

Vets a priority in Placer County

Provided by Placer County

More than 32,000 veterans call Placer County home, and it's Rick Buckman's job to reach out to them and provide the help and services they need to obtain benefits.

During the 2008-09 fiscal year, Buckman, the county's veterans services officer, and his staff filed 3,500 claims for Placer County veterans, garnering \$22 million in benefits for them. This was an increase from 1,700 claims and \$10 million received in benefits for veterans the year before. Since Buckman's arrival to Placer County in May 2006, services to area veterans have increased dramatically.

The proof is in the numbers. In the year before his arrival, the office filed about 400 claims on behalf of veterans.

"All it takes is a veteran from any war to stop by our office, and we do all the work to file a claim for them," Buckman said. "We are not the VA – we're the county and our job is to get our local veterans the federal money and assistance available to them."

The Veterans' Service Office provides assistance and advice to veterans and their dependents in obtaining veteran benefits. Its mission is to promote the interests and welfare of veterans and their dependents and survivors and to enhance their quality of life through counseling, education, claims assistance and advocacy.

Some benefits available to veterans include compensation for service injuries, pensions for non-service disabilities, health care enrollment, claims filing for payment of insurance policies and a college fee-waiver program for dependents of

disabled veterans who wish to enroll in a community college, CSU or UC.

Buckman, who has more than 20 years experience in veterans' services and is retired from the Army, isn't surprised at the number of veterans, especially those from World War II, who come into his office unaware of the benefits available to them.

"The older veterans were told years ago they weren't eligible for benefits, and even though the laws have changed, they still don't know. They don't know to ask. Many veterans aren't aware they have benefits, unless they are connected to a veterans' group," said Buckman.

For instance, last year a significant new benefit became available for all veterans, no matter when they served. This benefit allows compensation for veterans suffering from ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease). Surviving spouses are also eligible for compensation. However, Buckman said, most veterans were not aware of this benefit.

"The VA posted it on the website, but most people don't read their website, and I only had one or two people come in to file a claim. However, when a letter appeared in the newspaper, in one of those nationally syndicated advice columns, then I suddenly I had about 10 people come in to file claims."

Vietnam veterans should be aware of a recent benefit which specifically affects them. Three more diseases have been added to the presumptive list, meaning if Vietnam veterans suffer from these diseases, they will receive compensation. The diseases recently added to the list are: Parkinson's disease, Ischemic heart disease and hairy cell leukemia.

Since Buckman took the job as veterans service officer in 2006, he made veterans who are seniors a top priority because many eligible World War II and Korean War veterans were not

receiving benefits such as pensions and compensation for injuries. He also found caregivers who assist veterans sometimes are ill informed about how to obtain benefits for veterans. The Veterans Office also took steps to reduce the time needed to process claims by automating the process for submitting claims to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

As part of his outreach to veterans, Buckman speaks to veterans' groups and community organizations, such as Veterans and Families and the Gathering Inn. His office also contacts discharged veterans who settle in Placer County to help them with their benefits. Recently, Buckman started visiting Sierra College one day a week to connect with younger, recently discharged veterans to help them file claims for injuries and free VA health care benefits.

To help veterans find jobs, the office works with Roseville One-Stop Career Center and the California Employment Development Department.

Buckman is a busy man. The office has four full-time staffers and the department talks to or helps an average of 450 veterans a month. The three phone lines are constantly busy, and Rick personally sees a client every 30 minutes.

Wednesday is Veterans Day and that morning Buckman and other veterans will march through downtown Auburn in the annual parade. After the parade, Buckman will emcee Veterans Day events at the fairgrounds. This year the theme is "Welcome Home, Vietnam Veterans."

In mid-January 2010, the Placer County Veterans' Services office will move from the DeWitt Center in Auburn to its new and larger home at 1000 Sunset Blvd. in Rocklin. The move is due partly to outgrowing its current space and partly to be closer to a larger population of veterans. The new office will combine the Auburn office and the current Roseville office.

Office hours will remain the same: 8am-noon and 1-5pm Monday

through Friday.

For more information about the Veterans' Services Office, call (530)889.7968, email veterans@placer.ca.gov or visit the county website at Placer County Veterans' Services.