have your agency and/or volunteers help at this community event. For more information, you can contact Kim Albers, Executive Director at Flood Bakersfield Ministries/Garden Pathways at kim@floodbako.com; Louis Medina, Homelessness Project Manager at the United Way of Kern County at Louis.M@uwkern.org; or Deborah Johnson, President at the California Veterans Assistance Foundation at deb.johnson@cavaf.org.

PRESIDENT, continued from page 1 —

This brings the total number of HUD VASH vouchers to 49,000 – representing 80 percent of the administration's initial target of 60,000 vouchers needed to end chronic veteran homelessness. The FY 2012 funding bill for the Department of Veterans Affairs has not been signed into law, but the budget proposal for homeless veteran programs is expected to be met. This includes the following funding levels:

- \$224 million for the Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem (GPD) Program
- About \$100 million for the Supportive Services for Veterans Families (SSVF) Program

- An additional \$50 million for HUD-VASH case management services

In addition, veterans and beneficiaries receive a 2012 Cost of Living Adjustment of 3.6 percent beginning January 1st. The last COLA for VA benefits was in 2008 when the last Social Security increase occurred.

As we roll into this New Year, we want to thank everyone for their kind gifts and donations during this past holiday season. It is through the generosity of others that we are able to make sure the veterans of the program know that they are cared for and appreciated by members of the community.

Deborah Johnson, CVAF President

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?

Providing services takes money; foundations and corporations fight hard for a share of big federal and state grants. The California Veterans Assistance Foundation relies on the generosity of people like you to help end the national disgrace of homeless veterans who are (MIA) missing in America.

Please send your tax-deductible donations to:

**California Veterans
Assistance Foundation, Inc.
729 Decatur Street, # 1
Bakersfield, CA 93308**

Please help us to continue our efforts to help those veterans who need a “hand-up and not a hand-out.”

CFC Donation

94262 California Veterans Assistance Foundation, Inc. EIN #30000186044

Transitional housing programs with supportive services that assist veterans in identifying, treating and diminishing the issues that lead to homelessness.

Toll-free: 888-805-2490

CVAF MISSION STATEMENT

Our mission is to help veterans or at risk of becoming homeless veterans, regain, maintain, and improve their status in society by providing an alcohol and drug-free, secure environment through which a wide array of human services can be accessed in an atmosphere of dignity and mutual concern.

A JOB WELL DONE!

CVAF Case Manager Ron Hernandez received this e-mail from a veteran he worked with at the Resource and Referral Center. The message is as follows:

Dear Mr. Hernandez:

Having spent the last year and a half homeless and actively participating in relevant veterans' programs in the area, I wish to relate more than a compliment.

I am not versed or knowledgeable on how to attain touted benefits. I witnessed anxiety and frustration as benefits seemingly became elusive. You sir, have accomplished more for me in three brief meetings than any other VA affiliate officer or representative attempted in those last 18 months of anguished effort.

I think of my experience with Mr. Ron Hernandez of the CAVAF organization in Kern County, California as a highly commendable, professional, result-oriented, pleasant encounter. Well done, my friend.

D.H.

Ron responded with this: Its e-mails like this that makes this foundation an awesome place to work.