

Health care a top issue for local veterans

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson

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LAKE COUNTY – As the nation marks Veterans Day this year, local veterans advocates say that medical care for the men and women who served in the armed forces remains a critical issue.

Bob Penny, the county's assistant veterans service officer and himself a Vietnam veteran, said the Veterans Services Office staff of three helps veterans and their dependents obtain the benefits due to them from local, state and federal agencies.

"That's our main purpose," he said.

It's a crucial task in Lake County, which has a large veterans population.

"We have about 8,000 veterans in our county, which is one of the highest veteran-to-population ratios in the state," he said.

The Veterans Administration is increasing medical services to veterans, particularly those in rural areas like Lake County, said Penny. "That is one of their big pushes right now."

There has been talk for many years of having a VA clinic in Lake County, and Penny said the agency – which has agreed a need exists here – is very seriously looking at locating a clinic in Clearlake, possibly in late 2009 or early 2010.

He said the VA is talking to doctors in Clearlake and discussing possibly locating a VA clinic in an Adventist Health clinic facility on Lakeshore.

Penny cautions, however, "Nothing is written in stone yet."

Lake County's veterans population is dominated by men and women who served in World War II, Korean and Vietnam, Penny said.

There also are a "handful" of veterans who have served in Iraqi and Afghanistan.

Local vets' No. 1 issue – across the generations – is medical care, said Penny.

The county's largest vet groups, World War II and Korean vets, are disappearing at a rapid pace, he said, as many of them reach their 80s and 90s.

Vietnam vets, in their 50s, 60s and some even older, have a variety of health issues as a legacy of their service, said Penny.

The biggest problem for Vietnam vets, he said, is a variety of cancers, diabetes and other conditions caused by Agent Orange exposure.

Dean Gotham, president of Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 951, said his organization is particularly concerned about the VA's plan to end Agent Orange screenings for veterans.

"They're cutting it off," he said, although when that's supposed to take place hasn't been announced.

VVA also is concerned that the VA has dropped some levels of health care for vets, said Gotham.

The No. 1 issue facing local veterans, according to Gotham, "has been and will continue to be assured funding for veterans health care.

"The VA budget goes through too many ups and downs," he said.

Last year, the government raised VA funding by about \$77 million in an effort to address the growing cost of veterans' medical care, said Gotham. But the Assured Funding for Veterans Health Care Act died in committee this year.

"Funding is more important now than what is has been," said Gotham. He said it's especially critical in preparing to care for vets of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Gotham said another concern for veterans is that the California National Guard has the lowest benefits level in the country, which VVA is trying to change. He said the guard's poor benefits situation is ironic, considering that California has the largest population of veterans of any state.

"Our state could stand to pick it up a notch," he said.

When it comes to younger veterans, Penny said some of them are still in a stage of denial about any physical and mental problems they may have as a result of their service.

Their issues of denial, Penny said, may have more to do with their youth; many will seek help later.

Younger veterans' denial differs from that suffered by Vietnam vets in an important respect, said Penny. Vietnam vets didn't reach out for help "because they weren't accepted as veterans back then."

Even today, that stigma seems to haunt Vietnam veterans. Gotham notes that while he has contact with many Vietnam veterans, a lot of them are reluctant when committing to joining groups like VVA.

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