



## 2024 CSAC Challenge Awards

### VETERANS OUTREACH & WELLNESS PROGRAM IN RURAL CALIFORNIA

**OVERVIEW:** The Nevada County Veteran Outreach & Wellness (VOW) Program addresses veterans' critical needs in mental health, homelessness, employment, and community engagement through a comprehensive initiative.

**CHALLENGE:** Veterans face significant challenges when transitioning to civilian life, often struggling with the loss of structure, camaraderie, and purpose from military service. This, coupled with a "warrior mentality" that discourages seeking help, leads to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Long wait times for VA mental health services, often three to six months, exacerbate these issues, fostering isolation and distrust. Further, California faces a particularly acute crisis, with one-third of the nation's homeless veterans. The lack of stable housing and employment has fueled a cycle of worsening mental health, unemployment, and homelessness.

**SOLUTION:** The VOW Program focuses on four key goals: preventing veteran suicides, ending veteran homelessness, providing pathways to employment, and fostering community engagement. By collaborating with Sierra Family Therapy Center (SFTC), the VOW program connects veterans and their families to essential mental health services, overcoming the barriers of long wait times and fostering a strong support network. Additionally, the employment initiatives provide valuable work or transitioning service members, helping them secure stable jobs within the county. VOW's community engagement efforts create events that honor veterans and build bridges between military personnel, veterans, and the civilian community, ensuring that veterans' needs and voices are represented at the highest levels of local government.

**INNOVATION:** The VOW Program introduces a holistic approach by integrating multiple services under one comprehensive initiative. It establishes partnerships with SFTC to provide free, confidential mental health services, leveraging diverse billing options that include veterans' families in the treatment process. The program also pioneers a robust intern program through federal and state veteran employment initiatives, facilitating veterans' transition into civilian careers. Additionally, VOW launched community-focused events such as Military Appreciation Week and Grass Valley Armed Forces Day, which not only honored veterans but also strengthened their ties with the local community.

**RESULTS:** The VOW Program has yielded impressive results across its four focus areas, demonstrating the effectiveness of a holistic, community-driven approach. In the realm of mental health, the program has surpassed its goals, with an average of 93 veterans per year accessing free and confidential services through the NCVSO and SFTC partnership. This achievement is particularly significant given the extended wait times veterans typically face at VA clinics. The inclusion of

family members in the mental health process has been instrumental, providing a support network that enhances the overall well-being of veterans. This has proven to be critical in the success of our program as Nevada County has not lost a single, actively engaged NCVSO veteran to suicide. The program's efforts to end veteran homelessness have been equally impactful in both keeping up with the inflow of homeless veterans as well as decreasing the total number experiencing homelessness. The number of homeless veterans has gone from 61 in 2018, to just 18 as of July 2024 and continues to work towards functional zero. This collaborative, data-driven approach has provided veterans with permanent housing and has helped address the underlying issues that contribute to homelessness, such as substance abuse and lack of job skills.

On the employment front, the VOW program's intern initiative has provided 33 transitioning service members with valuable work experience, resulting in over 29 veterans securing gainful employment. The program has generated over 18,000 hours of work and more than \$750,000 in compensation, highlighting its role in facilitating veterans' successful transition to civilian careers. The focus on employment has not only provided veterans with financial stability but has also given them a renewed sense of purpose and belonging. Community engagement initiatives have further strengthened the bond between veterans and the local community. Military Appreciation Week has become a highly anticipated event, driving economic activity, and reinforcing the county's commitment to honoring its veterans. The Grass Valley Armed Forces Day celebration has also grown in popularity, serving as a unifying event that brings together veterans, military personnel, and civilians in a shared celebration of service. The event's centerpiece, the naming of the Military Ambassador, ensures that veterans' voices are heard at the highest levels of local government.

**REPLICABILITY:** The VOW Program is a model that can be replicated in other rural communities across the country. Its success lies in its ability to leverage existing federal, state, and local resources to address the specific needs of veterans without placing additional financial burdens on local taxpayers. By focusing on mental health, housing, employment, and community engagement, the program offers a comprehensive approach that can be tailored to the unique challenges faced by veterans in different regions. Key elements of the program, such as the partnership with Sierra Family Therapy Center, the use of diverse billing options, and the development of a veteran-focused intern program, are scalable and adaptable. Communities can replicate these strategies by building local partnerships, accessing state and federal funding, and engaging local businesses and organizations in supporting veterans.

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**ADDITIONAL MATERIALS:** (1) [Yuba Net - First Veterans Health & Wellness Fair](#) (2) [Veteran Programs](#)