



## **REGULAR MEETING MINUTES**

Tuesday, April 14, 2026 – 6:00 pm

### CALL TO ORDER

President Barnickel called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. and welcomed attendees, including new Mayor-appointed Commissioner Aditya Lakshminarayan, attending his first meeting since being sworn in on April 8. Commissioners extended a warm welcome.

### ROLL CALL

#### PRESENT:

President Bill Barnickel, Vice-President Hanley Chan, Commissioners Deborah Dacumos (remote), Prince Kelly Jordan, Aditya Lakshminarayan, Jenny Perez, John Reissenweber, Nicholas Rusanoff

#### EXCUSED:

Commissioner Baba, Boatman. (Prior to the meeting Commissioner Darya Kutovaya notified the commission secretary that she will resign from the commission effective April 14, 2026.)

Quorum established.

### RAMAYTUSH OHLONE LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The commission secretary read the land acknowledgment.

### PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Commissioners and attendees recited Pledge of Allegiance.

### SET AGENDA

President Barnickel asked if any comments or changes to the agenda. Hearing none, a motion was called to approve agenda:

Motion / Second / All in Favor

Motion passed. Agenda approved as posted.

Absent: Baba, Boatman



## PRESENTATIONS

### **Outcome of VA Benefits upon Veteran Population**

Presenters: Jaime Betancur, Office of Public Affairs, VA Palo Alto and Kathleen Mink, SFVA

Presentation compared Guaranteed Income (GI) programs and VA benefits, focusing on outcomes related to financial stability and health and well-being. Key points cited for VA benefits included providing long-term financial stability, reducing food insecurity and homelessness, and improving engagement with healthcare services. [For more information, the full presentation is posted on VAC website.]

During discussion, commissioners emphasized the need for better outreach to veterans unfamiliar with benefits. It was noted the presentation provides useful data to advocate for more staffing at SFCVSO. Commissioners will explore potential advocacy using data provided in presentation.

### **Mindful Movement for Veterans**

Presenters: Regina Dick-Endrizzi, JGPG Board of Directors, and Liam Day, JGPG Director

Presentation on a free movement-based wellness program designed for veterans. The program focuses on mind-body connection and mental health. Classes are held weekly on Mondays (virtual) and Wednesdays (in-person) and are accessible to all mobility levels.

Commissioners noted a high level of loneliness among older veterans. Recommended the program look into potential partnerships with VA and senior housing sites. Commissioners will look into raising awareness of program with their community networks and district supervisors. Additional information about program will be shared with the commission secretary for distribution to commissioners.

### **Mayor Certificate of Honor for Robert Vicari, Jr. – a Marine, Korean War Veteran, and longtime San Francisco Resident.**

President Barnickel presented the Mayor Certificate of Honor that was approved by the Commission at its March 10 meeting. He said he looks forward to presenting the certificate to Bob during his next visit with him.

## COMMUNICATIONS

### **County Veterans Service (CVSO) – March Report:**

- Gerardo Carr, CVSO acting director, reviewed March activities and noted it was a very busy month, with 116% increase in benefits awarded and more than 400 walk-ins handled between the Gough St. office and SFVAC. He also noted a new work-study added to Gough St. office in early April has assisted with the service counter and veteran returns, enabling more support for VSR at SFVAC. Further, he mentioned recently introduced



California SB1407, which proposes state tax exemption for military retirement income. [The full CVSO report is posted on VAC website.]

- Commissioners commended the CVSO for its efficiency, especially for implementation of the VA Work-Study Program. Commissioners commented on the need for additional staff and hopes for continued expansion of work-study program.

### **VAC Executive Team Updates:**

- **Secretary:**
  - CVSO recruitment remains on hold pending direction from the Mayor's Budget Office. Commissioners were encouraged to contact the Mayor to request that the hiring process move forward.
  - Memorial Day planning is moving forward. The event's programs and flyers are expected by first week of May. Commissioners encouraged to reach out to BoS and Mayor to ask that they attend the event on Monday, May 25.
- **Vice-President:**
  - VP Chan reported attending the Bataan Death March Commemoration, noting it was a great event. He shared that he has requested a Board of Supervisors Certificate of Honor for a 102-year-old World War II veteran who may attend an upcoming meeting. He also provided a brief update on state-level legislative efforts, including Senator Archuleta's SB1407 regarding disabled veteran tax exemptions, supported by Treasurer Fiona Ma. VP Chan highlighted similar veterans' property tax measures adopted in states such as New York and expressed hope that California will provide the same support for veterans.
- **President:**
  - President Barnickel noted that California is one of only a few states that taxes military retirement pay, and he expressed support for efforts to change this. He also shared a recent experience meeting a Vietnam veteran living in an SRO who was unaware of his eligibility for benefits. After connecting him with the CVSO, the veteran was able to access his benefits and has since moved into housing near Lake Merced. President Barnickel emphasized that many veterans remain unaware of the benefits available to them and highlighted the importance of outreach.



## APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES

- President Barnickel asked if there were comments or questions from commissioners about the March 10, 2026 meeting minutes. No comments from commissioners. No public comment. [ACTION]
- Motion to approve / Second / All in Favor
- Minutes approved as submitted.

Absent: Baba, Boatman

## NEW BUSINESS

- **Review for Approval of an Advocacy Letter to Prevent Elimination of two Positions at the Veterans Justice Court (VJC).** The Commission reviewed a letter drafted by Commissioner Rusanoff. Commissioner Rusanoff led discussion. [ACTION]
  - Commissioner Rusanoff provided an overview of the Veterans Justice Court (VJC), sharing his understanding that the Court operates under an agreement with DAS as part of a broader \$19 million funding structure intended to run through 2027. He stated that two key positions—a Case Manager and a Clinical Support Therapist—are being eliminated immediately and that this change is already affecting referrals for veterans without VA healthcare. He emphasized the vital importance of these roles in supporting treatment-based participation in the VJC. He said that the VJC was specifically designed to serve justice involved veterans who do not qualify for VA healthcare and as of right now these are the veterans that are no longer being referred into the Veterans Justice Court.
  - Commissioners asked clarifying questions regarding veterans' eligibility for benefits and the status of potential grant funding. VP Chan read an email from the Court Coordinator suggesting the Commission wait for additional budget information before sending letters to City leadership. Commissioners discussed whether to take immediate action or wait for further guidance. Commissioner Rusanoff requested approval to send his draft letter to the Mayor, while other Commissioners recommended waiting to ensure alignment with VJC staff before proceeding.
  - Public Comment: A letter of support was received via email from Megan O'Leary, Supervising Staff Attorney at Swords to Plowshares. Commissioner Rusanoff read the letter into the record. The letter is attached to these meeting minutes. No in-person public comments were shared.



- After robust discussion, a roll call vote was taken to move ahead with one of two actions: send the letter in its current form or wait for more information from VJC staff before acting. Results of roll call vote:
  - Votes to send letter: Perez, Rusanoff - 2
  - Votes to wait for additional information: Jordan, Dacumos, Barnickel, Chan, Lakshminarayan, Reissenweber - 6
- By majority vote, Commission will delay action until more information is received from Veterans Justice Court staff.

Absent: Baba, Boatman

- **Pending California Assembly Bill related to disabled veterans.** VP Chan led discussion. [DISCUSSION]
  - VP Chan provided an update on California SB1034, introduced by Senator McNerney, which would expand the definition of qualifying disabilities for veterans and make it easier for veterans with 100% service-connected disabilities to obtain support. VP Chan noted that he will bring this topic back to the Commission as the legislation progresses.
- **Review for Approval of an Advocacy Letter Supporting Establishment of a Contra Costa County Veterans Affairs Commission.** Commissioners considered a letter drafted by VP Chan. [ACTION]
  - Letter was shared with commissioners and posted to VAC website prior to the meeting.
  - Motion called to approve letter / Second / All in Favor
  - Letter approved as submitted.

Absent: Baba, Boatman

## **GOOD WELFARE**

This is the opportunity for members of the Veterans Affairs Commission to share special thanks and congratulatory remarks for the good welfare taking place in the veteran community.



- Commissioner Perez extended good welfare to the outgoing members of the Presidio Trust Board of Directors for their exceptional work on behalf of San Francisco veterans.

## **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

- Commissioner Jordan announced he will place on next month's agenda a proposal to establish a stand-alone City of San Francisco Department of Veterans Affairs.

## **GENERAL PUBLIC COMMENT**

- No public comment.

## **HONOR REPORT AND MOMENT OF SILENCE**

In memory of American service members in all wars and conflicts who made the ultimate sacrifice. We also remember the passing of homeless veterans, veterans who died while awaiting approval of benefits, and suicides within the veteran and armed service communities.

- VP Chan submitted remembrances for the following veterans:

Mr. Chuck Norris, an American Air Force veteran, renowned martial artist, and enduring symbol of discipline, strength, and service. Mr. Norris passed away on March 16, 2026 at the age of 86.

Mr. James Edward Lane, a distinguished United States Marine Corps Veteran, respected business leader, and cherished community pillar of San Francisco's Fillmore District, who passed away on March 20, 2026, at the age of 90.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

Meeting adjourned by President Barnickel at 7:58pm.

The next regular meeting of the Veterans Affairs Commission will be held in-person at 6:00pm in Room 416 at San Francisco City Hall on **Tuesday, May 12, 2026**.

Links and meeting documents can be found on the Veterans Affairs Commission website.

Respectfully submitted,

Mary Murphy  
Commission Secretary  
Veterans Affairs Commission



[Attachment: Letter of Support for two positions at Veterans Justice Court]

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This document is Official Business of the Veterans Affairs Commission, City and County of San Francisco. It is part of the official Public Record of the City and County of San Francisco.

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Veterans Affairs Commission Meetings:

General meetings of the SFVAC are scheduled for 6:00 p.m. on the second Tuesday of every month, with the exception for the month of July, when there is no scheduled SF VAC meeting, and are held in Room 416 in City Hall.

Meeting confirmation, and specific announcement of general meetings are made via public posting of the Meeting Agenda as required by law, at least 72 hours prior to scheduled meetings. Agendas for SFVAC meetings (and archived meeting minutes) are available on the SFVAC Pages of the City of San Francisco website, and are also available for public view and inspection at the 5th Floor Government Information Center at the San Francisco Public Library, at 100 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102. The documents librarian telephone number is (415) 554-4472.

Disability Access:

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## Veterans Crisis Line



1-800-273-8255  
PRESS 1

If you or a Veteran, you know is in immediate danger to themselves or others, please call 911 or visit your local emergency room.

The Veterans Crisis Line is also available by texting 838255 or by going to their website and chatting with a mental health professional.



SUICIDE  
PREVENTION

24/7 Confidential  
Support

Text [MYLIFE](https://www.mylife.org) to [741741](https://www.mylife.org)  
Crisis Line:  
(415) 781-0500



VETS HELPING VETS SINCE 1974

Swords to Plowshares  
Michael Blecker Veterans Center  
1060 Howard Street  
San Francisco, CA 94103

April 14, 2026

The Honorable Daniel Lurie  
Mayor of San Francisco  
San Francisco City Hall, Room 200  
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place  
San Francisco, CA 94102

Honorable Mayor Lurie,

My name is Megan O’Leary, Supervising Staff Attorney at Swords to Plowshares. I am a proud San Franciscan and the daughter of a Vietnam-era veteran. On behalf of Swords to Plowshares, I support continued HSA funding for the case manager and therapist at the San Francisco Veterans Justice Court (VJC). If these roles are cut, many vulnerable San Francisco veterans—including those who are unhoused, with service-related mental health conditions—will be unable to participate in VJC.

Founded in 1974, Swords to Plowshares provides housing, healthcare, employment, and legal services to low-income, homeless, and at-risk veterans in San Francisco. Each year, our Legal Unit helps hundreds of veterans access VA benefits and discharge upgrades. My work focuses on justice-involved veterans, and I founded the partnership between Swords and VJC to provide the court participants with legal assistance. Through this work, I have seen firsthand how essential the VJC—and the HSA-funded case manager and therapist—are to stabilizing veterans and connecting them to care.

The VJC serves as a diversion court for justice-involved veterans. Those eligible for VA benefits receive support from the VA during their time at the VJC, but those without VA eligibility—often due to less than honorable discharges—rely on city-funded services. The case manager and therapist currently slated for cuts provide critical services to this latter group of veterans.

Many of these veterans were discharged under less than honorable conditions after experiencing trauma in service, such as combat deployments, military sexual trauma, and racist and homophobic abuse. A key part of our legal work at Swords is helping those veterans obtain VA eligibility despite their discharge status through the VA’s Character of Discharge Determination process. This veteran population is significantly more likely to experience suicidal ideation, homelessness, and criminal justice involvement than those with honorable discharges.<sup>1</sup> In addition, veterans of color and LGBTQ+ veteran are much

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<sup>1</sup> As a population, they have much higher rates of PTSD (79.3% vs. 48.4%) and Traumatic Brain Injury (44.8% vs. 20%) than veterans with Honorable discharges. Service Discharge Status and Suicide Risk, Department of

more likely to have received a less than honorable discharge, often due to discrimination faced in the service and due to discriminatory laws like “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.”<sup>2</sup> The injustice they experienced in service continues when they are denied VA care after service. San Francisco has committed to not perpetuate that harm by providing HSA-funded services—but without these positions at VJC, only veterans with honorable discharges will be eligible for VJC.

Our legal work depends on stability, which the VJC case manager and therapist provide. Every Thursday, our Legal Unit hosts a drop-in clinic where the VJC case manager regularly brings veterans—often in intensive treatment—and serves as our point of contact as we work to secure them VA eligibility. This connection enables access to healthcare and disability income, reducing recidivism and shifting costs from the City to the federal government. Without it, more veterans will cycle through incarceration and homelessness.

To illuminate what their tireless work looks like, I want to share three examples of veterans that I met through the VJC who were not eligible for VA healthcare and relied on the case manager and therapist from HSA for help<sup>3</sup>:

- **Aaron Burkowski (Navy):**  
After being sexually assaulted by a fellow service member, Aaron began self-medicating with drugs and was discharged with an Other than Honorable discharge following a failed drug test. Referred through VJC, we successfully advocated for his VA eligibility and secured service-connected compensation for PTSD. Aaron now receives nearly \$4,000 per month in tax-free federal income and has access to lifelong VA healthcare.
- **Josh Harkin (Army, 2005–2009):**  
As a combat medic in Iraq, Josh experienced multiple traumatic events, including the loss of fellow service members, sniper threats, IEDs, and friendly fire. After returning home, he developed PTSD and turned to drugs to cope, leading to his less than honorable discharge. Through VJC, we helped him access VA healthcare and disability compensation. He is now housed in San Francisco, connected to care, and maintaining sobriety.

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Veterans Affairs, available at, [https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide\\_prevention/docs/FSTP-Service-Discharge-Status-and-Suicide-Risk.pdf](https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/FSTP-Service-Discharge-Status-and-Suicide-Risk.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Black soldiers are 61% more likely and Black sailors are 40% more likely to be referred to courts-martial than their white peers for similar misconduct. *Racial Disparities in Military Justice*, Protect Our Defenders, available at, <https://www.protectourdefenders.com/racial-disparities-reports/>. And, 43% of veterans discharged due to their sexual orientation received a less than honorable discharge. *Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Resources*, Department of Defense, available at, <https://www.war.gov/Spotlights/Dont-Ask-Dont-Tell-Resources/>.

<sup>3</sup> Clients names have been changed to protect confidentiality.



VETS HELPING VETS SINCE 1974

Swords to Plowshares  
Michael Blecker Veterans Center  
1060 Howard Street  
San Francisco, CA 94103

- **Todd Dobbs (Army, 2008–2011):**

Following a combat deployment to Afghanistan—where he earned a Combat Infantry Badge—Todd developed severe PTSD and struggled to cope, including multiple suicide attempts while still in service. He was ultimately discharged with an Other Than Honorable discharge. Referred through VJC, we helped him gain VA eligibility and secure disability compensation for PTSD. He is now working and maintaining his sobriety.

The VJC case manager and therapist are essential to helping these veterans access care, maintain recovery, and rebuild their lives. Eliminating these roles would send a clear message that there is no place for them—something San Francisco has committed to reject.

I respectfully urge your office to restore funding for these positions within the Veterans Justice Court. Thank you for your continued support of Swords to Plowshares and the veteran community.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Megan O'Leary".

Megan J. O'Leary  
Supervising Staff Attorney  
Swords to Plowshares