



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.¹ In addition, veterans of color and LGBTQ+ veteran are much

¹ 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.”² 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 help³:

- **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.

Veterans Affairs, available at, https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/docs/FSTP-Service-Discharge-Status-and-Suicide-Risk.pdf.

² 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/>.

³ Clients names have been changed to protect confidentiality.



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- **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,

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