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September 2024

Office of Mayor London N. Breed

Sent via EMAIL

Dear Honorable Mayor Breed,

Over the past several months, the San Francisco Veterans Affairs Commission (VAC) has become concerned about the level of staff support at the San Francisco County Veterans Services Office (CVSO). By this letter, we would like to bring this to your attention as well as offer our recommendation on ways we hope staff can be expanded.

The CVSO is the primary resource to help veterans and their family members apply for federal, state, and local benefits. Some examples of the many services provided by the CVSO include assistance with VA health care enrollment and applying for VA disability compensation, DMV veterans license verification, assistance requesting military service records from the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC), discharge upgrade information and referral to Swords to Plowshares Legal Clinic, assistance applying for VA Survivors' Pension, and assistance filing a PACT Act disability claim for exposure to toxic substances.

The last example in list above - assistance filing a PACT Act disability claim for exposure to toxic substances – is the result of The PACT Act, signed into law on August 10, 2022, and perhaps the largest health care and benefit expansion in VA history. This huge benefit expansion, incredibly important for our country's veterans, obviously means a significant uptick in claims activity for all CVSOs.

It is the Commission's understanding that the SF CVSO currently manages all these services with a staff of four full-time claims representatives. As veterans, we know what's involved in processing claims. It is almost never a task completed with a one-time meeting. Fulfilling a claim typically requires multiple follow-ups – with the veteran, the veteran's family, the VA, and/or other government entities. There is always paperwork to track and update, and deadlines to meet. Further, while all this follow-up work is being done, veterans continue to come into the office, and new claims continue to be opened. Despite the hard work and dedication of the SF CVSO employees, they simply cannot keep up with the rising number of claims.

The Commission has also observed that staffing challenges seem to affect the San Francisco CVSO more than other Bay Area CVSOs. For instance, a veteran recently informed the commission of his experience looking for benefit assistance. He left voicemails at the San Francisco, Alameda and San

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Mateo CVSOs. He did not receive a return call from the San Francisco office. Whereas the other two offices called back the same day, one within the hour. In fact, the Commission has frequently heard from veterans about their frustration in reaching the CVSO by phone. Often, these are elderly or disabled veterans, who cannot come to the office in person and do not have computer access to book an online appointment. When this issue was raised during a commission meeting, the SF CVSO director explained their office does not have a dedicated person to answer calls. All calls go to voicemail. At the end of each day, claims representatives try to set time aside to review and answer voicemails. However, representatives' claims work often run to the end of the workday which means messages go unchecked for a day or even longer.

As the Commission became more aware of the SF CVSO's staffing challenges, and based on our own experiences going through the claims process, we would like to share the following recommendations:

- Add a "veteran peer navigator" to SF CVSO staff. It was brought to our attention that other CVSOs have part-time peer navigators to assist claims representatives with the tracking of paperwork and with the many follow up tasks associated with the claims process. (A commissioner will be happy to meet with a member of your staff to explain the function and benefits of this role in further detail.)
- Add a part-time receptionist to manage front desk. This person could greet walk-in clients (a significant number, as noted in SF CVSO's monthly activity reports). A receptionist could also answer incoming calls, connect callers with an available claims representative, or take a message. (Often, veterans call with a quick question about filling out a form or asking for confirmation that an original document they mailed to the CVSO was received. With a person answering incoming calls, these are examples where questions could be answered quickly.)

Strengthening the work of the SF CVSO will be of great benefit to the approximate 24,000 veterans and their family members living in San Francisco. We know supporting veterans is a top priority of the city, and, as members of the Veterans Affairs Commission, we are grateful for the opportunity to present our recommendations for consideration.

If there are any questions, or if further information can be provided by our commission, we are happy to assist. We thank you for your attention to this important matter and for your continued support of our San Francisco veterans community.

Sincerely,

The Veterans Affairs Commission
City and County of San Francisco