

Orange County Veterans Initiative - Evaluation Report

Orange County
Community Foundation

February 2021



ORANGE COUNTY
VETERANS
INITIATIVE

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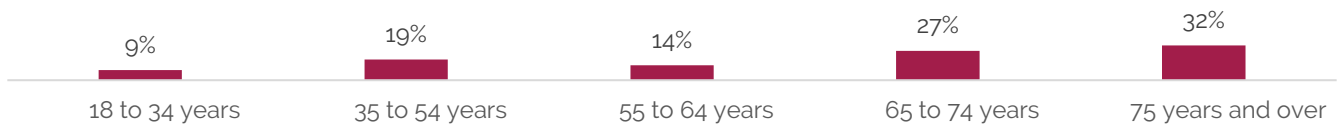
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Background and Overview

Orange County

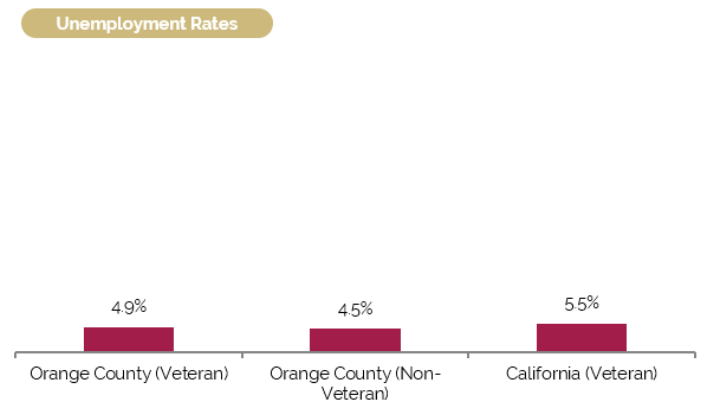
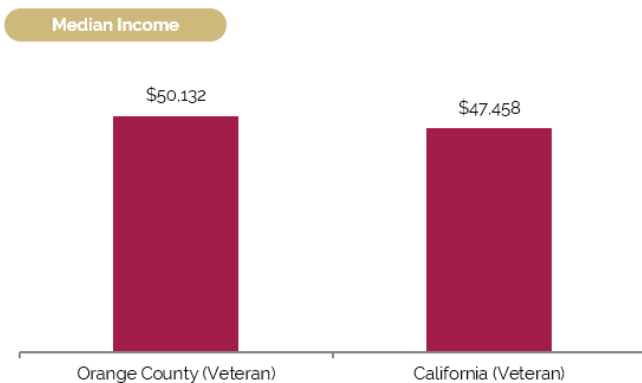
Orange County has the fourth-largest population of veterans in California. Orange County is home to 130,000 veterans and a more significant number of military-connected family members.¹ Veterans make up nearly five percent (4.6%) of Orange County's total population.² Given current trends, each year, approximately 6,500 military veterans will settle in Orange County as they transition from the military.³ According to the 2019 American Community Survey estimates, in Orange County, 67 percent of veterans were active duty pre-9/11 and 17 percent served post-9/11. Almost all (93%) veterans in Orange County are male and veterans ages 75 years or older compromise the largest percentage (32%) of the total veteran population (Exhibit 1). About 80 percent of veterans in Orange County identify as white, 15 percent identify as Hispanic or Latino, 9 percent identify as Asian, and 4 percent identify as Black or African American.

Exhibit 1. Age of Orange County Veterans^a



The median household income for veterans in Orange County is \$50,132, compared to \$47,458 for California veterans (Exhibit 2). The veteran labor force participation rate in Orange County is 82 percent compared to the 78 percent labor force participation rate for non-veterans. Orange County veterans have higher employment rates than the national average in jobs related to business operations, computers, mathematics, architecture, and engineering.⁴ As displayed in Exhibit 2, the unemployment rate for veterans in Orange County (4.9%) is comparable to the rate for non-veterans (4.5%) and is less than the state-level unemployment rate for veterans (5.5%). About 6 percent of veterans in Orange County report income below the poverty level within the last 12 months, which is lower than that of non-veterans at 10 percent.

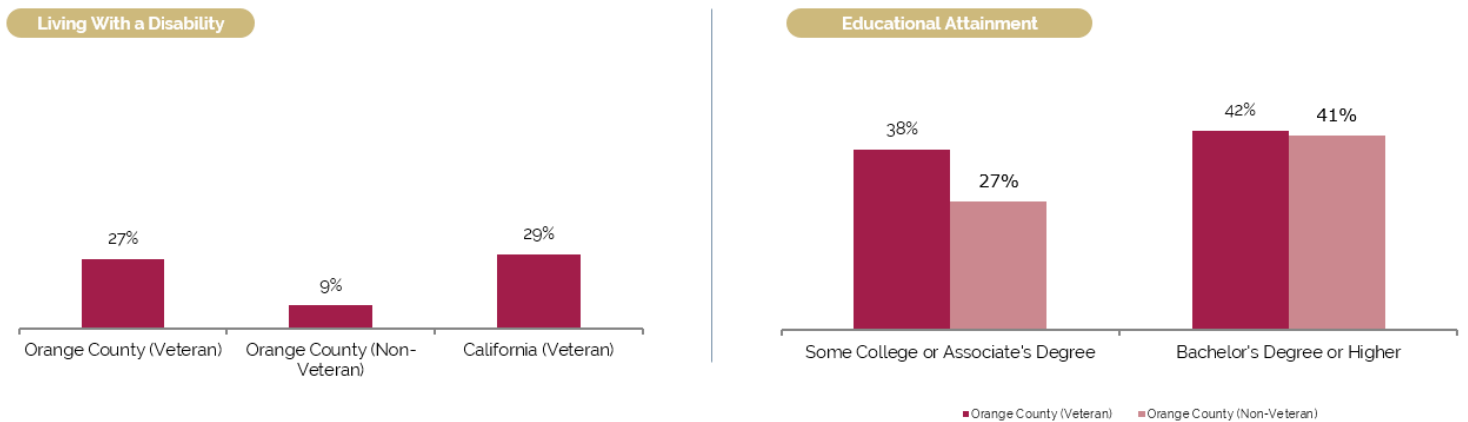
Exhibit 2. Characteristics of Orange County Veterans



^a Race/ethnicity categories are not mutually exclusive thus add up to more than 100%.

The percentage of veterans who live with a disability in Orange County (27%) is higher than the percentage of non-veterans living with disabilities (9%), but slightly lower than the state figure for veterans (29%; Exhibit 3). In terms of educational attainment, the percentage of veterans with some college or associate's degree (38%) and bachelor's degree or higher (42%) is greater than that of non-veterans in the county (27% and 41%) (Exhibit 3). The unique and diverse characteristics and needs of veterans in Orange County warrant specific services and support tailored for veterans and military-connected family members.

Exhibit 3. Characteristics of Orange County Veterans



Community-Based Veteran Serving Organizations

Research demonstrates how critical the transition process from military to civilian life is for the veteran and their family members. American communities have demonstrated variability in terms of the infrastructures, resources, political support, and military cultural competence needed to adequately address veterans' needs when they return home.⁵ Although the Veteran Administration's (VA) Transition Assistance Program (TAP), a cooperative effort among several government agencies, continues to serve as a first point of contact for transitioning veterans, many communities are beginning to explore how they might provide services that better address the needs of veterans.⁶ For this reason, Orange County has been shifting its focus toward building collaboration and infrastructure among veteran service organizations (VSOs). These VSOs are community based, non-government organizations that serve the needs of veterans and military-connected families and are valuable resources for veterans before, during, and after their transition period. In addition to their transition to civilian life, veterans experience many transitions including marital transitions, transitions to college, first jobs after service, having children, and retirement. VSOs play a critical role in filling the capabilities gap between what the government can provide to those who have served and what veterans and their families need to thrive through public-private partnership. VSOs commonly provide veterans and military-connected families with information, care coordination, employment and education services, rehabilitation support, healthcare and behavioral health services, housing resources, as well as being there in case of emergencies. Considering the various needs that emerge for service members during and after their various transitions, VSOs possess invaluable military cultural competence expertise. They are often among the few resources in communities to authentically understand and meet the specific needs of their veterans and military-connected families.⁷

Supporting Veterans in Orange County

The Orange County Veterans and Military Families Collaborative (OCVMFC) is a coalition of over 100 entities including businesses, nonprofits, and government institutions committed to supporting veterans and their family members. The mission of the collaborative is to serve as a bridge connecting veterans, , and military family members to quality benefits, services, and opportunities within the community of Orange County.*The collaborative serves the needs of over 130,000 veterans and their families residing in Orange County. In 2018, the OCVMFC was recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs as the Community Veteran Engagement Board for Orange County. In 2019, the University of California, Irvine, became OCVMFC's Convener, providing leadership and support to the collaborative's mission. The collaborative advances its mission through its working groups which include health and wellness, children and families, education, employment, government relations, older adult veteran services, housing, faith based, legal and re-entry, resources, and public relations and outreach. While OCVMFC is separate from the Orange County Veterans Initiative (OCVI), their members overlap and their work complements each other in support of veterans and military-connected families. *Source: <https://www.ocvmfc.info/>

The Tierney Center (The Hub): In 2018, 211 Orange County, Volunteers of America Los Angeles' Battle Buddies Bridge (B3), zero8hundred, and Goodwill Industries of Orange County came together with a shared veteran at the center vision to co-locate and provide veterans access and coordinated care to a myriad of services and opportunities. OCVI funding partners supported this vision and committed to invest in creating a large center with additional partners. As a result of this work, The Hub is now home to nine co-located organizations who provide veterans with a one-stop shop for comprehensive resources and supports.

OCVI and OCVMFC members spend many hours collaborating through working groups, employment events, and behavioral health and faith-based summits to make the shared vision of veteran and transitioning services in Orange County a reality. Additionally, OCVI and OCVMFC have been recognized as trusted resources and subject matter experts to supply information regarding veterans and transitioning service members to Members of Congress, CA State Senators, and Orange County officials. Both collaboratives have been acknowledged at the national level for their collaborative approach to serving veterans, transitioning services members, and their families, and serve as model initiatives for other counties across the nation.

OCVI Initiative

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 landmark, first-ever, comprehensive needs assessment of Orange County veterans and their families. The results of the study identified that the highest needs of veterans and military-connected families at that time were in the areas of transition, education, employment, and physical and behavioral health.⁸ Additionally, the study revealed:

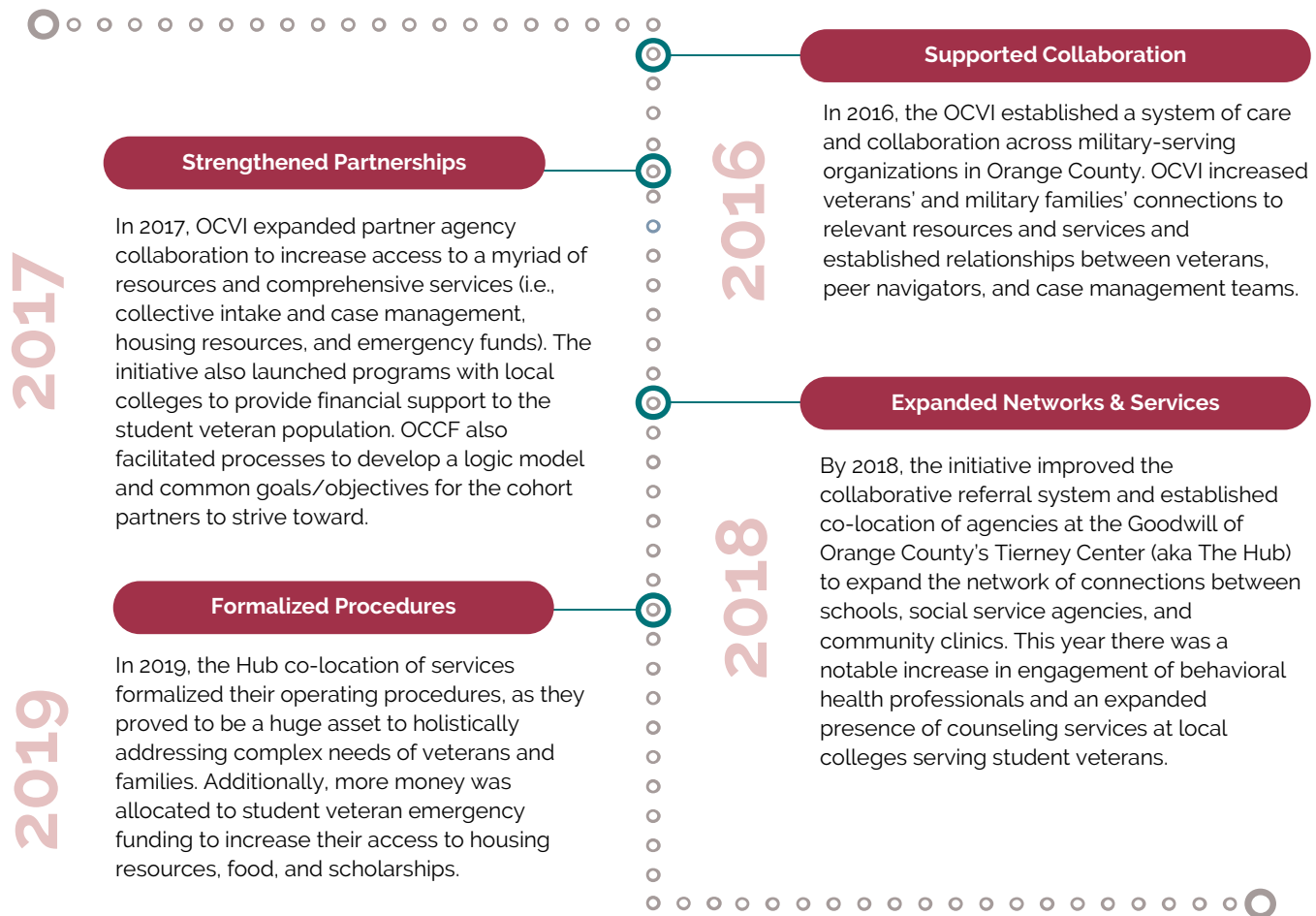
- Veterans did not know where to go in Orange County to get the services they need;
- Veterans were not able to develop trusting relationships with community providers;
- Veterans were not connecting early and proactively to services they and their families needed; and
- Veterans were not obtaining employment in career-oriented opportunities and positions.

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 OC Real Estate Industry (OCRE) joined OCCF, becoming a key financial

OCVI Cohort Members

- 2-1-1 Orange County
- California State University Fullerton
- Strong Families Strong Children (Child Guidance Center, Inc)
- Easter Seals Southern California
- Goodwill Industries of Orange County
- Irvine Valley College
- Lestonnac Free Clinic
- Saddleback College
- Semper Fi Fund
- Strength in Support
- University of California Irvine
- Vanguard University
- Veterans Legal Institute
- Volunteers of America Los Angeles- Battle Buddy Bridge (B3)
- Warrior-Scholar Project
- Working Wardrobes for a New Start
- zero8hundred

contributor as well as a thought partner to OCVI. Since 2015, the initiative has invested over \$4 million into 17 nonprofit VSO partners (referred to as cohort members) across Orange County (see side bar) to address the barriers identified in the study and to support veterans and military families in the areas of transition, education, employment, and physical and behavioral health. OCVI has developed a robust coordinated system of care in Orange County, worked to strengthen partnerships and coordination among VSOs, expanded organization networks and veteran and military family services, and formalized referral and data sharing procedures between cohort members. The following provides a year- by- year description of key milestones and successes of the initiative:



Five years into the initiative, it is important to understand its impact on the veteran landscape in Orange County, specifically on veterans' transitions to civilian life, education, employment readiness and job skills, as well as their physical and behavioral health. The following report presents the findings from the OCVI 5 Year Evaluation, detailed evaluation takeaways, and recommendations to consider as Orange County organizations support veterans and military-connected family members.

OCVI 5 Year Evaluation

In December 2019, OCCF partnered with Harder+Company Community Research to evaluate the overall impact of OCVI on veterans and military-connected families in Orange County over the past five years, specifically in the areas of transition, education, employment, and physical and behavioral health. Additionally, the evaluation sought to understand whether veterans now know where to go in Orange County to get the services they need and whether the services that were provided improved outcomes for veterans and their family members.

In March 2020, just as data collection was to begin, the COVID-19 pandemic and corresponding public health crisis led to drastic increase in needs for services and changes in how the OCVI grantees operated. In response to these shifts, the evaluation team worked closely with OCCF staff to ensure the timing and organization of data collection did not create an additional burden on grantee staff during an already stressful and challenging time.

The OCVI evaluation utilized a mixed-methods approach to data collection and captured data from a variety of sources to ensure recommendations and findings were based on a range of perspectives. The following describes each data collection activity implemented as part of the OCVI evaluation:



Existing data review. At the onset of the evaluation, the evaluation team conducted a review of existing data to more deeply understand OCVI's work over the last five years, examine preliminary successes and challenges, and identify areas to probe on during subsequent data collection. Sources of data reviewed were primarily annual progress and final reports completed by grantees and summary reports completed by OCCF.



Funder interviews. Key funding partners were interviewed via phone by the evaluation team. These interviews captured the funders' perspective regarding the successes and challenges experienced by the initiative over the past five years. Funders shared their insights on lessons learned and the extent to which the initiative has helped to transform the system of services available to veterans and military-connected families.



Cohort member survey. Between May and June 2020, 53 staff members across all 17 OCVI (current and former) funded organizations received a survey. It sought to evaluate the successes and challenges of the initiative, the overall impact of the initiative, examine collaboration among veteran serving organizations, and understand the progress made to date towards the initiatives focus.. Thirty-eight individuals across 16 organizations completed the survey, equating to a 72% individual response rate and a 94% organizational response rate.



Veterans and military-connected family member focus groups. During three 90-minute virtual focus groups, veterans and military-connected family members shared their insights and feedback on how well the initiative and the community programs available in Orange County have supported them over the past five years. Of the participants who completed a post-focus group survey, the slight majority (57%) of participants identified as male, and the remaining 43 percent identified as female. Focus group participants were, on average, 44 years old and were racially/ethnically diverse (43% Hispanic or Latino/a, 29% Asian, 14% Black or African American, and 14% identifying as another race/ethnicity). Participants (or participants' family members) served in the Air Force (29%), Army (29%), or Navy (43%). In appreciation for their time and input, all focus group participants received a \$20 gift card.



Reflection session. The evaluation team facilitated a reflection session with current OCVI cohort members to present and discuss the findings of the evaluation. The reflection session provided an opportunity for cohort members to discuss the extent to which the findings of the evaluation aligned with their experiences and how they can use the findings to inform their work moving forward. Additionally, this session was an opportunity to better understand how cohort members anticipate sustaining their work once OCVI funding sunsets.

Evaluation Findings

Throughout the evaluation, data was collected from various sources, representing a diverse array of perspectives. This section highlights the findings of the OCVI evaluation, organized by the following topics:

- Tailored support and services
- Transition
- Education
- Physical and behavioral health
- Employment
- Collaboration and partnership
- Sustainability

OCVI Service Recipients

This report reviews services provided to transitioning service members, pre and post 9-11 veterans as well as military-connected families.



Tailored Support and Services

OCVI increased the support available to veterans and military-connected families. Since 2015, OCVI has reached over 25,000^b veterans and military-connected families in Orange County. One funder shared, “[The initiative’s greatest success] is that we have been able to touch tens of thousands of veterans through the work of these various organizations.” Cohort members, veterans, and military-connected family members reflected on how robust the VSO landscape is in Orange County. Since the establishment of OCVI, 97 percent of cohort member staff feel support services for veterans and military-connected family members have improved. One veteran explained, “[Services] have really improved in Orange County, because I didn’t even hear about a lot of services the first ten or so years I was out of the service. Within the last five years, there are a lot of services out there.” The increase in the number of services, and the improvement in outreach and coordinated efforts among VSOs in Orange County has been critical for ensuring veterans and military-connected families receive the support they need.

Although there has been an increase in available support, one barrier both veterans and military-connected family members have experienced is a lack of knowledge and awareness of the available services. Some shared that they were connected with an OCVI cohort member during a challenging time, as a reactive solution as opposed to a preventative measure, and many wish they knew about these services sooner. A military-connected family member shared, “I wish I had known about these programs earlier on so I would have taken advantage of the resources available at the time and possibly avoided [the hardships] I’m dealing with now.” Once veterans and military-connected families were made aware of services, they spoke highly of the support and the quality of care experienced.

Pre 9/11 and post 9/11 veterans have had different experiences accessing services in Orange County. The initial USC study differentiated between the needs of pre 9/11 and post 9/11 veterans. A focus was on the unique psychological health issues and prevalence of homelessness among the different service cohorts. Five years later, through this current evaluation, similar stories have emerged. In the veterans focus groups, older pre 9/11 veterans resurfaced some of the unique challenges they have experienced and how their experiences are different from veterans who more recently returned to civilian life. Several older veterans shared that not many services were available when they initially transitioned from the military. Several of the veterans who served pre 9/11 also expressed experiencing years of homelessness before receiving any services, as well as the psychological health issues that came to light in the initial USC study. An important note that the study made in 2015 was the need for community assessments that allow for resources to be organized and prioritized in order to address the unique and most pressing needs of their veteran populations; while both pre- and post-9/11 veterans continue to require post-

^b Service counts may include duplication across multiple service providers and multiple years.

military transition support, each cohort of veterans requires a different type and level of support.⁹ With insights shared through this current evaluation, there is a continued need for more tailored and experience-specific outreach and engagement practices, case-management, and behavioral health services for veterans of different service cohorts.

Veterans highlight their respect and deep appreciation for peer-support programs and VSOs run by veterans. As stated in the 2015 USC study, one way to support veterans in a way that recognizes and values the impact of military culture is through the use of peer support programs.¹⁰ Research suggests veterans are more likely to trust and feel understood by fellow military peers compared to VA providers without lived experience.¹¹ One veteran explained the importance of peer support by sharing, "It's so important to ask each other for resources, and how to help each other. In the military, helping out each other is how we're going to achieve something. It takes a lot of pride and ego, but it's something you've got to do. You're staying in contact with each other, and that's how you get through it. That's how you face challenges, not by yourself, but with others, so you can help out each other to get a mission accomplished."

Since 2016, OCVI has expanded the use of case management and peer navigation services to 8,600^c veterans and military-connected families through 1:1 support, group and individual counseling, evidence-based family treatment, collaborative intake and referral procedures, and resource navigation. OCVI cohort members shared that one of the initiative's greatest successes is its commitment to utilizing peer support services as a primary approach to veteran care and family support. During focus groups, veterans highlighted their respect for the peer-to-peer model and the peer-support programs available in Orange County. They expressed the importance of community, comradery, and engaging in programs that are led and run by people who have lived through similar experiences. One veteran explained, "[My mentor] gave good peer support and they had a plethora of resources that allowed me to overcome many of my barriers. I'm very proud of them, very happy that they're around." Another veteran shared, "Peer support is really, really essential... [My peers] are always there, and they've helped me out a lot for any kind of resource, and not just for myself, for others." Veterans who participated in focus groups also discussed the importance of authentic peer support. They shared how they perceive peer support specialists to be much more effective when they meet veterans where they are at as opposed to "supporting from behind a desk."

Focus Areas

Across all four focus areas (see sidebar), cohort members, veterans, and military-connected families agreed that the areas of most significant improvement, in terms of accessibility and quality, have been with behavioral health and education services. Although the four areas were categorized separately to capture specific findings for each, veterans and military-connected families spoke about these focus areas in an interdependent and interconnected way. The following section highlights key takeaways and progress made to date within each focus area, understanding that they are not mutually exclusive but weave together and influence each other. Where identified, existing challenges or opportunities for improvement are also highlighted.

OCVI Focus Areas

- Transition
- Education
- Behavioral and physical health
- Employment



Transition

OCVI facilitated the building of consolidated/unified goals and a network of support for transitioning veterans.

Since its inception, OCVI has helped veteran serving organizations increase their integration of transition support services through case management and peer navigation services, 1:1 support, group and individual counseling, evidence-based family treatment, collaborative intake and referral procedures, and resource navigation.

^c Service counts may include duplication across multiple service providers and multiple years.

Additionally, OCVI has worked diligently to carry out system-level efforts to connect veterans transitioning from local and non-local bases with needed supports. For example, OCVI coordinated with county staff to ensure that communication received by veterans transitioning to Orange County included resources provided by OCVI. Ninety two percent of cohort member survey respondents indicated their organization provides a more comprehensive and holistic approach to engaging and supporting transitioning service members due to their organization's involvement with OCVI. Several members shared that this network of support has helped to increase provider knowledge, the number of accessible workshops, as well as points of contact for warm referrals and peer mentor engagement. Since 2015, OCVI has provided assessment and referral services to over 8,500 veterans and military-connected family members and case management support to 5,500.^d Funders also reflected on the impact OCVI has had on supporting veterans transitioning to civilian life through collaboration with local college campuses.

Cohort members, veterans, and military-connected family members see improvement opportunities for connecting transitioning veterans to services earlier in their active duty career. OCVI is committed to taking an upstream or preventive approach through outreach to veterans before they transition from active service. They do so by going on bases, providing workshops, identifying needs, and holding conversations with veterans to help them better understand civilian life. Although steps have been taken to reach veterans early on in their transition process, 34 percent of cohort members acknowledged that it continues to be a challenge connecting with veterans while they are still active in the military. As military base leadership has discretion over how VSOs are able to engage with transitioning service members, changes in military command and direction create challenges for OCVI cohort members to have early access to service members. This challenge was initially brought forward in the USC study and remains a challenge for service providers on the ground. Several veterans reiterated the importance of outreach prior to a veteran's transition to help bridge their understanding of differences between military and civilian life.

Many veterans and military-connected family members wished they had been made aware of Orange County VSOs sooner in their transition process. All the participants at the military-connected family member focus group agreed that if they were aware of the robust Orange County services while they were still on active duty, it could have potentially provided them the tools to more effectively address transition challenges. Once made aware of services, however, veterans and military-connected family members expressed deep gratitude for the amount of support available in Orange County. They also emphasized that once connected with services, the consistent communication, follow-up, and high-quality and authentic care, has helped not only keep them and their families connected to services but provided them the tools and opportunities to thrive.

"I wish I had known about these programs earlier on so I would have taken advantage of the resources available at the time and possibly avoid [the hardships] I'm dealing with now."

– Military Spouse



Education

Campus veterans resource centers and academic programs have served as critical safe spaces for student veterans. Veterans resource centers on campus provide student veterans with familiar faces, camaraderie, and peer support. The combination of academic and financial resources, like books, tutoring, and computers and the counseling and mentorship programs provided by veterans resource centers have been pivotal in supporting student veterans' behavioral health and in helping them reach their goals. One student veteran shared, "I think [the Vet Center] actually saved my life. I could go to that extent, because if [they hadn't referred me to] a doctor from US Vets, I don't know how I would be right here talking to you guys."

^d Service counts may include duplication across multiple service providers and multiple years.

One veteran highlighted Saddleback College's "Boots to Books" class, which veterans consider to be one of the biggest hubs for veteran learning and veteran transition to civilian life; "Saddleback College is probably one of the best facilitators of a veteran's success that I've encountered. It was through them that I actually encountered the Warrior-Scholar Project (WSP), which has been a huge, absolutely amazing, [an] amazing experience, and opportunity to succeed." Numerous veterans highlighted the motivation and opportunities they've received through WSP. One veteran shared that he was inspired by the testimonies of veterans at an event hosted by WSP and the reassurance it gave him for his own transition and personal goals.

Funders, cohort members, and veterans agreed that the achievement of post-secondary educational goals has been an area of success for the initiative.

OCVI has found that one of the earliest touch points between VSOs and veterans is at school and have leaned into early intervention and collaboration with local college campuses to support student veterans. Similarly, veterans highlighted that compared to other resources, education resources are the easiest to access. As a result of OCVI, 95 percent of cohort member survey respondents feel more veterans have the support they need to pursue their post-secondary educational goals. Additionally, nearly all cohort members (93%) mentioned the positive impact of connecting student veterans to emergency funding for housing, food, gas cards, or bus passes, while about three out of four reported increasing the number of, and funds toward, scholarships for student veterans. OCVI's investment in veteran resource centers at colleges has proven to help veterans meet their educational goals, and increase veterans' access to scholarships and emergency funding. However, a few organizations mentioned that an increase in emergency funds would be beneficial to student veterans in helping them meet their educational goals.

"[With an OCVI organization's help] I found out that I was qualified to go back to school on scholarship. I got my undergraduate degree, and I should be entering law school next year."

– Veteran

Military-connected family members would like to learn more about how to access educational resources available to them.

Military-connected family members who participated in the focus group expressed feeling disconnected from post-secondary academic support services for themselves. They are not sure of what support they qualify for, who to connect with to ask questions, and what steps to take to access the educational support services available to them. One military-connected spouse shared, "I haven't at all found any [education] resources to go back and get my master's or anything like that. I don't even know as a spouse where I could go other than the GI Bill."



Physical and Behavioral Health

Although behavioral health stigma and coordination with providers continue to be a challenge for veterans, behavioral health services have improved and become more readily available. The USC study reported that one of the primary issues faced by pre- and post-9/11 veterans in Orange County in 2015 were behavioral health issues. Five years later, 88 percent of cohort members feel they have been able to connect with more veterans to evaluate their behavioral health and better educate veterans on the topic of stigma surrounding behavioral health services. Veterans agreed that behavioral health services have become more readily available, especially through college veterans centers. However, veterans expressed the need for additional support in accessing behavioral health services, stronger integration of wellness services like yoga and meditation, and improved coordination between organizations that provide behavioral health services, counseling, and treatment programs.

Because many veterans do not want to be attached to the VA system or behavioral health services, having local nonprofits focused on physical and behavioral health has been instrumental in supporting veterans and their families. The initiative has raised the tide by challenging grantees to collaborate and give veterans access to services outside

of the VA system. However, both grantees and funders shared that there are not enough behavioral and physical health services in Orange County to meet veterans' needs. A few cohort members also mentioned the need for innovative approaches to collecting and utilizing patient data (e.g., social determinants of health) to inform practices. In terms of unmet needs and challenges, funders shared that the initiative is just scratching the surface regarding behavioral health needs. Cohort members and funders are excited for the potential and see the importance of a central co-location of health services at the Tierney Center.

There is a need for stronger integration between behavioral health and transitional support services. As mentioned in the transition section above, returning to civilian life is challenging for many reasons. Several veterans highlighted the impact that the military experience has on service members' lives, including the trauma they experienced. Heightened mental health instability during re-entry, lack of social support, familial stress, suicidal ideation, increased substance use, and stigma/hesitation around seeking support services are commonly experienced by transitioning veterans and their families and underscore the importance of connecting them to behavioral health supports during their transition period. One veteran explained, "All the stuff that we went through in the military service is a lot, and we get a different kind of trauma there, anxiety, depression, stuff like that, and coping with the civilian world, it's not easy. I've gone through it, and it's not an easy world out here. We need that support"

Military-connected family members highlighted the impact of behavioral health services made available to them in Orange County on their own, and their families', wellbeing. They spoke highly of the VSOs that provide behavioral health services in Orange County, the trauma-informed care, consistency and follow-up, and connections to other support services they have received. One military-connected family member shared, "I have found a lot of relief now that I've been connected with somebody. Through these services, I have found that I could be more grounded. I know that I have the strength and I needed that help." Military-connected family members also reflected on how valuable behavioral health services would have been for themselves during their veteran family member's transition. One person shared, "I think I should have had help when he first got out of the service. It was so intense for the first year. Just his transition and his mental health was just off the charts. So, it was really intense. I think [a stronger transition and behavioral health] resource would have been super helpful."

Veterans highlighted the need for improved promotion of, and connection to, physical health services. From the cohort member perspective, 83 percent feel more veterans in Orange County know where to go to address their physical health needs because of the work of the initiative. Additionally, 84 percent of cohort members feel they have been able to connect with veterans to evaluate their physical health and provide appropriate services. And 86 percent feel they have improved their health outreach and support services to be more sensitive to the needs of various gender, racial, and ethnic identities. The 2015 USC study that identified oral health as a critical need for veterans, Dental work provided by VSOs is critical for veterans because currently, the VA only provides dental care to veterans who have a service-related dental problem, are former POWs, or are rated as totally disabled as a result of their military service. Under this current law, only about 8 percent of veterans are eligible for dental care from the VA, highlighting the need for additional dental care.¹² In response to this, OCVI funding supported the Lestonnac Free Clinic to provide free dental services to veterans in Orange County. A handful of veterans acknowledged appreciation for veteran serving organizations that provide dental care.

One area cohort members indicated room for improvement was around coordinating with health providers. One-third of cohort members indicated that they have not improved coordination with health providers to ensure medical records are comprehensive and complete.



Employment

OCVI has helped increase the number of employment support programs available to veterans and helped veterans sustain higher-paying work.

Highlighted in the 2015 USC report, veterans expressed their frustration with being referred from one employment website to another, without much success. Veterans wanted to speak directly with employers, as opposed to continually being referred to websites focused on hiring veterans.¹³ Since 2015, OCVI cohort members has provided employment support to over 1,400 veterans and military-connected families, of which nearly 600 (43%) were full-time employment positions. Through the initiative's various employment support programs, OCVI increased the number of veterans placed in career-potential positions with higher salaries. In 2019, the average hourly rate was \$20/hr.

A vast majority (89%) of cohort members feel their organization is better able to support veterans in addressing barriers to unemployment and the same amount feel more veterans have developed the skills they need to find and maintain employment because of OCVI. Both funders and cohort members shared that OCVI funding and critical efforts by the Tierney Center, UCI, Easter Seal, VetNet, and EDD have provided their teams with the resources to conduct more transition workshops, peer one-on-one assessments and counseling, and classes/training to support veterans in finding higher-paying jobs. However, OCVI members identified a couple of challenges that still exist despite their efforts, including struggling with outreach and establishing connections with employers.

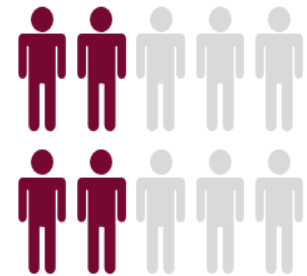
1,400+

veterans and military-connected families **received employment support** from OCVI

600

of which were **placed in in full-time employment positions**

Of the veterans who receive employment support through OCVI each year, an average of **44 percent** are placed in full-time career potential positions.



Through the initiative's various employment support programs, OCVI increased the number of veterans placed in career-potential positions with higher salaries. In 2019:

\$20/hour

was the **average hourly rate** for these higher salary positions



Collaboration and Partnership

OCVI has strengthened the trust and collaboration between veteran serving organizations in Orange County.

Research suggests VSOs are most effective when they leverage partnerships and collaborate through complementary service delivery.¹⁴ Since the initiative's inception, cohort members have worked together to address the complex needs of veterans and their families through comprehensive care coordination. Additionally, OCCF invested in a facilitation consultant to support the cohort in building shared goals and objectives and to establish processes and procedures to improve collaboration between service providers. Nearly all of the cohort members (97%) feel their organization is part of a more robust system to connect veterans and their families to the services and opportunities they need to succeed. There is consensus that OCVI has had a strong influence in shaping the way nonprofits serve veterans and their families in Orange County. A funder of the initiative shared, "OCVI is filling numerous gaps in services through their collaborative model. They first identify vetted organizations and hold them

accountable. Then they attach that to funding, and provide a one-stop shop, like the Hub, that makes veterans comfortable that they know where to turn to for all their services."

There's been an increase in the level of trust and collaboration between the OCVI cohort members. They are now sharing information, have defined roles, frequent communication, and engage in shared decision-making. There has also been an increase in collaboration between OCVI cohort members and the organizations that are a part of the Orange County Veterans and Military Families Collaborative (OCVMFC). Prior to OCVI, collaboration between cohort members and the OCVMFC was rated as a 3.5 on a scale from 1 (*No Interaction*) to 5 (*Collaboration*). Currently, cohort members feel the level of collaboration between the members of these two veteran serving collaboratives is a 4.3 (Exhibit 4).

Exhibit 4. Collaboration between OCVI funded organizations and OCVMFC (scale from 1-No Interaction to 5-Collaboration)



Collaborative public-private partnerships are critical for improving the standard of care for veterans and their families and delivering more targeted, expedited, better quality, and innovative services.¹⁵ Cohort members shared that they have noticed an increase in collaboration between public and private organizations serving veterans. Prior to OCVI, collaboration between public and private organizations serving veterans was rated as a 3.4 on a scale from 1 (*No Interaction*) to 5 (*Collaboration*). Currently, cohort members feel the level of collaboration between public and private organizations serving veterans is a 3.7 (Exhibit 5).

Exhibit 5. Collaboration between public and private organizations serving veterans (scale from 1-No Interaction to 5-Collaboration)



During the reflection session, cohort members reflected on how the level of collaboration among cohort members has changed over the last five years. Compared to five years ago, the cohort members now have defined common goals and objectives and have seen a remarkable change due to the stronger collaboration. They described the initiative as a much more "trusted resource-sharing space." Cohort members highlighted that the Hub has played a pivotal role in coordinating intakes and warm hand-offs between established organizations resulting in positive outcomes. One powerful learning for the cohort members that has resulted from this work is the value of relying on each other's organizations' strengths to create a veteran-centered, coordinated, holistic system of care. One grantee shared, "We've learned we don't have to do it on our own. There are so many great resources in Orange County that we can handoff to....We don't have to be jack of all trades."

Veterans and military-connected families recognize and appreciate the collaborative nature and relational approach of Orange County VSOs. A major success of OCVI is its commitment to creating awareness around a holistic approach to veteran care and family support. Veterans and military-connected families experience varying levels of trauma and require a gradual healing process that is affirming, empathetic, and uplifting.¹⁶ One way OCVI has approached this is through the use of more warm-handoff referrals between organizations. Specifically, 97

percent of cohort members feel their organization conducts more warm-handoff referrals, and a vast majority (93%) feel their organization conducts more follow-ups on referrals to ensure veteran's needs are met. Veterans and military-connected family members who participated in focus groups reflected on how helpful and appreciative they were for the collaborative nature of Orange County VSOs. They appreciated not having to "figure out their next step on their own" or find resources on their own. Veterans also highlighted the positive impact of the Hub and its collaborative nature in improving access to and knowledge of services.

Additionally, veterans and military family members shared how genuine and compassionate cohort member staff are. The relational and authentic approach they take to supporting veterans and military-connected families has been critical for building trust and providing veterans and military-connected family members with the supports they need to thrive. A military-connected family member explained, "Staff at [OCVI VSOs] are very personable. They take you as a person, help you because they really want to help you, not because they're just doing their job." Many veterans who participated in the focus groups have also received services in Los Angeles or other parts of the country. Their experiences receiving services in Orange County have been starkly different than their experiences in other places. One veteran said, "Los Angeles is all over the place when it comes to serving veterans. Orange County is connected together and you can rely on doing like a one-stop [to get support]."



Sustainability

As part of the evaluation, cohort members received preliminary evaluation results at a reflection session. During this session, they discussed progress made in supporting veterans and military-connected families over the past five years and how they can sustain their work, as individual organizations, and as a collaborative going forward. According to the cohort member survey, 69 percent of cohort members were either confident or extremely confident that their organization will be able to sustain veteran programming once OCVI funding sunsets.

Cohort members agreed on the importance of continuing to develop holistic behavioral health and transition services and building collaboration with non-veteran serving organizations in Orange County in order to sustain their work. Cohort members reflected on the need for their continued efforts towards more holistic services. They agreed that more collaborative work is needed to build the system of care that supports veterans and their families. In the future, grantees want to see the collaborative work spread beyond VSOs to include additional non-veteran specific service providers. They would also like to develop more effective strategies around establishing relationships and a support system with active service members so that veterans are better prepared and have the necessary tools to adjust to civilian life.

Pursuing collaborative funding efforts will be vital to the future success of the initiative. Several cohort members agreed that if their work as a collaborative is to continue into the distant future, it will be essential to share funding opportunities as they learn of them and look for opportunities to apply for funding together. They expressed a commitment to self-sustain the collaborative beyond the OCCF funding by promoting and growing the collaborative and leveraging each other's strengths and resources. Cohort members agreed that keeping a collaborative mindset at the forefront of their work will help them be successful in bringing in future funding and enable them to have a greater impact supporting veterans and their families no matter from where the funding comes. A few cohort members also emphasized the need for more compiling and sharing of data as they work on ongoing sustainability efforts.

“We've learned we don't have to do it on our own. There are so many great resources in Orange County that we can handoff to...We don't have to be jack of all trades.”

– OCVI Cohort Member

Conclusion and Recommendations

Recommendations

Over the last five years, OCVI has impacted each of the four focus areas and has been successful in developing a coordinated system of care to support veterans and their families. OCVI has increased the support available to veterans and military-connected families, supported veterans in achieving their post-secondary educational goals, established a collaborative and relational approach to supporting veterans and their families, and strengthened the trust and collaboration between VSOs in Orange County. However, this work has not gone without challenges. Over the last five years, OCVI has worked diligently to bring about systems-level changes, which were often complicated by systemic challenges at the county and federal levels. Informed by the OCVI evaluation, the recommendations that follow are intended to provide guidelines and suggestions for strengthening the system of care in Orange County and supporting the veteran and military-connected family populations.



System of Care Recommendations

Continue implementing and prioritizing a relational and authentic approach to supporting veterans and military-connected families. The authentic and relational approach OCVI cohort members take to support veterans and their families has been impactful for many. The initiative should continue prioritizing and implementing this relational approach as a way to continue reaching and supporting veterans and their families. Authentic, relational engagement approaches to service delivery have been linked to improved quality of care, increased satisfaction and health outcomes, and reductions in health care disparities and costs.^{17,18}

Improve availability and coordination between VSOs and health providers to ensure the physical and behavioral health needs of veterans and military-connected family members are met. Although some progress has been made in the areas of supporting the physical and behavioral health of veterans and their families, there is a need for more physical and behavioral health support and better coordination between health providers and VSOs. Alternative approaches to utilizing patient data (e.g., social determinants of health) to inform practices and incorporating more wellness-centric activities (i.e., yoga, mindfulness, etc.) into health care can be impactful ways to ensure the holistic wellness of clients.

Strengthen transition supports by working with leadership at local bases to increase awareness of services, engage with veterans and families at earlier touchpoints, and connect to community level care coordination systems. As feasible, the initiative should consider strengthening their partnership with local base leadership to incorporate OCVI and its cohort members into the base's TAP activities and ensure transitioning veterans are knowledgeable about the resources available to them if they plan to stay in or relocate to Orange County post-active duty service.

Work towards increasing the cultural competency of non-veteran specific organizations working with veterans and establishing a shared referral and data system between VSOs and non-veteran specific organizations to strengthen the system of care in Orange County. Establishing a shared data system between providers would not only be beneficial for care coordination between cohort members but would streamline the service experience and reduce the trauma of having to retell their story for the veterans and military-connected families seeking services in Orange County.



Veteran Specific Recommendations

Continue utilizing peer support services as a primary approach to veteran care and family support. From their first day as a recruit, military culture and values such as teamwork and camaraderie become instilled in service members and direct how they live their lives, make decisions, and navigate challenges and adversity. Prioritizing the use of peer mentors to support veterans has proven to be impactful to the veteran community. Research suggests veterans are more likely to trust, and feel understood by, fellow military peers and that peer support programs build social support, provide veterans with a sense of purpose and meaning, and offer therapeutic benefits.^{19 20}

Encourage and implement tailored and experience-specific outreach and engagement practices, case-management, and behavioral health services for veterans of different service cohorts. Veterans from different service cohorts, such as pre 9/11 and post 9/11, often require different types and level of support. Veterans who participated in the evaluation spoke to these difference and highlighted the need for experience-specific support. For instance, pre 9/11 veterans expressed having experienced homelessness at higher rates than post 9/11 veterans and less access to services compared to post 9/11 veterans.

Leverage the established infrastructure at the college campus level and develop stronger employment readiness and points-of-access for veterans seeking employment. Employment support grantees should consider partnering with college veteran resource centers (VRCs) to host employment-specific workshops, presentations, resource fairs, etc., to support veterans in finding higher paying jobs directly out of college. VRCs on college campuses are key places to engage with and support veterans in a way that meets veterans where they are at.

Continue working to address the stigma associated with engaging in veteran support services. Through the holistic approaches prioritized by the initiative (e.g., peer support models, relational approach, etc.) cohort members can continue working to address the stigma associated with engaging in services and break down barriers that prevent veterans from accessing needed supports, especially behavioral health support.



Military-Connected Family Specific Recommendations

Increase behavioral health, family support, and peer support resources available to military-connected families to better prepare them for their family members' transition. Since it can be challenging to reach veterans while they are still on base, the initiative may consider more actively reaching out to and informing the family members of active duty service members getting ready to transition about the behavioral health, family support, and peer support resources available to them. This could also include creating a transitioning seminar that prepares military-connected families for the transition process and promote greater success as veterans in Orange County transition to civilian life.

Inform military-connected family members about the education resources they are eligible for and what steps they must take to access educational support services available to them. Clarity and connection to the educational support available to military-connected families would be helpful for supporting this population achieve their educational goals.

Conclusion

The Orange County Veterans Initiative was launched in 2015 to give our local heroes the welcome home they deserve. The results of this five year evaluation highlight the progress that has been made, in addition to the important work that still needs to be done. Orange County's veteran and military serving nonprofit community continues to be a resilient and trusted partner to veterans and their families. Going forward, OCVI will continue to partner with these nonprofits to strengthen the system of care in Orange County and ensure veterans and their families have the resources they need to be successful.

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