

VETERANS, from page 10

C.S.: It's really driving it in health care, education and employment. Even one of those areas can be a rabbit hole, in terms of the changes we are seeing in the broader health care system, much less the uncertainty of federal funding on the VA health care system. But if it's more general, making sure that we take care of the programs that the VA has in a sustainable manner, building broader partnerships, and truly being a bridge between our different veterans generations. Honoring all those who came before us by continuing to incorporate their vision, while also bringing up the young guys that aren't necessarily joining the groups right now.

R.B.: *Do you think that there is, I don't want to say a disconnect, but a lot of our generation isn't exactly flocking to the veterans organizations when they get out.*

C.S.: I think there will be a transition point where our generation does begin to join. And some of that is less about who they are, and more about where they are in the current spectrum of their life. And the question becomes: How do we sustain those organizations? Don't let them go the way of the Grange Hall, but really use them. They have often been the most powerful advocates back in D.C., whether it was for the GI Bill initially after World War II, or the enhanced GI Bill after 9/11. We have the support network we have because of those major efforts back in D.C., and now how do we leverage that community better?

When you get out of the military, it is a transition. It doesn't matter if you've been in for years, have the best family support, have the best connections — it's a transition from an institution that has its own culture and values. How do you translate that back to the civilian world? But such great strengths in the military — the loyalty, the judgment, the leadership, the discipline — everything that attracts people to the military and what they get out of it is a huge value, and they're our greatest strength and treasure as a nation, but how you wean that great skill set back to the civilian world is not easy. I can think of no better preparation in life than military service. And there are horrible experiences in war and in combat, and it is not something to celebrate. But what you get out of it is huge, in terms of life lessons and leadership skills to apply across wherever people go after the military. And we lose that when we always focus on all the challenges — the alcohol and drugs, mental health, homelessness. It paints a picture. Those are the veterans who need the most help, but it also paints the community in a way that's challenging. It weakens us, I think, when we push for education, employment and broader support sometimes.

R.B.: *What are you hearing from other*

veterans as far as their experiences dealing with the VA and government services?

C.S.: I think it runs the gamut. There are obviously the nightmare scenarios, whether claims have been lost or pending for years, or negative treatment through the health care organizations. But the flipside of that is there have been people who've had great experiences with an easy claim process, whether through the state, county or the feds.

I'd say one of the biggest challenges is in rural Oregon. Most of the resources, if it's through the federal VA, are often centralized services in the Portland-Vancouver area or the valley. Our Roseburg and Medford area has more than Bend or Burns or anything in the Gorge. Eventually, as you get further east the veterans get shuttled to Boise and that VA system. So transportation to services and access to service continues to be a challenge. If you need a treatment and you're on the coast and if it's above and beyond the capabilities of your local VA clinic, that is a long haul to Portland, and transit and reimbursement where you're staying while you're here.

There are great strengths in the federal VA health care system in terms of scale, centralization and efficiencies, but creating equal access and service for all of our veterans, wherever they live, is a huge challenge. We've improved with the clinic model pushing out, but they can't do every major surgery or major procedure. That is a hard nut to crack. And organizations like Disabled American Veterans and other folks have good rideshare programs, but we haven't cracked the nut on transportation or access, for sure.

R.B.: *The federal VA and Secretary Shinseki have made it a priority to end veteran*

homelessness. How do you feel this can be best addressed locally?

C.S.: Will we solve veteran homelessness in five years? I don't know. Is it a worthy goal? Of course. And it provides the focus for that effort and the resources that come with it. There are still gaps in the system, but significant resources have come down, and I think the key is making sure those federal resources coming down are not creating new bureaucracies but are tied into our existing community-based organizations that have close ties. I always highlight Central City Concern as an example. They have ties with employers, they have the housing side, the health care side. They are able to holistically reintegrate veterans back into the community, whether coming back from war or coming back from being homeless. They have all the different pieces that they can line up to support that veteran. And then I think there is going to be a state role in terms of where are those gaps, whether on the funding side or general attention and focus.

We have a lot of resources to bring to bear, but it's sometimes challenging on an issue like homelessness that crosses agency silos. How do break down those silos? Even at just the state level that's hard, much less making the links to all the different partners. But we've made a lot of progress over the last few years, and I expect that we will continue. But it's not easy work, and God bless all the community orgs that are doing the heavy lifting.

R.B.: *And how do you see the ODVA fitting into that puzzle?*

C.S.: I don't know that it will always be direct programs through the ODVA. It may be pass-through on funding, depending on

what different revenues we can get and how the state does on tax revenues and what kind of political support and policy support we can generate

But again, going back to the partnerships. How do we provide a center of gravity to raise awareness of what our veterans face — homelessness being one leg of that — and how do we then bring those partners together in a way that build long-term relationships that we've seen pay dividends.

It's going to be relationships and partnerships. And it's hard to do that above and beyond the core programs of the ODVA, but that has got to be central to the mission. So not always a direct homelessness program necessarily, but really trying to support the broader efforts of our partners.

R.B.: *The disability claims backlog has received a lot of attention lately, with about 70 percent of the pending claims taking more than the VA's goal of 125 days. How do you feel the ODVA can best resolve this?*

C.S.: I think it's really across the partners. On the claims, it's largely going to be the counties, the state and the feds partnering. There is a lot that the feds have tried to do on electronic records but there are a lot of paper records still. How do you transition to electronic? How do you make sure that Department of Defense folks that are exiting service members are sending that health records from those days directly to the VA, so that we have access to them and it's not incumbent on the service member to take that with them?

There are always challenges in terms of training, whether at the federal, state or local level, to make sure that claims that are going up through the system, whether paper or electronic, that they meet all the criteria, that they've been quality checked. So how do we make sure our folks submitting the claims are doing great quality control and submitting up good products for the federal VA to then take action on? And then I'd say just generally education of our veterans on these earned benefits.

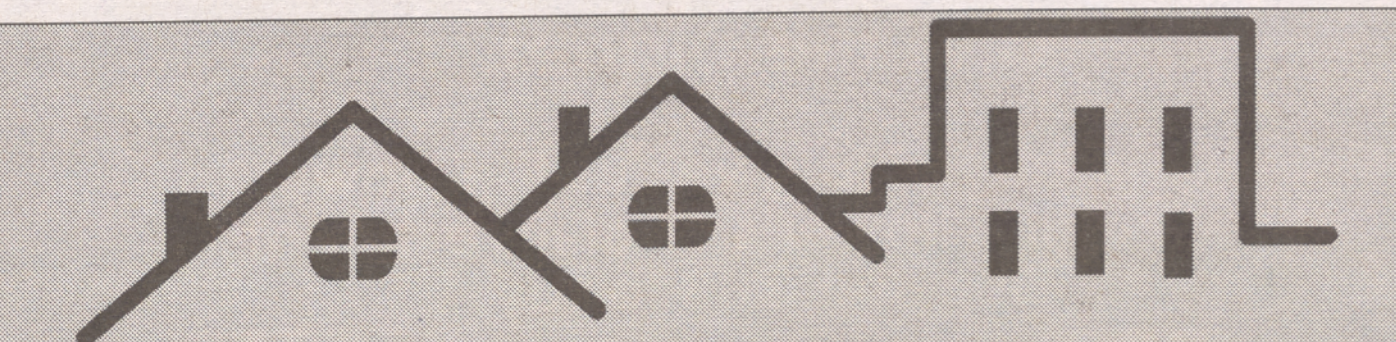
We have about 330,000 veterans in Oregon, and probably about a third of those access their federal or state benefits. We're missing about two-thirds. And not everybody qualifies for something, and not everyone needs something, but how do we capture more of those earned benefits for our citizens and relieve the stress on other state and local support systems and networks.

So a huge push in terms of outreach and education to our veterans and military families, as well as regional meetings and then something like a larger veterans summit, where we actually pull together at a large level the leaders in the veterans community and our organizations, but also leaders from across all our different partners, to really try to address training, education and hear back from them what issues they're facing and ideas of how to move forward.

Oregonian Desert

By Kareem Ali

Here breath is lost
Out where the sky rises
Into the eyebrows of trees
The moon rides elbow high
While the dark aroma of light subsides
Below a crest of fields
Cactus captures a pasture
Rusting in a bed of dillweed
The alfalfa and clover are well mannered
And always dine al fresco
Above the skin of rocks
Vipers chant into a sponge of clouds
While the nightjars begin to mimic evening
I wait and
Dream of days that are
And days that are not.



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