



VETS HELPING VETS SINCE 1974

Inside Swords

SWORDS TO PLOWSHARES NEWSLETTER

FALL — 2022





PHOTO: Swords to Plowshares staff

A MESSAGE FROM
MICHAEL BLECKER

DEAR SUPPORTERS AND COLLEAGUES,

I hope this message finds you healthy and well. As we move forward into the fall and winter months, Swords to Plowshares calls upon our supporters, friends, and sponsors to do their part to help provide necessary care to veterans in crisis. This summer, we increased in-person activities and saw an improvement in wellbeing among our housing residents and programming participants. We anticipate a resurgence of all in-person events and services as the Bay Area progresses past the pandemic.

Throughout this newsletter, you will read about the targeted ways we are advocating for highly acute veterans in the San Francisco Bay Area. The aging veteran population is the largest group we serve and the largest cohort of veterans. Their urgent needs are finally garnering the attention of state and federal decisionmakers. We are excited and honored to be an integral voice advocating for the needs of aging veterans and contributing to the program designs that will give them stability, dignity, and wellness in their final years.

We are proud to announce the long-awaited opening of elevator operation at the Veterans Academy, our housing site in the Presidio. The site's two buildings underwent a rehabilitation project that began in 2018 with the specific intention to make the older structures accessible for all veterans who call them home. These life-changing installations have immediately alleviated daily struggles for mobility that many of the residents had to endure. The Swords community sends our gratitude to all who played a part in financing the elevators and advocating for their installation.

I look forward to expanding our community and reconnecting with longstanding partners as we push forward with new supportive initiatives for the veterans we serve. Thank you for investing in our mission.

MICHAEL BLECKER,
Executive Director
Vietnam Combat Infantry
U.S. Army 1967-1970

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Expanding care for aging veterans

PHOTO: Edwin M. Lee Apartments veteran resident

Swords to Plowshares is proud to be at the forefront of a new California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet) initiative called Veterans Support to Self-Reliance (VSSR) Pilot Program. We have been an active participant in designing how the \$25 million that Governor Newsom set aside in the approved 2021 budget will be used to better serve aging veterans in the state of California. The VSSR program grew out of Swords’ advocacy to provide a higher level of on-site supportive services for veterans aged 55 and over who reside in permanent supportive housing (PSH) sites.

In California, veterans aged 55 years and older represent about 69% of the veteran population (1.18 million veterans), and among them, 25% are over 75 years old. Veterans who have experienced chronic homelessness and who live with multiple mental and physical disabilities—like the ones we serve at Swords—tend to fare much worse than their civilian peers. Expedited frailty, depression, and chronic

disease are often the consequence of unresolved, compounded traumatic experiences. It is no surprise that many older veterans need in-home support to help with habitability, peer specialists to encourage them to engage in mental health care, and geriatric social workers to identify behavioral issues related to early onset dementia or similar cognitive issues.

As we design, implement, and evaluate this important three-year VSSR pilot in partnership with CalVet, we hope to create a model that significantly enhances supportive services within the construct of Housing First and evidence-based practices—not just for the veterans who call Swords home, but also for other similar populations of California veterans. We anticipate this pilot will contribute to helping highly acute veterans age in place and enjoy the stable and thriving quality of life that they deserve.

PACT Act is enacted

In August, the PACT Act, or the Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act, passed through Congress and was signed by President Biden. This important legislation, the biggest expansion of VA health care in decades, provides comprehensive health care coverage and life-saving benefits to veterans exposed to burn pits and other toxic substances.

For years, veterans have been fighting for VA health care related to their exposure to toxic burn pits while serving in the military. The PACT Act will expand health care eligibility, improve the toxic exposure presumption process and establishment of service connection for toxic-exposed veterans, build out research collaboration between the Department of Defense and VA to identify hazards associated with toxic exposures, expand disability compensation and care issues for Persian Gulf War veterans, and broaden Agent Orange presumption to cover veterans who served in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Guam, or American Samoa during certain time periods.

As the impacts of this newly passed law remain to be seen, we are anticipating a higher influx of veterans pursuing new legal claims. The PACT Act is a significant and necessary step forward, and time will tell how the VA will handle providing care to veterans in need of life-saving assistance.



For more information on Environmental Exposure Illness, visit www.swords-to-plowshares.com/toolbox.vet.

Elevators are finally running at Veterans Academy housing site, soon to be the “Jon W. Paulson Veterans Community”

Everything is looking great. People can go wherever, whenever they want.



It's changed lives.

“It’s about time!” exclaimed Brittany Mares, a long-time property manager at the Veterans Academy supportive housing in the Presidio, home to 108 formerly homeless veterans. The installation of elevators in the two buildings was part of a larger effort to renovate the old barracks and eventually rededicate the site as the Jon W. Paulson Veterans Community, in memory of our dearly departed supporter and advocate.

In 2018, we began rehabilitating the buildings – new windows, flooring, appliances, and much more. The installation of the elevators was a significant financial undertaking for us, but we were committed to providing the much-needed improvement for our rapidly aging residents. The process to install elevators has been met with more obstacles than we could have ever imagined. First, the ground was not stable enough for elevators, adding more than \$1M to the budget and delaying us more than a year. Then COVID interrupted all work for months on end. When work finally resumed we were met with more delays from manufacturers that couldn’t deliver parts. Then after more than a year of waiting on one single electrical part, we had to wait some more for inspection. It has been an arduous journey to say the least.

The residents and staff are overjoyed that the elevators are finally operational after all this time. The elevators represent a vital step in rehabbing the buildings, making them more accessible to the community of aging residents.

One resident, Jerry Bartlett (U.S. Navy, 1974–80), has benefitted immensely from the elevators during their first month of utilization. “They have impacted and changed my life.” Before the elevator installation, Jerry was often secluded in his apartment unit on the third floor and faced physical difficulties making it up and down the four flights of stairs. A severe back injury and body weight made it impossible for him to leave his unit and the building. A mobility specialist helped Jerry engineer a way to use crutches down the stairs, but he knew that would not be sustainable forever. With the elevators running, Jerry can come and go as he pleases on his electric scooter. “The elevators are a godsend. I don’t have to use my crutches and I don’t have to ask for help... everything is looking great. People can go wherever, whenever they want. It’s changed lives,” says Jerry.

“It’s great to see more people, more often, enjoying our common areas,” details Brittany. “They’re able to join the community without it being a strain on their body.” We could not have reached this milestone without the support of our donors and partners who share our goal to provide permanent supportive housing to aging veterans and veterans with mobility challenges. Now that the elevators are done, we look forward to hosting a ceremony with our supporters in 2023 to finally rededicate the site as the Jon W. Paulson Veterans Community.

PHOTO: Jerry Bartlett, veteran resident



Showing
up with

This June marked the return of the San Francisco Pride Parade, and Swords to Plowshares staff, family, and friends took to the streets in celebration of LGBTQ+ Pride Month. The day was a joyous one. We shared information with the crowd about how our work specifically impacts LGBTQ+ veterans while handing out 4,000 festive rainbow bandanas with the Swords logo.

Last year marked the 10-year anniversary of the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, and with that, the VA announced a goal to update regulations for processes that have historically hindered LGBTQ+ veterans from upgrading dishonorable discharge status and receiving VA healthcare. This gave hope to many veterans who need care and deserve



recognition for the injustices they experienced due to their sexual orientation. Unfortunately, there has been no specific guidance or follow-up since the statement was made in October. The veterans we serve continue to face obstacles and poor reception from VA resources.

As the Bay Area continues to adjust and re-open after two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, we amplify our commitment to serve all veterans. Our Legal Unit is ready to provide support and connect LGBTQ+ veterans with the services they need to access the benefits they deserve. There is still important work to be done, and we are proud to continue advocating for the rights and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ veterans.

PHOTOS: Swords to Plowshares staff and Pride parade participants





Celebrating our community

Swords to Plowshares' staff members and veteran clients have been embracing community building activities, which we are grateful to do this year after the devastating impacts the COVID-19 pandemic brought upon our community. While staying vigilant about the impact of the virus, we have benefitted from the return of in-person gatherings and opportunities.

This summer began with our annual Tenant Appreciation Lunch at the Veterans Academy in the Presidio, where Executive Director, Michael Blecker, addressed veterans from all 8 of our housing sites, updating them on organization news and checking in with residential inquiries. A pineapple soft serve machine was a hit with all the veterans, who enjoyed the communal meal and renewed a sense of camaraderie with their peers. Events like these disrupt feelings of isolation that many of our veterans experience and strengthen the bond between housing residents and staff.

In August, over 100 staff members attended our summer staff party at ParkLab in San Francisco. We enjoyed our first day out of the office together since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Staff across our organization connected in person, some for the first time. Taking a day to celebrate the work each of our departments does to support Bay Area veterans boosts motivation and encourages collaboration. We look forward to more team bonding in the future and appreciate each person involved in our mission to improve the lives of veterans in need.

PHOTOS: Swords to Plowshares staff

Swords to Plowshares attends CalVet Leadership Summit

This year, CalVet aims to tackle the three most significant issues facing veterans today in California: Housing, Mental Health, and Aging Veterans. These topics were front and center at the annual CalVet Leadership Summit this September.

Our priorities have never been more aligned as Swords to Plowshares has projects in place to address these same three critical issues. This year, CalVet will work in partnership with community organizations like Swords to launch new programming that aims to improve aging veterans' health and housing. The emphasis will be on two programs: California Veterans Health Initiative, which will add a layer of community-based mental healthcare, and the Veterans Support for Self-Reliance program that will enhance on-site supportive services for senior veterans living in permanent supportive housing settings. While housing resources remain inadequate and the housing affordability crisis continues in California, these two programs target the supportive services needs of homeless and highly acute veterans.

We are hopeful for what is to come this year to begin addressing these urgent needs. Unfortunately, there are no long-term plans to permanently adopt either of these critically needed programs. One-time funding and programming are inadequate. Swords to Plowshares is committed to doing its part to advocate for the resources and support needed to tackle mental health, homelessness, and the age-related needs of senior veterans with long-term solutions. We look forward to keeping our supporters up to date on how these three critical issues are being addressed.



PHOTO: Amy Fairweather, Director of Policy speaking at a panel

PowerPathway opportunity provides **career stability** for veterans



On June 10th, we congratulated the newest cohort of PG&E PowerPathway graduates. The graduation ceremony celebrated 15 veterans who completed the 10-week “Entry to Gas Pipeline Inspector” program. Swords to Plowshares has been a proud collaborator with this program and has seen veterans who came to us with employment concerns flourish in their new career paths. This group was the 4th cohort of veterans to graduate thanks to assistance from Swords to Plowshares. Jesse Vukelic was elected as class Valedictorian, and Jobs for Vets’ Program Manager, Akta Patel, was elected as the honorary graduate.

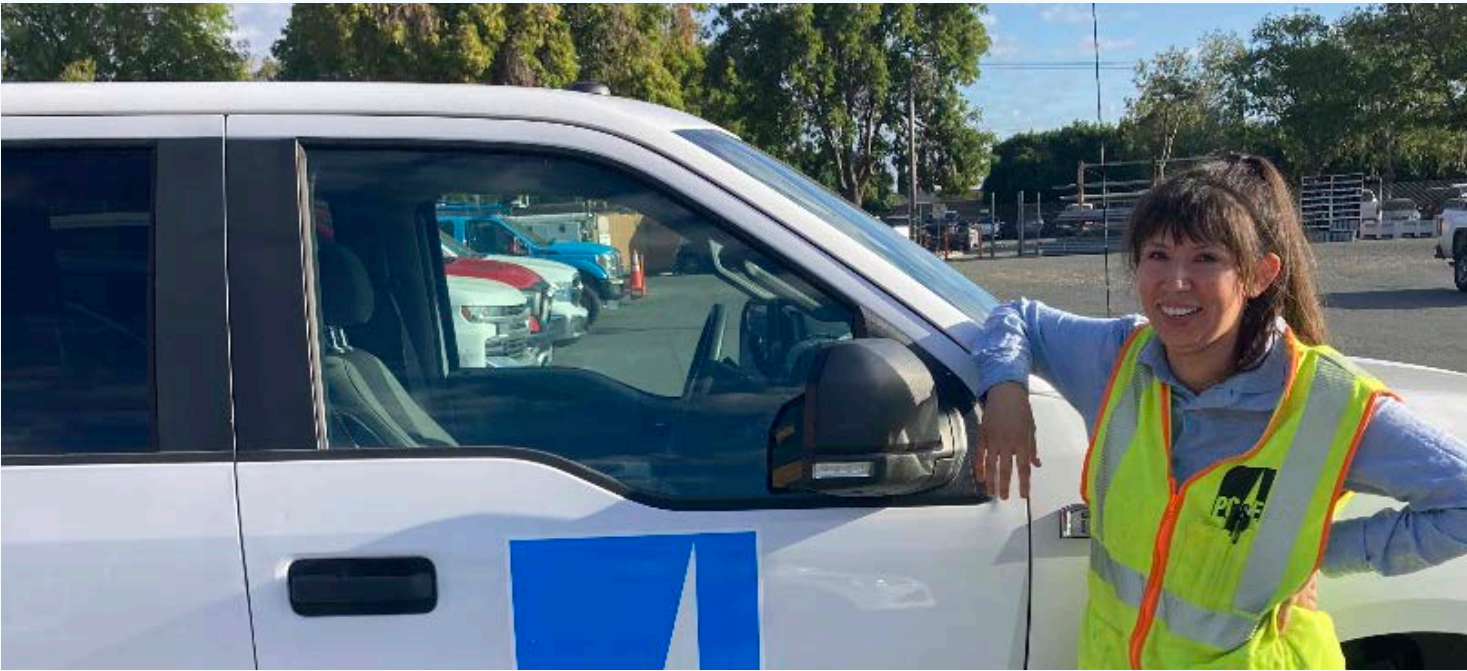


Interested veterans go through a screening process to identify their individual needs and goals before being admitted to the program. PG&E has developed a 3-year line of progression for veteran graduates to build a new career path. Upon graduation, they start new employment roles as Pre-Utility Inspectors and will eventually become certified Utility Construction Inspectors. This guaranteed career growth allows previously financially insecure veterans to gain stability.

PHOTOS: PG&E PowerPathway program participants attending a workshop

Meet Jessie Kohgadai

VETERAN SPOTLIGHT



Jessie Kohgadai, a veteran of the U.S. Navy Reserve, gained interest in welding during her service as a hull maintenance technician. Jessie served in the military during the pandemic, and when she returned to civilian life, she felt lost trying to find reliable employment. After months of working small temporary jobs, Jessie connected with Swords for career guidance and was able to be admitted into the PG&E PowerPathways program.

When the pandemic began, Jessie and her husband were newlyweds experiencing a lot of personal changes. They had to make more adjustments when she was given mobilization orders in July of 2020. She reported to Washington state and served there for 10 months. After her orders were completed in May 2021, Jessie came back to the Bay Area and was left to

figure out her next steps. With a new community of veteran supporters behind her, Jessie was able to explore her passion for welding in a setting that understood her needs.

Jessie, the only woman in her graduating class, successfully completed the 10-week “Entry to Gas Pipeline Inspector” program in her hometown of Winters, CA in June 2022. Jessie shares, “In the military, women are underrepresented. Not only do I want more veterans doing this kind of work, **but I want more women to be inspired.**” Jessie now works as a Pre-Utility Inspector in East Contra Costa County and is regaining financial stability with guaranteed career growth within the utility industry. Jessie and her husband are aiming to purchase their first home, which seemed like a far-out goal less than a year ago.

PHOTO: Jessie posing with her PG&E truck

Welcoming corporate partnership



PHOTOS: Swords to Plowshares staff with Twitter volunteers and vet resident from Edwin M. Lee Apartments

This year, we saw the return of in-person volunteer events. While welcoming back old corporate partners, we are also making new connections with organizations that support our mission. As our community prepares for the winter months, our programming benefits from the generosity of committed partners.

We appreciated the support of Optum, which donated to the community pantry located at Veterans Commons, our housing site on Otis Street, to provide veteran residents with nonperishable food items and household cleaning products. We were elated to re-start our breakfast service program with Twitter in September; Twitter provided funds and brought a friendly team of volunteers to cook the meal and serve veteran residents. Breakfast meal service across our various housing sites was a successful program that had to pause during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been missed



by our residents and staff alike, and its return was an exciting day for both Twitter and Swords to Plowshares.

One of the few volunteer opportunities we continue to offer during the pandemic is organizing hygiene kit assembly. As many unsheltered veterans still face health disparities, we are always in need of essential care items. We appreciated the generosity of companies like Genentech, Activision, and Cloudera, which organized and donated kits throughout the year.



As corporate philanthropic engagement opportunities are regaining momentum, we highly encourage corporate partners to reach out with volunteer interests. Please visit our website to fill out an interest form to get started.

STAY CONNECTED

OUR OFFICES

ADMINISTRATIVE

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San Francisco, CA 94103

EAST BAY SERVICE CENTER

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26TH ANNUAL

Veterans Day Concert & Reception

November 9, 2022



Learn more: swords-to-plowshares.org/vdd