

ADVANCED POLICY ANALYSIS

The San Francisco County Veterans Service Office (CVSO) Response to COVID-19: Analyzing the Impacts of a Remote Service Delivery Model

A Study Conducted for the San Francisco
Human Services Agency Policy & Planning Unit

by

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Executive Summary

The San Francisco County Veterans Service Office (CVSO) shuttered their office in March of 2020 in response to San Francisco's shelter-in-place ordinance. For the following months, the office operated ad hoc—providing services however possible without a cohesive service delivery plan in place or the necessary technologies to provide services remotely. In October of 2020, the office implemented new processes for delivering services, enabling the office to transition to a remote service delivery model. Today, the office continues to provide services remotely (via phone, email, text, and video calls), in addition to operating from a central office and two satellite locations.

This project focuses on the San Francisco CVSO's transition to a remote service delivery model to develop understanding of how the CVSO's response to the COVID-19 pandemic impacted uptake of services, the barriers that the CVSO's clients face in obtaining services, and the lessons both the CVSO and other government agencies can learn from the CVSO's implementation of a remote service delivery model. To answer these central questions, a mixed-methods evaluation was carried out, consisting of analysis of the CVSO's administrative data, in addition to 10 interviews with key employees of both the CVSO and other San Francisco City & County agencies. The following fourteen findings were identified through this evaluation:

Finding 1: The number of clients served by the CVSO decreased following the pandemic. The number of claims filed and total award amounts reaching CVSO clients also decreased.

Finding 2: The CVSO assisted fewer older veterans and homeless veterans during the pandemic.

Finding 3: Financial assistance awards decreased, reflecting both fewer veterans served and a lower rate of awards for those who filed.

Finding 4: The Swords to Plowshares' Legal Unit saw similar client trends as the CVSO during the pandemic.

Finding 5: CVSO staff and leadership express unanimous support for the remote and hybrid service delivery models.

Finding 6: CVSO staff's perceptions of workload are misaligned with actual trends.

Finding 7: The ability to serve clients residing outside of San Francisco and the greater San Francisco Bay Area was highlighted by CVSO staff as a success of the new service delivery model.

Finding 8: While a relatively small number of claims are filed for clients outside of San Francisco and the Bay Area, it is notable that the CVSO saw an increase in claim activity for residents of counties outside of the Bay Area and states other than California.

Finding 9: Staff feel positively about the impact of the CVSO's satellite offices.

Finding 10: The CVSO faces staffing-related challenges that impact service delivery.

Finding 11: Workload is unevenly distributed across CVSO representatives.

Finding 12: Policies and procedures pertaining to interfacing with clients are either unclear, not utilized, or have not been developed.

Finding 13: The processes of the CVSO rely heavily on manual data-entry, with little to no automation in place and no integration between VetPro and other data systems used by the VA or San Francisco government agencies.

In response to these findings, the following nine recommendations are presented and discussed:

Recommendation 1: Continue iterating upon the current hybrid model of service delivery.

Recommendation 2: Create processes and policies to inform how the CVSO operates. While the CVSO should continue to operate with flexibility and ensure representatives are granted autonomy in their work, it is important to address several existent issues.

Recommendation 3: Evaluate the utilization of data within the CVSO and ensure client data are consistently tracked and updated across all staff.

Recommendation 4: Continue operating satellite CVSO locations and re-evaluate which locations to prioritize. Consider prioritizing locations where homeless and older veterans spend time.

Recommendation 5: Fill vacancies, focus additional resources toward staff retention, and consider hiring more staff. Ensure clear communication within the office relating to expectations and responsibilities of staff.

Recommendation 6: Utilize VetPro data to inform operations, policy, and practice. Collaborate with Panoramic Software, where necessary, to further develop the capacity of VetPro to track and report on key data.

Recommendation 7: Explore opportunities to streamline processes by further utilizing technology.

Recommendation 8: Create emergency response protocols and ensure that the CVSO is prepared for future closures.

Recommendation 9: Evaluate policies related to serving veterans outside of San Francisco.