



San Francisco Veterans Affairs Commission Annual Report 2022

President, Ikram Mansori

Vice President, Stephen Martin-Pinto

Commissioners: Joseph Baba, Douglas Bullard, William Barnickel, Hanley Chan, Jason Chittavong, Deborah Dacumos, Courtney Ellington, Christopher McDonald, Courtney Miller, Victor Olivieri, Nicholas Rusanoff, Jordan Sun, Raymond Wong

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This annual report provides an overview of the activities and accomplishments of the San Francisco Veterans Affairs Commission (VAC) from January to December 2022. The Commission met 10 times during this period, with meetings consisting of relevant discussions, presentations, and public participation on matters affecting the welfare of approximately 26,000 veterans living in San Francisco.

San Francisco has a highly engaged veteran community that works hard to honor veterans' accomplishments, as well as bring awareness and provide answers to the community's ongoing challenges. While significant progress has been made in terms of support, many challenges continue to arise, particularly with hundreds of veterans experiencing homelessness and thousands more in need of healthcare and mental health support. The Commission actively works with the veterans community to identify and address a number of local challenges, including:

- Access to affordable housing
- Veterans Justice Court funding
- Mental Health support needs
- Transitional housing – Permanent housing issues
- Access to parks and recreation
- JROTC funding
- Access to City, State and Federal resources and benefits
- Medical resources allocation

In 2022, the Commission addressed these ongoing issues in a variety of ways. Through engagement with local officials, key pieces of legislation were passed that resulted in important benefits for veterans including free admission to San Francisco parks, improved access to affordable housing, and pay protection for military reservists working in the private sector. On a national level, the Commission contacted the United States House of Representatives to urge sponsorship of the *Commitment to Veteran Support and Outreach Act*, bipartisan legislation that would provide critical federal resources to county veteran services officers, who are often a veteran's first point of contact in the community for accessing services. Additionally, with pandemic-related restrictions easing in

2022, Commissioners planned and participated in several community events that brought increased awareness to the accomplishments as well as the continuing needs of many veterans. Noteworthy among these events was a historic visit to San Francisco by the Sergeant Major of the Army over the Memorial Day weekend.

The Commission is pleased to share this annual review, both to celebrant achievements made on behalf of veterans and to stress the need for ongoing support and advocacy for our city’s veteran community.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Veterans’ Affairs Commission directly advises the Mayor and the Board of Supervisors on all matters affecting veterans of the Armed Forces of the United States of America; on the problems, interests, and needs of veterans and families who are residents of the City and County of San Francisco; and on the coordination of economic development, health care, and social services programs as they relate to veterans and their families who are residents of the City and County of San Francisco.

COMMISSION LEADERSHIP AND MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

At the December 12, 2021 regular meeting of the Veterans Affairs Commission, members elected Ikram Mansori to a first term as president of the Commission and Stephen Martin-Pinto to a first term as vice-president. The Commission welcomed Mayor appointed Commissioner Courtney Ellington to her first meeting in June 2022. The Commission also welcomed Commissioner Jordan Sun, appointed by the Mayor on September 9, 2022 to fill the seat vacated by former Commissioner Myles Tucker. Commissioner Jeff Marshall resigned from the Commission on March 8, 2022. The Commission endured a sad loss at the end of 2021 with the sudden passing of Commissioner George Ishikata on December 30. The Commission’s first meeting of 2022 was dedicated in memory of Colonel Ishikata, and throughout that meeting commissioners, colleagues, and members of the public shared many heartfelt memories and tributes in his honor.

At the beginning of the year, the Commission began a process to amend its Administrative Code to decrease from 17 to 13 the number of members of the Commission, and make corresponding revisions to qualifications and appointing authorities for members. An ordinance amending the Administrative Code was introduced to the Board of Supervisors at their December 13, 2022 meeting and is expected to be completed in early 2023. This action was taken after robust discussions at commission meetings, where it was noted the high membership had become an obstacle to commission work since not all commissioners participated equally and it was often a struggle to attain a quorum for meetings. The update to the Administrative Code will rectify these issues and strengthen the Commission into an even more focused and actively engaged group.

COMMISSION ACTIVITIES

Following are highlights of Commission activity throughout 2022:

- Parks Legislation, Enacted on January 21, 2022
Commissioner Hanley Chan and Commissioner Courtney Ellington worked with District 4 Supervisor Gordon Mar to pass legislation that provides free admission to popular Recreation and Park facilities for veterans and active members of the United States armed forces who reside in San Francisco. Through this law, veterans now have free access to city facilities such

as swimming pools, the Japanese Tea Garden, the Botanical Garden, the Conservatory of Flowers and the Goldman Tennis Center. Veterans also receive a 50% discount for Camp Mather and a reduction in fees for wedding venues such as the Palace of Fine Arts Rotunda.

Studies by the VA Administration have cited access to outdoor spaces as a proven benefit to veterans mental health. As District 4 Supervisor Gordon Mar, author of the ordinance, noted to the San Francisco Examiner, “Our veterans have made enormous sacrifices for our country and are deserving of recognition and respect for their patriotism and service. This law is just one small way we can help support their mental and physical health as they work to reintegrate into civilian life.”

The Commission was actively involved in the passage of this important ordinance, and continue to raise awareness about this benefit among the veterans community.

- Veterans Justice Court, Funding Support

Commissioners Nicholas Rusanoff and Jason Chittavong, in collaboration with Allyson West, director with Superior Court of California, San Francisco, sought to secure ongoing funding for a crucial social services position of the Veterans Justice Court (VJC) as well as add a new position to further strengthen the support system for veterans participating in the VJC.

Commissioners were successful in receiving a positive response from the San Francisco Human Services Agency (HSA). HSA will consider funding of the VJC Case Manager position in future budget reviews. The second, new, position of a VJC Court Coordinator/Mentor continues to be pursued through funding requests to the Court system and other departments within the City & County of San Francisco.

The Veterans Justice Court was launched in April 2013 in the Community Justice Center to offer a veteran-focused intervention that had been missing from the existing criminal justice system. In January, 2015 it was established as a stand-alone collaborative court of the Superior Court of California, County of San Francisco. It was created in partnership with the Veterans Administration, District Attorney’s Office, Public Defender’s Office, Department of Public Health, Human Services Agency, Adult Probation Department, the San Francisco Bar Association and its defense counsel, San Francisco Sheriff’s Department, and various other city agencies and community groups.

Commissioners Chittavong and Rusanoff are actively engaged in the Court’s programs and keep the Commission and the veterans community aware of the exceptional and much needed work being accomplished by the Court’s dedicated staff. They will continue this work in 2023 and bring attention to opportunities for the Commission, Board of Supervisors and Mayor to support the programs and services of the VJC.

- Administrative Code - Priority for Veterans in City Affordable Housing Programs

Ordinance amending the Administrative Code to add a priority for veterans within each category of preferences in the City’s affordable housing programs funded or administered by the Mayor’s Office of Housing and Community Development (MOHCD).

In the past few years, a high priority focus of the Commission has been assisting veterans obtain access to safe, affordable housing – a considerable challenge faced by far too many veterans in the Bay Area’s high cost of living environment. In 2022, the Commission worked closely with the Mayor’s Office of Housing and Community Development (MOHCD) and Supervisor Gordon Mar in support of legislation to grant priority to veterans in the application process for Below Market Rate (BMR) housing in San Francisco.

The Commission was grateful to see the legislation pass with unanimous support of the Board of Supervisors on July 19 and enacted by Mayor Breed on August 4, 2022. Commissioners will continue to work with MOHCD and the City’s Department of Technology to stay informed as to when the category preference will be available to veterans on the online application form. The process is expected to be completed by fall 2023.

- New San Francisco County Veterans Service Officer

In March 2022, the position of County Veterans Service Officer (CVSO) for San Francisco was vacated when the current officer relocated to Alameda County. The Commission actively engaged with the Department of Disability and Aging Services (DAS) to find a replacement for this important position that provides such a crucial service to the veteran community. DAS accepted input from commissioners on preferred qualifications, and the Commission president and vice-president served on the applicants interview panel. In early August, the City gratefully welcomed US Army veteran Elena Kim as the new County Veterans Service Officer. Prior to joining the San Francisco CVSO, Elena served in a leadership role in Orange County’s Veterans Service Office which provides services for over 110,000 veterans. In her role there she participated on many committees, task forces, and advisory boards to create programs for veterans and their families. Her extensive career in public service, both in the military and in government, is a major asset to her new leadership position as San Francisco’s CVSO. Beginning in September, Elena started regularly attending monthly Veterans Affairs Commission meetings, and shared updates on work being accomplished at the CVSO as well as her ideas on ways the Commission and CVSO can collaborate in the future. The Commission looks forward to building on this positive and collaborative relationship throughout 2023.

- Military Leave Pay Protection Act

Legislation drafted by Supervisor Gordon Mar and legislative aide Alan Wong amending the Police Code to require private employers to pay military reservist called for military duty the difference between their military salary and their salary as employees, for up to 30 days in a calendar year.

Alan Wong presented this draft legislation to the Commission at its regular meeting on October 11, 2022. Mr. Wong summarized how the legislation will assist reservists working in the private sector to have the same pay protection provided under current local, state, and federal laws to public sector reservists. The law applies to San Francisco employers with 100 plus employees and is believed to be the first legislation of its kind nationwide.

The Commission strongly supported this legislation through committee review and was pleased when it was passed by the Board of Supervisors on December 13, 2022.

COMMISSIONER EVENTS

With COVID-19 restrictions easing substantially, 2022 saw the re-emergence of many veteran-related events. Commissioners participated in events that provided a unique opportunity to raise awareness of the needs of the veterans community.

- Memorial Day Visit to San Francisco by Sergeant Major of the Army, May 28-30, 2022

Commission President Ikram Mansori organized and led events surrounding a Memorial Day visit of the Sergeant Major of the Army. This historic visit provided an informative atmosphere to both educate and inspire our community organizers to take immediate and definite action to benefit the veterans and military families. The highlight of the weekend activities was the formal Memorial Day Program at the Presidio National Cemetery on May 30. The program included talks by CDR Daniel Bernardi, Ph.D., and the Sgt. Major of the Army Michael Grinston. There was also a very moving Gold Star Family wreath presentation and a flyover by the Coast Guard Air Station San Francisco.

- Fleet Week, October 3-11, 2022

Commissioner Deborah Dacumos represented the Commission by taking a lead role in organizing several Fleet Week events, including a Blessing of the Fleet Interfaith Service at the Presidio Chapel on October 9 and an informative Senior Leadership Seminar held on October 5. The



Commissioner Dacumos with seminar presenters, Ukraine Director of Military Surgeons and UCSF surgeon interpreter.

seminar included moving presentations from a medical surgeon in charge of the military academy in Kyiv, Ukraine, and from Poland's Ambassador to the United States, The Honorable Marek Magierowski. The Russian invasion into Ukraine created a humanitarian crisis not seen in Europe since World War II. The Ambassador provided valuable insights into the challenges his country has faced and how good planning, improvisation and partnerships with other Western governments, has allowed Poland to meet the critical task of providing aid, comfort and safety to over 2 million refugees.

In addition to this timely and inspirational seminar, Fleet Week activities included an opportunity for San Franciscans to come to the San Francisco waterfront to tour visiting ships docked at the Port

of San Francisco and get a glimpse of the day-to-day lives of the sailors serving in the U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard. Commissioner Dacumos assisted in extending ship tour invitations to the Mayor and members of the Board of Supervisors and was on hand to greet and assist with tours. Commissioners Hanley Chan and Joseph Baba also participated in ship tours.



Ensign and Veterans Affairs Commissioner Joseph Baba smiles on the deck of the USS Princeton during Fleet Week celebrations.

▪ Veterans Week, November 6 - 12 and Veterans Day Parade, November 6, 2022

Commissioner Doug Bullard helped kick off the salute to veterans week by taking the Lowell High School JROTC Drum Corps to perform for veterans at the San Francisco VA Hospital. Also in November, the Lowell High School JROTC Color Guard presented the colors at the Congressional Gold Medal Ceremony for Filipino WW II veterans. Commissioner Bullard presented Gold Medals to a World War II veteran and several family members of WWII veterans. Commissioner Raymond Wong took a lead role in coordinating parade participation of several commissioners and members of the veterans community. Commissioners Christopher McDonald and Deborah Dacumos served as parade judges, Commissioner Nicholas Rusanoff served as a parade marshall, and Commissioner Doug Bullard accompanied 250 cadets to march in the parade.

▪ Wreath Laying Ceremony at Presidio National Cemetery, December 17, 2022

The Commission was proud to work with the national non-profit organization, Wreaths Across America, to remember and honor our veterans through the laying of Remembrance wreaths on the graves of our country's fallen heroes. Commissioner Courtney Ellington actively participated in the planning of this event, and she sang the National Anthem during the wreath-laying ceremony at the Presidio National Cemetery.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND CONCLUSION

The Commission is grateful for the support of many City agencies, including Mayor's Office of Housing and Community Development (MOHCD), Human Services Agency (HSA), San Francisco Presidio National Cemetery, Mayor's Office of Communication, and the County Veterans Services Office. Veterans related legislation passed by the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 2022 will have positive effects for veterans for years to come and the Commission is grateful for this as well. As we look forward to 2023, serious issues remain, most significantly in the area of affordable housing and access to quality mental health services. The Commission is committed to address these and any other concerns facing our San Francisco veteran population. In partnership with many nonprofit veterans groups and the City and County of San Francisco, we look forward to continuing our efforts to bring awareness to veterans concerns and honor veterans' dedicated service to our country.