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WCHD Veterans Program Grows to Meet Local Veterans' Needs with Advocacy, One-on-One Support

BELLINGHAM, WA — Since its inception in 2011, the Whatcom County Health Department's (WCHD) Veterans Program has continued to adapt and expand to meet the needs of veterans in Whatcom County, most recently with the addition of two accredited Veterans Service Officers who provide one-on-one support, advice, and advocacy for veterans receiving state and local benefits. With this added service, the program has helped over 200 veterans receive more than \$150,000 in veterans' benefits and create a new level of financial stability for themselves and their families.

The WCHD Veterans Program expanded in November 2018 to include Veteran Service Officer (VSO) services when Veterans Specialist, Liz Harmon-Craig, became an accredited VSO through the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). As a VSO, Harmon-Craig can prepare and send claims directly to the VA, which expedites the process for veterans who are seeking VA assistance. Harmon-Craig and WCHD Human Services Supervisor, Ann Beck, who became an accredited VSO in October 2019, are able to provide tailored help to veterans when navigating the process to receive benefits can prove challenging.

"As a VSO, I have the person's best interest in mind," says Harmon-Craig. "My job is to help get them the benefits they deserve, and that means doing everything from answering their questions to troubleshooting claims to advocating for vets at VA hearings. It can be a complicated process, but I'm here to walk them through it."

How to Receive VSO Support

VSOs are trained and accredited by the VA or other recognized organizations to provide assistance to veterans, their dependents, and survivors. Support includes not only applying for federal and state benefits, but also resources related to:

- Compensation and Pension
- Health Care
- Education and Training
- Employment
- Burial and Survivor Benefits
- Housing
- Transportation
- Military Records

VSOs assist veterans and their families by:

- Answering questions, advising, and educating veterans, family members, and groups about which benefits are available from local, state, and federal resources.



- Helping eligible vets and family members file necessary benefits claims.
- Representing individuals and presenting claims at VA hearings.

WCHD's VSOs are available Monday – Friday, 8:30am – 12:00pm and 1:30 – 4:30pm. To make an appointment with a VSO, call (360) 778-6050 or email eharmonc@co.whatcom.wa.us.

About the WCHD Veterans Program

WCHD's Veterans Program continually assesses and responds to the needs of the veteran community in Whatcom County. The program focuses on connecting veterans with existing services and community resources – like VA benefits, childcare services, educational programs, and peer support networks – and providing short-term, emergency financial assistance for items such as rent or other basic needs.

Over the years, the program has transformed to develop programming based on community input. In 2016, the program added a listserv and events calendar for veterans, after results of a survey of veterans' needs showed that veterans wanted new sources for information about veteran-specific opportunities and events.

Preliminary results from the most recent veterans' need survey, completed in October 2019, indicate that the top concerns Whatcom County veterans face are affordable housing and access to healthcare for both physical and mental/behavioral health. One in three veterans who took the survey said those were the most pressing challenges affecting local veterans.

“This survey confirms what we know are ongoing issues for veterans,” says Ann Beck, program supervisor. “It gives us a starting point to collaborate with community partners about how to best use our community’s resources to better meet these needs. We have some great partnerships and services to build on going forward, like the Coordinated Entry System at the Whatcom Homeless Service Center that prioritizes housing for veterans, and the volunteer drivers through the Volunteer Center of Whatcom County who help transport vets to medical appointments. But there is more we can do, and we’re looking for ways to make sure local veterans can access the care and resources they need.”

The Veterans Program works with the [Veterans Advisory Board](#) and the veteran community to advocate and plan for services that are more accessible and targeted to the needs of Whatcom County veterans.

Learn more about WCHD's veteran's program at www.whatcomcounty.us/vets. To learn more about volunteer driver opportunities or other ways to connect with the Whatcom County veteran community, contact Liz Harmon-Craig at eharmonc@co.whatcom.wa.us or (360) 778-6050.

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