

Serving Those Who Served Our Country

By Catherine Sachs, Child Support Professional, San Francisco Department of Child Support Services Outreach Unit

Military members who are transitioning to veteran status frequently face decreased income and a high risk of unemployment. According to OCSE's *Child Support Participation in Stand Down Events* Fact Sheet, veteran noncustodial parents are likely to have higher child support arrears than their non-veteran counterparts—27 percent higher on average. Facts like these prompted San Francisco Department of Child Support Services Director Karen M. Roye to put forth a challenge to the staff of the department's Outreach Unit to find ways to connect with, and help local veterans with child support issues.

As a member of the Outreach Unit, I began to look for ways to make the connection. An internet search led me to Elizabeth Brett, Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. I asked for a meeting, and within a month our collaboration began with a monthly child support workshop at the San Francisco VA Downtown Clinic.

The child support workshop at the VA Downtown Clinic takes place on the third Thursday of each month. The VA helps advertise the workshop by sending out announcements to VA staff, who then tell their clients and patients about it.



THE SAN FRANCISCO VA DOWNTOWN CLINIC,
401 3RD STREET, SAN FRANCISCO

CHALLENGES - CHILD SUPPORT DEBT AND MORE

Many of the vets I see are homeless and suffer from—by their own admission—mental and physical challenges and histories of drug and alcohol abuse. Very few receive veterans' pensions. Nearly all those who seek help have large arrears balances, and some have ongoing current orders. John*, a vet I saw in November of 2013, is required to pay \$3,200 per month under an order that was established many years prior to him becoming unemployed, homeless, and living off food stamps. *Ricardo, a vet I saw in late 2012, was seeing half of his \$1,200 Social Security Disability Insurance benefits garnished for arrears owed to the government, leaving him with only \$600 for his food, clothing, shelter and transportation. I help vets like John and Ricardo by assisting with applications for the Compromise of Arrears Program, giving referrals to the local Family Law Facilitator's Office for legal help, and serving as

a liaison between the vet and the child support agency handling the case when the case is being handled by an out-of-state child support office.

BRANCHING OUT

In April 2013, the San Francisco Superior Court established a special court calendar for veterans going through the criminal justice system. Allyson West, the coordinator for the San Francisco Community Justice Center, contacted us to find out if we would be interested in providing on-site services for vets at the newly-established court calendar. We sat in to observe court proceedings, and we expect to begin offering on-site services in January 2014.

LESSONS LEARNED

Now over a year since we began outreach to the veteran population, some lessons have been learned. The biggest lesson for me is to always be upfront with veterans about the work they will have to put in themselves. While in some cases matters can be resolved with very little work on the part of the veteran, other times the veteran must make the effort to see the Family Law Facilitator and attend court hearings.

The next lesson I learned is “Don’t reinvent the wheel.” There are others out there who have been working with veterans and possess a wealth of experience. In order to tap into that experience, I joined a network hosted by the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE), called the Veterans and Military Liaison Network (VMLN). The VMLN is a network of 160 child support staff (and growing) from all over the U.S. who are interested in how to increase the child support program’s services to military families and veterans. I recently participated in a VMLN conference call in which I spoke about my experiences and about the struggles some vets are facing in regards to child support. In response, I got some great feedback and new ideas on how to better assist these vets. (If you are interested in joining the VMLN please contact Thom Campbell of OCSE at thom.campbell@acf.hhs.gov.)

When it comes to veterans and the child support program, we have the difficult task of balancing the financial needs of families with the limitations and challenges some vets face. Tailored outreach and on-site services can go a long way to gaining the trust and cooperation of the veterans who bravely served our country. For me, it’s been a privilege and a pleasure to be able to help these vets, and by doing so, help their families.

*Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals.