

# VOICE OF THE VETERAN

VA GREATER LOS ANGELES HEALTHCARE SYSTEM



Need a Ride to the Clinic?  
**DIAL A DRIVER!**

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## Cover Story

# Need a Ride to the Clinic? **DIAL A DRIVER!**

In partnership with VA Greater Los Angeles (VA GLA), the Central Coast Volunteer Veteran Shuttle (CCVVS) provides Veterans with transportation to and from their scheduled appointments at VA GLA's Santa Maria and San Luis Obispo Clinics. CCVVS drivers are volunteers, some who are Veterans themselves and who receive their care at VA GLA, who have been driving our Veterans to their medical appointments since December 2012.

Veterans can request a ride through their medical provider at least five days before their scheduled appointment. The drivers pick up Veterans from their homes, bring them to their appointments, and take them home afterwards. There are currently more than 30 volunteer drivers, and they have racked up a lot of miles and smiles over the past two years, averaging 3,200 miles of round trips for approximately 100 Veterans each month. In 2013, CCVVS drivers transported 1,024 Veterans, over an area extending from Paso Robles to Solvang, who may not have otherwise been able to get to their appointments.

Driver Bob Prophet said Veterans have told him "if it were not for the shuttle they would have to cancel appointments or drop out of the VA healthcare [system]." Mr. Prophet said that is the reason he volunteers to drive. "There is a real need and it is my feeling I am helping assist where and when needed." These drivers are critical in helping



to connect Veterans who have no other means of transportation with VA services. “The reason I [drive] is that these people need help, and they have earned it,” said driver Bob Dignan. “It makes it easier and more practical for them to schedule and get to their appointments for the services they need.”

“I am a Vietnam Veteran and being a volunteer gives me the opportunity to meet new people, visit different parts of my community, a feeling of accomplishment, and a deep sense of pride knowing that I am providing a valuable service for our Veterans,” driver Roger Welt said.

Driver John Bragg, who also gets his care at the Santa Maria Clinic, agreed. “They are very thankful for their ride as many are too old to drive or have medical, mental, or homeless issues and need and deserve [VA] services.” VA GLA covers the cost of fueling and maintaining the seven vans it currently has in its fleet. The ride itself is free to Veterans, but the social and emotional benefits to both patients and drivers are priceless.

Driver Francis Rivinus said he enjoys the social interactions with his passengers. “I get to meet folks that I probably wouldn’t get to know otherwise,” he said. Mr. Bragg agreed, “I have picked up all kinds of Vets and every one of them had a great story to tell.” Some of those stories are about how much they value the van service. “I think it is a wonderful program and offers a small, concrete way that I can say ‘thank you’ to those who have given much,” Mr. Rivinus said. Mr. Dignan agreed, “It is definitely worthwhile, because I can see that the Vets appreciate it.” This is really so much more than just a transportation service. “It’s a wonderful feeling knowing I am making a difference in someone else’s life,” Mr. Welt said. “For me it’s an honor to [drive].”

Would you like to get involved? We need many more drivers and dispatchers. We have a van to transport local Veterans to the Santa Barbara Clinic, but need drivers to start this service. Drivers need to complete orientation, a physical and TB test, a background check, and have a current driver’s license. For more information on volunteering as a driver or to request a ride, please call Larry Foster in Voluntary Service at (805) 354-6004.

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# A Prescription for a Faster Service-Connected Disability Rating: The Fully Developed Claim

Filing a claim for a service-connected disability rating can sometimes be a lengthy process, but there's a faster way to file and get a decision on your claim: the Fully Developed Claim (FDC).

The FDC program can expedite your claim because you help the VA help you. When you file a FDC with the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), you are in control of what the VBA reviews in making a decision on your disability rating because you provide all relevant documents in support of your claim. The VBA can make a decision faster because it saves time the VBA would have to spend to gather all this information. For example, it takes an average of 300 days for the VBA to receive records from the National Guard and Reserves. It is easy to file a FDC online, and GLA has Veteran Service Officers (VSOs) who can help you through the process.

You can file a FDC for an injury, disability, or condition you believe occurred or was aggravated by military service, or for a condition caused or aggravated by an existing service-related condition. To file a FDC, you collect all records and documents relevant to your disability claim, such as military service and private medical records, Social Security disability benefits, and statements from people who witnessed the event causing the disability or how the disability symptoms affect you.

Medical evidence is recorded on Disability Benefit Questionnaires (DBQs). Your private providers, if any, should complete a DBQ for you relevant to the disability you are claiming. DBQs could help the VBA reach a decision faster because they provide medical information that is directly relevant to determining a disability rating. Any private doctor can complete the relevant DBQ for you. DBQs are available here: [http://benefits.va.gov/COMPENSATION/dbq\\_ListByDBQFormName.asp](http://benefits.va.gov/COMPENSATION/dbq_ListByDBQFormName.asp).

You then scan and upload all the documents you believe are relevant to your claim through the eBenefits online system (VSOs can help you with this), and certify that what you submit is all the evidence for your claim. Once you initiate your FDC, you have one year to submit all of your evidence and complete it. If the VBA approves your claim, you will be paid from the date you initiated your claim.

There is no risk in filing a FDC. If the VBA finds that additional exams are needed to make a decision on your disability, you remain in the FDC process and the VBA will schedule you for the exam either with the Veterans Health Administration, such as at GLA, or with a contracted community clinic. If you submit additional information from private doctors or witness statements after certifying that there was no other evidence for your claim, then your claim is simply moved from the FDC fast-track to the traditional claim processing process so the VBA can review the information.

## The Steps:

Personal  
Information

Informative  
Material

Service  
Information

Military  
Pay

Disability  
Records

Treatment  
Records

For a checklist of what evidence to include in your FDC, go to this website: <http://www.benefits.va.gov/FDC/checklist.asp>.

For step by step instructions on the FDC process, go to this website: <http://www.benefits.va.gov/fdc/walkthrough.asp>.

To begin your FDC, log in or register at <http://www.ebenefits.va.gov>. Here you can appoint an accredited VSO to help you initiate your claim, gather the required medical records and evidence, and submit your claim. If you prefer to file your FDC by paper, complete VA Form 21-526EZ and visit your local VSO to help you prepare and submit your claim.

## Documents to include in your FDC:

- All relevant military medical and personnel records, including National Guard or Reserves; you can request these from your branch of Service
- All relevant private medical records
- Statements from people who witnessed the event causing the disability or how the disability symptoms affect you, if applicable
- Social Security benefits for the condition you are claiming, if applicable

## VA Forms to submit with your FDC:

- For disability compensation claims, submit VA Form 21-526EZ: Fully Developed Claim (Compensation).
- For Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) claims, also submit VA Form 21-0781: Statement in Support of Claim for Service Connection for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- For PTSD claims based on personal assault (such as military sexual trauma), also submit VA Form 21-0781a: Statement in Support of Claim for Service Connection for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Secondary to Personal Assault.
- For Individual Unemployability claims, also submit VA Form 21-8940: Veteran's Application for Increased Compensation Based on Unemployability, and VA Form 21-4192: Request for Employment Information in Connection with Claim for Disability Benefits.

Direct  
Response

Special  
Circumstances

Upload  
Documents

Error  
Check

Final  
Review

# A Day in the Life of Atticus

**Woof!** I'm Atticus, Jim Hogan's guide dog. It is 5:30am and he is up getting dressed! Oh boy...early breakfast! We are gonna go somewhere. Jim and I get up really early when we need to go to the Sepulveda Clinic. The Access Van comes to pick us up at 6:30am and then we arrive at Sepulveda by 7:30am. This is how our day begins.

Jim, my Dad, is a blind Veteran who has been volunteering for over 13 years for the VA and the Vision Impairment Service Team (VIST). He has had me by his side for the past 9 years. Over the years I have learned my way around the Sepulveda Clinic as well as the Downtown and the West LA campus. Jim is really my kind of guy: he works for food too!

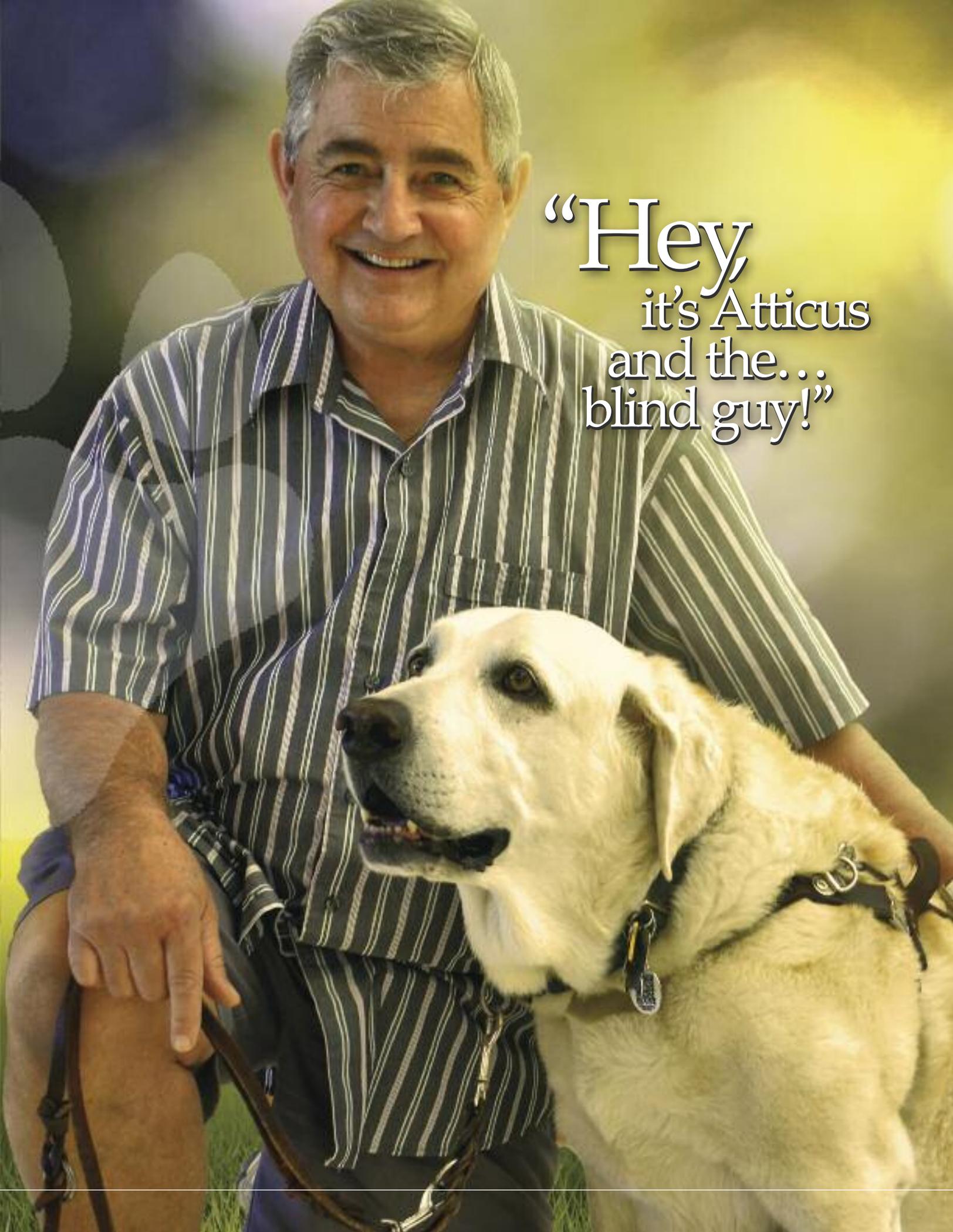
There are always lots of people who admire me as we walk down the halls and through the common areas. I just wish they would not try to reach out and pet or distract me. Because if I pay attention to them, Jim could get hurt.



I love to be at the VA, especially when I can show Veterans how much a service dog could help them. It did take me over 18 months to get the training to be a service guide dog. I also really like visiting the Nursing Home and Hospice Care Unit. When Dad gives me the "OK" command, I can start giving some of my good Lab loving to those lonely Vets who miss their pets so much. I think they get as much out of my visits as I do, especially when I see them smile.

And then there are the nurses and staff who know me. Sometimes one of them will bring a treat for me, but they know that I am not allowed to take anything from them, so they hand it to Dad and he gives it to me. That is all part of my training as a good service dog. I also never bark, make noise, or jump on people. Usually when I am in a room, I work "under cover." People are surprised when Dad gets up and a big dog pops out from under the table or chair. They never realized that I was in the room. Just doing my job!

You know, I am really proud to be working for Jim. People think I am really special and call out, "Hey, it's Atticus and the...blind guy!" But to me Jim is the special one because he takes such good care of me. I get fed, groomed, and even get my teeth brushed. My toy box is full and at home we get plenty of play time. I give Jim a lot of independence and we get to travel. We have been all over the world and met some pretty important people. Just between you and me—Betty White is my favorite girl of all time. I wouldn't let Jim wash my face for weeks after she kissed me!



“Hey,  
it’s Atticus  
and the...  
blind guy!”

# CALL CENTER COOL



You may have noticed something different when you call GLA these days—a new Call Center to help answer many of your questions, refill your medications, schedule your appointments, and pass along messages to your providers. The new Call Center gives GLA new technology, software, and staff, and is one phase in the larger plan to improve our services to you. Each of our facilities had different telephone technology, and the transition to the new system takes time. In the first phase, the Call Center covers the West LA and Sepulveda Clinics, and Primary Care and Pharmacy services. The next phase will include all the primary care clinics at West LA, the Los Angeles Ambulatory Care Clinic, Bakersfield, and Santa Maria. Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo and the rest of the West LA Clinics will come next.

**“A live person actually answered the phone! That’s great!”**

Who are the folks on the other end of the line? Jeff Niles is the Manager, and a proud U.S. Veteran. Jeff is still serving in the Army National Guard, and used to be a Medical Support Assistant Supervisor at West LA, so he knows about listening to our Veterans. Jeff believes in feedback from our Veterans, and has set up a special phone line so he can find out about any problems and get them fixed. Many of the other Call Center staff are also Veterans. One of them is Darrel Minter, a U.S. Air Force Veteran, who gets his healthcare at the VA as well. Darrel comes to us from Nellis Air Force Base, where he was a Communications Specialist in charge of phone operators and radar, and also helped with the consolidation of the AFB and VA hospitals at the time.

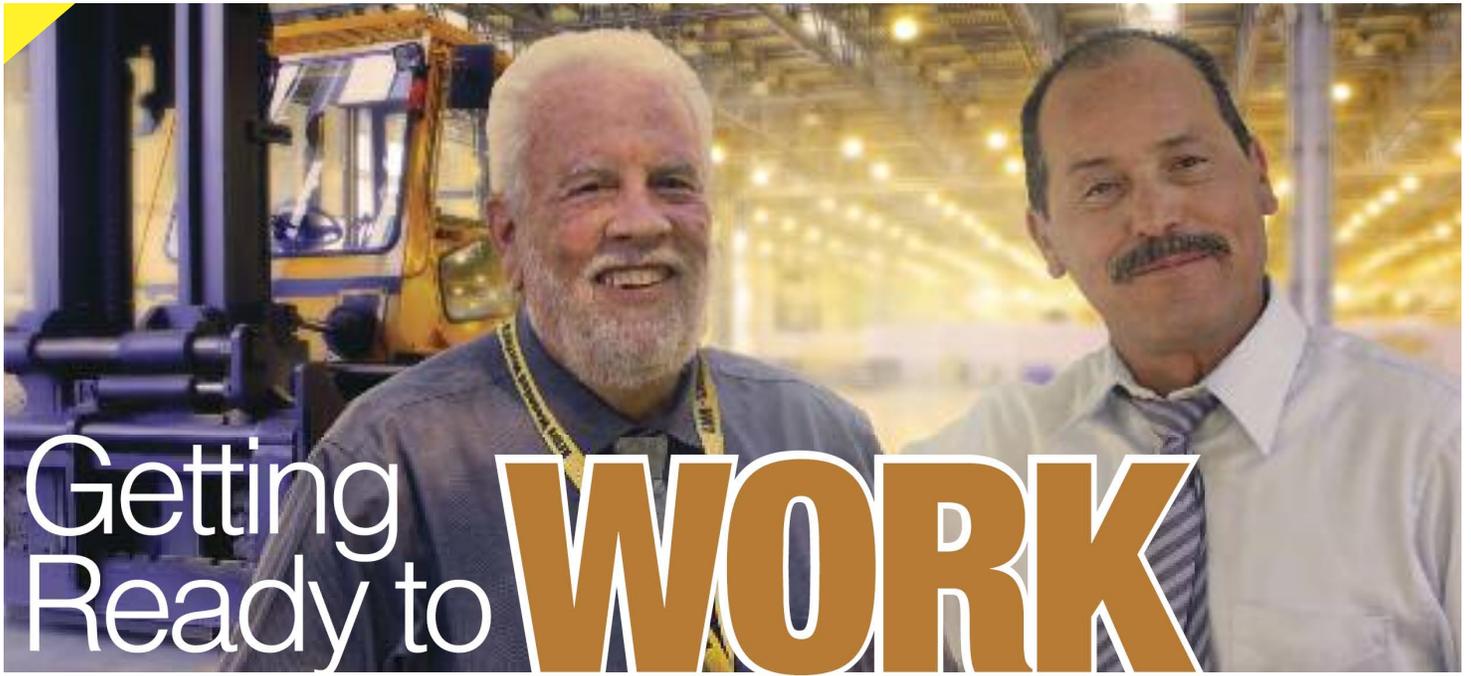
The staff who work the Call Center are all highly

trained Medical Support Assistants, so being an operator is just one feature of their jobs. They can make primary care appointment for callers, complete routine Pharmacy refills, and even help track where the refill process is in the system. They can also connect callers with the Nurse Advice Line. As Darrel said, “It’s great that we can exceed Veterans’ expectations; when we help folks that really need us, it’s great to be able to really come through for them.” Many Veterans comment, “A live person actually answered the phone! That’s great!”

What are the results so far? The technology gives us statistics, so the Call Center can measure how they are doing. Those statistics are looking good. With the old system, we had over a 40% abandonment rate (that means that many of our callers gave up on waiting and hung up). Now that rate is down to about seven percent, a remarkable change. That means that we are getting down to the private sector level, which is five percent. How fast does the Call Center staff answer? We know that as well: on average, 32 seconds. In the private sector, below 30 seconds is considered very good. We are close! The Call Center now handles over 15,000 calls per week, and that workload will go up quickly as all the other sites at GLA are added.

Jeff Niles’ goal for the Call Center is to get all of GLA “online”, for the Call Center to make things as easy as possible, and for our Veterans to experience first-class customer service as a result.

We encourage you to give us your feedback on the Call Center. Just ask the Call Center staff to connect you to the Customer Feedback Line at the end of your call. The Toll Free Number for the GLA Call Center is (800) 251-7295. We’re waiting to assist you!



# Getting Ready to **WORK**

One of the most pressing needs right now for Veterans is finding work. We've just started to recover from the most disastrous downturn in the economy since the Great Depression, and finding jobs has been difficult for everyone. Fortunately, at the VA West Los Angeles, we have the good fortune of hosting a marvelous seminar series on how to prepare for the job market, and it is run by a Veteran. Bill Pike, volunteer at the VA for the last four years, decided that it was time to give back to Veterans, and he's been leading the Vocational Directions Forum in the Haven (Salvation Army) ever since.

"I sort of backed into it," said Bill. After serving in Vietnam with U.S. Army, Bill wrote technical manuals and newsletters, worked in Human Resources, recruited people for positions, and helped them with resumes. Then he retired.

One day a Physical Therapist asked him to help her with her resume and get ready for her interview at the VA. She got the job, and asked Bill to consider volunteering to help Veterans who had the same need. That's when Bill came to Voluntary Service, and found his way to holding the ses-

sions at the Haven. "I introduce myself to Veterans as a combat Veteran," he said. "We have that common bond, and we understand each other."

What's covered in the Forum? How to do a targeted resume, how to interview well, how to handle questions that are challenging, how to translate military experience into current job skills that are needed in the job market.

One person who really benefitted from the Forum is Salvador Perez, who is now happily employed. "Bill Pike changed my life," he said. "I hadn't had a job for 10-15 years, and Bill taught me how to talk, how to dress, what to look for, how to interview. I went to Farmer John to interview for a job and they hired me on the spot." Salvador was a tank operator in the Army, and his new job as a forklift operator feels familiar. He advises Veterans who are truly serious about getting work to attend Bill's Forum and use the techniques and lessons Bill teaches. "I thought I knew everything when I went to the Dom, but I didn't. He taught me. All Veterans should open their eyes and ears and just listen to Bill."

If you would like to contact Bill Pike, please write him at [bill@mywritingresources.com](mailto:bill@mywritingresources.com).

*“I was in a hole  
and I couldn’t get out.”*

# RISING UP

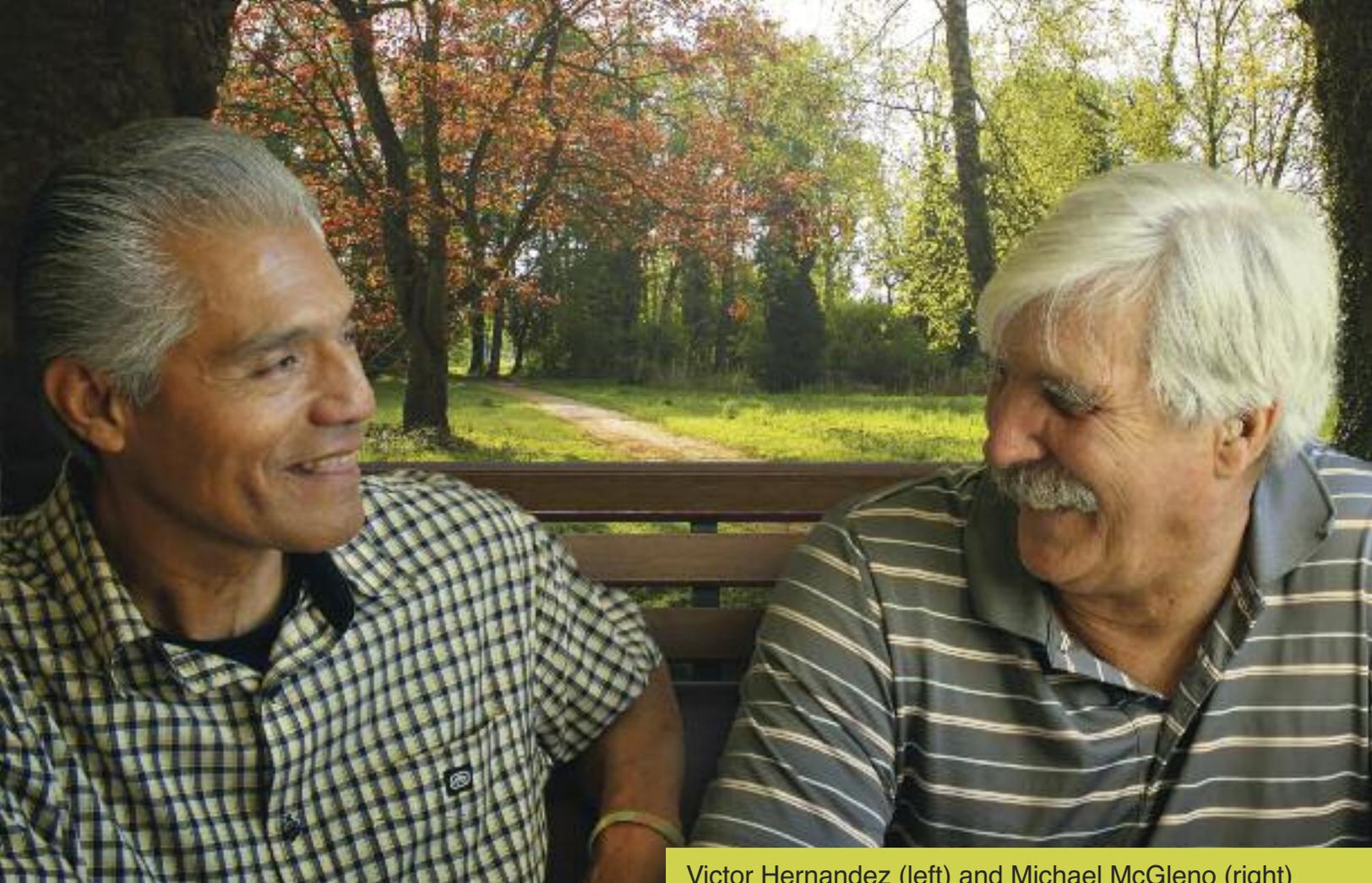
**The** Integrative Restoration Program has touched two Veterans recently, and Voice of the Veteran sat down for an interview. Victor Hernandez and Michael McGleno both faced extreme difficulties in life, but have turned everything around and found new joys and a relish for life. Here’s what they said:

Victor Hernandez served in Vietnam in the Marine Corps, and came home with PTSD, although at the time he didn’t know it. He was only 18 when he went in, and came home with substance abuse and anger management problems. “It ruined my life,” he said, and he worked at many different jobs, trying to function but not doing well. Then, seven years ago, a fellow Marine, Luis Rivera from the Military Order of the Purple Heart, told him, “Hey, you really need help; it’s time to get it.” Luis helped Victor apply for a higher service-connected disability, and healthcare at VA.

“At first my doctor wanted me to take medications to control my PTSD symptoms, but I didn’t want to go on meds,” Victor said. Then he got referred to the Integrative Restoration Program, which

combines meditation, yoga, and healing touch. “I’ve been doing this stuff for two years, and I’m totally off medications, don’t touch alcohol, and I feel more peace than ever. Dealing with PTSD is a full time job, and I am at the Sepulveda Clinic constantly, doing my classes and practicing. I love the staff here. They are totally dedicated and believe in what they are doing. So do I.”

These days you will find Victor focusing on the positives, enjoying his family, taking walks on the beach, and working on his part-time networking business. “Another benefit of all this is that I can now socialize,” he said. “Before, I just kept to myself, I was a real loner. But now I am feeling much more comfortable, I get out and I make contacts. Things are looking good.”



Victor Hernandez (left) and Michael McGleno (right)

Michael McGleno weathered several bad relationships, and fortunately ended up in the Navy. He did very well there, but finally felt it was time to get back to civilian life and went into real estate. He was doing well in business, but continued to have real problems in his personal life. “My relationship was bad, and all the good things in my life

*“My relationship was bad,  
and all the good things  
in my life went away.”*

went away.” The problems pushed him into depression, where he felt “just squished by the bad stuff.” He finally got Medicare, remembered his VA benefits, and came for treatment. “I had problems from head to toe, and came to the VA 100+ times to see the doctors. I was in a hole and I couldn’t get out.” His worries were so overwhelming that he couldn’t sleep, and didn’t know how to turn off the

worry and rest, so he got sleep deprivation. Then he got into the Integrative Restoration Program.

Now that he’s doing yoga and meditation, Michael says, “my life has totally changed. I am off medications completely, and the Healing Touch Program is miraculous.” All his aches and pains gradually disappeared, and he started feeling social again, so much that he’s hoping to get back to work. “Life is a wonderful, beautiful experience. My yoga class is like a family, and the energy in the room is so positive. I feel like it’s magic, and I want all Veterans to have this feeling.”

If you are interested in Integrative Medicine, please contact your Primary Care Provider.

**Thanks for sharing,**  
Victor and Michael.

**Joe Grassman**, GLA patient and volunteer on the Patient Advisory Council, shares more of his top tips for the best experience at GLA—stay tuned for more tips in future editions!

CUP O' JOE



PREMIUM  
C.O.F.F.E.E.  
COLLECTION

• Try it now! •

## The Rewards of Volunteering

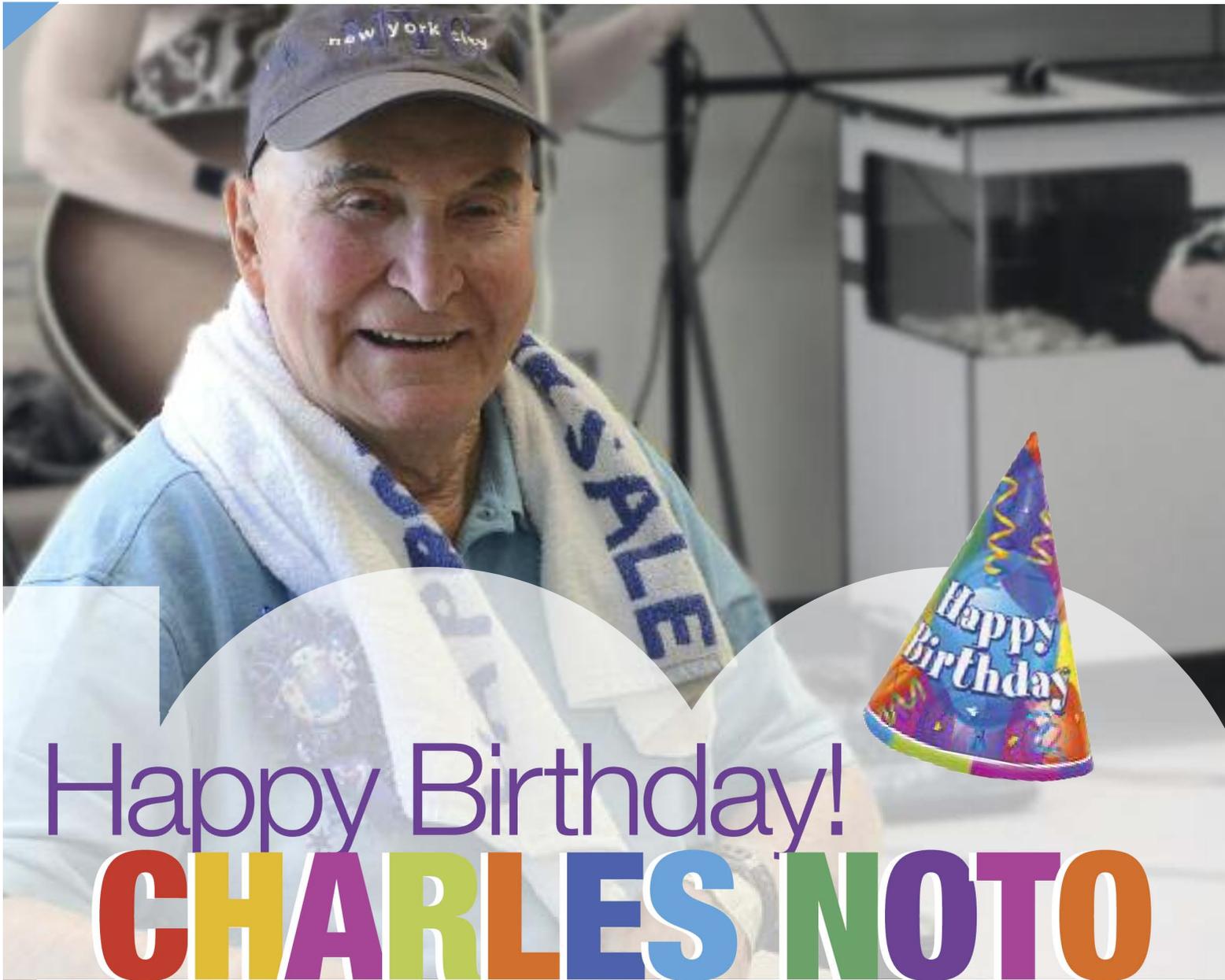
One of my volunteer jobs at the Sepulveda Clinic is being on the Patient Advisory Council, which is a group of Veterans that get together each month to try to improve the VA.

About four years ago Dr. Lisa Rubenstein asked some of the Patient Advisory Council members to serve on the Sepulveda Quality Council. Al Ciplickas and I volunteered to serve. The Quality Council is made up of doctors, nurses, and administrators from the Sepulveda Clinic that are committed to improving the quality of service to Veterans.

I have been well received as a volunteer on these Councils, and over the years they have proven to me that GLA wants Veterans' input in their decisions. I just wanted all of you Veterans to know that there are doctors, nurses, and administrators looking out for you.

—Joe

**P.S.** I sent an e-mail to Bob McDonald, the new Secretary of the VA, and guess what? He wrote me right back –  
WOW!



Happy Birthday!

**CHARLES NOTO**

**M**r. Charles Noto is a WWII Veteran. He is a resident of the VA West Los Angeles Healthcare System-Community Living Center (CLC) for the past 18 months, and he turned 100 years young on June 20, 2014. There was birthday cake, colorful balloons, signs on the walls, favors everywhere and a band that sang, "Charles, you ROCK!" He rolled into the room to shouts of "Happy Birthday!" His only living nearby relative, his niece, worked with staff members to coordinate the event. He was extremely taken aback, it seemed, with all the excitement.

He received a commemorative centennial birthday certificate, his name added into the CLC-Centennial Hall of Fame plaque, a beautiful centennial quilt donated by Voluntary Services and Quilts of Valor organization, and many more presents. "When a person has been fortunate to celebrate this centennial event, we must acknowledge and give respect to all the years and accomplishments that he must have experienced over the past 100 years," Sarah El Hage, Recreation Therapy Specialist, said in her speech to commemorate Charles' birthday. "You are an inspiration to all of us!"

# PATIENT TOWNHALLS

## at GLA

**VA** Secretary Robert McDonald is quickly putting many mechanisms in place to make sure that Veterans get a chance to give feedback in their healthcare system. One way he accomplished this was to mandate that all VA Medical Centers provide a Patient Townhall so that Veterans could point out problems and make comments. VA Greater Los Angeles is an extremely large system, so one Townhall would not get the job done. Instead, GLA held SEVEN Townhalls.

The format was simple: VA Executive staff greeted the Veterans with an introduction to the mission for the day, and some discussion of recent efforts to improve healthcare. Then the meeting went to “open mike” format and Veterans individually brought up concerns, issues, and support for VA. Also present were Robert McKendrick, the Director for the VA Regional Office of the Veterans Benefits Administration, and his staff, to address topics that related to compensation, benefits and other items that VBA supports. GLA staff also dealt with individual problems on-the-spot, and with more assistance following up. Each Townhall was unique, well attended, and full of Veterans who had great ideas for improvement. Here are the trends:

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### OUTPATIENT CLINICS (Bakersfield, Santa Maria, and Oxnard)

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Of course, transportation is a key issue for our far-away Clinics. Our Veterans asked for better bus service, better communications about transport options (like the volunteer shuttle), and better coordination with the West LA inpatient facility when they needed care there. Follow-up information was a challenge for many, and each situation was tackled and resolved as best as possible. Benefits issues were also plentiful, and the VBA staff took information and worked with Veterans to get their needs addressed. The Business Office managers helped many Veterans with billing and eligibility issues.




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### MAJOR SITES (LAACC/Downtown, Sepulveda)

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Communication problems between patients and providers continued to be a major challenge. In several instances instructions were confusing or lacking for patients, and they felt they didn't know what came next. Each issue was individually addressed and new “game plans” were created for the patients with the right providers. Confusion about eligibility for Agent Orange status came up, and VBA as well as GLA staff helped arrange the right exams and explained about eligibility. Social work staff were very busy helping Veterans find housing, and deal with finances. And the Business Office staff continued to work on billing and reimbursement questions.




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## VA WEST LOS ANGELES (Inpatient facility)

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Homelessness, and provider-patient communications problems again were themes at this event. Also, the recent GAO report about the management of property at GLA was on Veterans' minds, and they spoke about it several times. Women Veterans again voiced their concerns, as well as their desire to be part of the solution.

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## OUTCOMES

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One of the most remarkable outcomes of all the sessions was Veterans' desire to participate in making their healthcare system stronger, faster, and more efficient. Many Veterans asked to

become part of the Patient Advisory Councils at the larger sites, and so many asked at Bakersfield that a new Advisory Council will be set up soon.

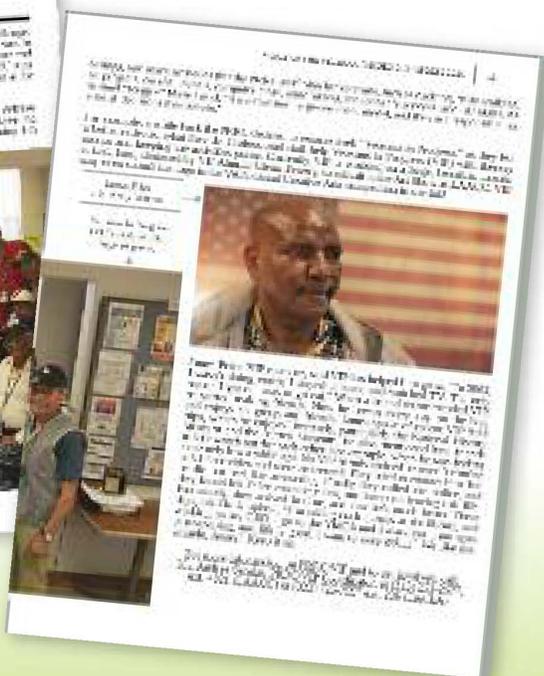
Many Veterans suggested more ideas for Veteran feedback, and so many volunteered to help out that the lists quickly became substantial. Each session yielded excellent ideas, a passion for the welfare of fellow Veterans, and a strong desire to step up and participate in the solutions to problems presented. These sessions have been so helpful that there will be more of them, quarterly, to continue the good feedback process and give GLA a chance to report out to Veterans on progress.

Well done, GLA Veterans! Keep it coming; we are listening, and acting on your needs.

# CONGRATULATIONS!

LAACC PRRC-VIP Veterans won 1st place at the 2014 National Veterans Creative Arts Show. As a result of the win, the Veterans who completed the piece (6 of them) and a staff member were invited to fly to Milwaukee, Wisconsin to participate in the festival: October 29th - November 3rd, 2014. Rosie Dominguez, LCSW (PRRC-VIP Senior Social Worker) was selected as a team leader for the event. Two Veterans from LAACC, Le

Ann Hobbs and Antonio "Tony" Martinez, traveled with Rosie to and from the Festival. Glenn Towery, who was the creator of the piece, traveled from Austin, Texas (he relocated with his spouse last October) to meet them at the festival.



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