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## **Increasing Engagement Of Veterans & Families Through Social Media**

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Increasing Engagement of Veterans & Families Through Social Media

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**Final Capstone Project Title and Abstract**

## Increasing Engagement of Veterans &amp; Families Through Social Media

The Monterey County Office of Military & Veterans Affairs provides services to both veterans and family members through financial compensation and pension benefits. A macro level problem is veterans return from active duty and struggle with numerous issues including family instability, homelessness, health issues and financial strain. The agency level problem is a majority (70%) of veterans in Monterey County are not accessing benefits for which they are eligible. This project aims to connect non-service connected veterans and family members to the agency's Facebook page to promote benefits and services as well as provide opportunities for community interaction. The goal is for these non-service connected veterans to become service connected with the agency, as well as providing a platform for veterans and family members to interact. A recommendation to address the problem is to further collaborate with local government officials in order to increase agency exposure across the county.

**Keywords:** *Facebook, service connected, veteran*

**Agency Information and Partnering Organizations**

The Monterey County Military Veterans Affairs Office (MVAO) has a primary mission to provide advocacy and assistance in addition to various services that help to improve the lives of Monterey County veterans who have served the United States Armed Forces, as well as their families and also their survivors. They work to obtain, "...entitlements and services from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), U.S. Department of Defense, California Department of Veterans Affairs (CDVA), and local programs for eligible veterans and their families" (Monterey County Veterans Affairs Office [MVAO], n.d.).

This agency provides a variety of programs and services to its clients, including, but not limited to, compensation for service related injuries or disease, survivors and widow benefits, nonservice connected pension, Veterans Affairs and California State education benefits, as well as assistance to veterans and their survivors with Aid and Attendance (MVAO, n.d.). Some of the community partnering organizations of this agency are Veterans Affairs at both the state and federal level, local county offices and the Veterans Transition Center (VTC) in Marina (J. Murphy, personal communication, April 20, 2021).

**Communities Served: Demographic Profile and Needs Analysis**

As published in the California Association of County Veteran Service Officers report, in Monterey County there are 19,876 veterans. (2022, p. 19). Data could not be gathered for Monterey County in all specific categories, however, some data is available in combination with the counties in California Congressional District 20, seen in Table #1 (Military Research Institute Center for Regional Development, 2021) and on the state of California level, seen in Table #2 (CACVSO, 2022, p. 10). All of these veteran categories are potential clients and part of the primary population served by the MVAO, while also including veteran spouses and widow/widowers (MVAO, n.d.).

<b>Table #1. CALIFORNIA DISTRICT 20</b>		
<b>Label</b>		
	Veteran Dependents	8,166
	Male Veterans	93.3%
	Female Veterans	6.7%
	Veterans with Disability	32.3%
	Veteran Households	11.5%
	Veteran Households without Children	84%
	Veteran Households with Children	16%
	Veterans Ages 18-34	5.1%
	Veterans Ages 35-54	16.2%
	Veterans Ages 55-64	17.3%
	Veterans Ages 65-74	32.6%
	Veterans Ages 75 and Older	28.9%
	Veterans in the Poverty Rate	6.6%
	Veterans Who Are Uninsured	2.1%
	Veterans on SNAP Benefits	4.6%
	Female-led Veteran Households with Food Insecurity & Access	8.4%
	Male-led Veteran Households with Food Insecurity & Access	4.3%

<b>Table #2. STATE OF CALIFORNIA</b>		
<b>Label - Veterans</b>		
	White Alone	1,211,000
	Black or African-American Alone	163,000
	American Indian & Alaska Native Alone	17,000

Asian Alone	116,000
Native Hawaiian & Other Pacific Island Alone	7,000
Some Other Race Alone	76,000
Two or More Races	68,000
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	314,000
Gulf War-Post 9/11 (2001 to 2019)	420,000
Gulf War-Pre 9/11 (1990-2001)	249,000
Vietnam Era (1961-1975)	541,000
Korean Conflict (1950-1955)	116,000
World War II (1941-1946)	47,000
Peacetime Only (Includes Pre-WWII, between WWII & Korea, between Korea & Vietnam, between Vietnam & Gulf War)	371,000

Some of the general problems or issues faced at this agency are service related injuries or disease, obtaining financial support or pension through the claims process and obtaining death benefits through the claims process (Monterey County Veterans Affairs Office [MVAO], 2021, p. 6). There are approximately 70% of veterans, family members and dependents who do not access benefits and services (MVAO, 2021, p. 6). The groups most directly affected by this problem are veterans and their families. There are several community assets available to local veterans (Monterey County Free Libraries, n.d.). These include The Veterans Transition Center (VTC), an agency that provides for things such as transitional housing and substance abuse counseling (VTC, 2021), the Central Coast Veterans Cemetery Foundation (CCVCF), an organization that supports a fully serviced cemetery that honors veterans from all military branches (CCVCF, n.d.), and the Monterey County Superior Court Treatment Court, a resource that provides assistance to veterans who are justice-involved as well as their families (Monterey County Veteran Treatment Court Peer Mentor Program, n.d.).

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**Capstone Project Description & Justification**

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The title of this capstone project is “Increasing Engagement of Veterans & Families Through Social Media”. This is a social media project that worked to enhance the agency’s current Facebook page to improve the agency’s ability to promote their services and more effectively connect with veterans and families in an engaging manner that appeals to all age groups. This was done through thoughtful and planned postings, with the hope that there would also be engagement through page comments.

Stakeholders in this project were the project mentor, project secondary mentor, agency staff, and veterans and their families. This project mattered to both mentors and agency staff as the results worked to provide more support to make the agency successful. This project mattered to veterans and their families because it worked to provide a platform they were more likely to use to find resources in which they may or may not currently participate. In fact, “Social media use among veterans has risen so much recently that it has been credited for bettering established veteran organizations...” (David, 2014).

Additional benefits to the Facebook project included the potential result of reaching more veterans and family members, which provides the agency with more county funding. Further positive results would have been that clients are provided with benefits they are entitled to as a result of their military service, and another is that the project would have kept clients and the agency engaged together in a positive manner through social media.

The success of using Facebook can be seen in the fact that, “...more than 900,000 people in the US participate in more than 2,000 groups for military members, veterans and their spouses on FB” (Meta, 2019). An example of a suggested Facebook page, “...is the official Make the Connection Facebook page. It’s an active page that connects veterans and their loved ones to stories of strength and resources for living well” (Valle, 2020). Just like this example page, the agency wants veterans and dependents to access their services in order to live a better, fuller life. Creating targeted posts on the agency’s page meant that more

clients were likely to engage in the agency’s services. Taking time working on these posts was also important to ensure quality, accuracy and effectiveness. The goal was for this to lead to ensuring that more clients learn about services and are engaged.

The purpose of this project was to find ways to connect said veterans and families to the services offered by the agency by means of social media. The first step involved in implementing this project included creating an agency promotional card with QR code that links to the agency Facebook page and then tallying the cards taken. The next step was to create targeted and engaging posts, posting them throughout the week and then monitoring the posts to determine effectiveness and level of engagement. The final step was to analyze the agency’s Facebook page analytics to determine the overall effectiveness of the project. The long-term goal would then be for the agency to see an increase in clients receiving services from their office.

Figure #1 shows a “Problem Model” that works to analyze issues on both the micro and macro levels. The micro-level problem statement looks into contributing factors and consequences of an agency-specific problem. The macro level problem statement analyzes contributing factors and consequences of a larger health or social problem.

<b>Figure #1. PROBLEM MODEL</b>		
<b>Contributing Factors to Agency Problem</b>	<b>Agency-Specific “Micro-Level” Problem Statement</b>	<b>Consequences to Agency/Clients if Problem is Not Addressed</b>
Veterans not aware of benefits	Approximately 70% of veterans in Monterey County are not connected to pension or compensation benefits	Agency services go unused
Current outreach methods are target specific		County cuts funding to veterans and dependents
Veterans unable to access benefits because of health issues		Veterans continue in poor health and lose quality of life

Contributing Factors to Broader Problem	Broader “Macro-Level” Health or Social Problem Statement	Consequences to Society if Problem is Not Addressed
Mental health treatment barriers during tours of duty	Veterans return from active duty and struggle with numerous issues, including family instability, homelessness, health issues and financial strain	Veterans do not return as healthy members of society
Veterans encounter various health related risks		Veterans have health issues that affect them and impact the healthcare system
Constant moving, spousal employment difficulties and transient financial needs		Veterans gather debt, impacting their quality of life

The micro-level agency problem is that approximately 70% of Veterans in Monterey County are not connected to pension or compensation benefits (Monterey County Veterans Affairs Office, 2021, p. 6). Contributing factors to this problem are veterans not being aware of available benefits (VA Claim Consulting, n.d.), current outreach methods are target specific (Murphy, 2022) and that veterans are not able to access benefits because of various health issues (MedlinePlus, 2022). The consequences of not addressing this problem are that agency services go unused, the county could cut funding to the agency, affecting veterans, family members and dependents and that veterans with health issues continue in poor health and lose quality of life.

The macro-level health problem is that veterans return from active duty and struggle with numerous issues including family instability, homelessness (American Public Health Association [APHA], 2014), health issues (MedlinePlus, 2022) and financial strain (National Veterans Technical Assistance Center [NVTAC], (n.d.)). The contributing factors to this problem include mental health treatment barriers for active-duty military during tours of duty (Naifeh, et. al., 2016), veterans encountering various health related risks while on active duty (MedlinePlus, 2022) and the constant moving, spousal difficulty maintaining

consistent employment in addition to transient financial needs (NVTAC, (n.d.)). The consequences of not addressing this problem are that veterans do not return as contributing and healthy members of society, that veterans go through life with health issues that affect them and shorten their lifespan, impacting the healthcare system and that veterans gather debt, are unable to emergency save and contribute to retirement, impacting their quality of life (NVTAC, (n.d.)).

The relationship between these two problems is that veterans need benefits, support and services after returning home, therefore, greater access to local county veteran services needs to be addressed.

### **Project Implementation Plan and Scope of Work**

This project was implemented through the agency's Facebook page, which is accessed by clients. Currently, the agency page is underutilized and needs work and improvements. There are several components that were used in order to engage clients and their families. The first component was done by posting items that advertise the agency's services, posting videos of staff or service members giving testimonials, posting humorous "meme" photos that catch people's attention with captions below and finally, posing a question that engages clients and their families.

In addition to posting, monitoring of post effectiveness and engagement was done through analytical means, which then showed ways postings could be improved. Learning how to use Facebook analytics was an important part of the process as well.

Participants in the project were the student and both the mentor and secondary mentor. The student's responsibility was to plan, create and post Facebook posts on a weekly basis, all while monitoring the posts for interactions and/or engagements. These posts were then assessed through the agency's Facebook page analytics to determine the effectiveness. The mentor oversaw the overall project work and completion, while working in cooperation with the secondary mentor on the agency's Facebook page through postings and

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monitoring of analytics. The secondary mentor was the primary point of contact for all things related to the Facebook page. Resources needed for this project included several hours a week to create and place postings on the agency's Facebook page. Additional time was thought to be needed for post engagements with both current and future clients, however was not, and finally time to monitor the page's analytics was needed.

A potential challenge that was thought could arise is that if the Facebook page is not used properly the project would not succeed in its goals. For example, posts need to be done with thought, creativity and care. Once posted, people are immediately able to see the information. Making sure the posts are ready before posting is very important. Another example of a potential challenge was accessing the management side of the agency Facebook page. This area of the page has multiple points of access, and needs to be handled carefully so as to not change any settings. Monitoring analytics was very important in order to determine the page's success, and was a new task to learn and use. The challenges here were becoming well-versed in using the tools in order to properly monitor the project and evaluate success.

This project was chosen as a way to give the agency more exposure through their Facebook page. Specifically it was executed by doing various postings in order to engage current and future clients with the goal of their becoming agency service connected. To begin, an agency card was made in order to promote the page and give clients a quick way to access it through a scannable QR code. Next, in conjunction and through training with the agency secondary mentor, several postings were done over the months of March and April, with assessment of success of postings was done in April. Measuring of analytics was done during the duration of the posting timeframe. Final findings analysis was submitted to both agency mentor and secondary mentor. Two dress rehearsals for the capstone project were in April, with the final presentation on May 13, 2022.

<b>Table #3. SCOPE OF WORK</b>					
<b>Phases</b>		<b>Activities</b>		<b>Deliverables</b>	<b>Timeline</b>
1	Select capstone project	1.1	Discuss capstone project ideas with mentor and agency staff	Generate a list of capstone project ideas.	Sept 2021
		1.2	Discuss capstone project ideas with mentor and agency staff	Submit a list of ideas and final project option to mentor for review/approval	Oct 2021
2	Plan project	2.1	Train/discuss with secondary mentor on how to effectively post and engage with clients through Facebook	Discuss training with mentor and seek feedback	February 2022
		2.2	Create agency promotion card that connects to Facebook page for agency use in office	Submit card to agency secondary mentor for review and printing	February 2022
3	Implement project	3.1	Begin posting to engage clients with agency, leading to accessing of benefits, services etc.	Secondary mentor review postings and provide feedback	March/April 2022
		3.2	Engage with clients via comments on postings	Secondary mentor review comment engagements made and provide feedback	March/April 2022
		3.3	Measure analytics to make sure that posts and engagements remain effective	Use findings to further improve upon postings and comment engagements	March/April 2022
4	Assess project	4.1	Gather analytical data to see how effective use of Facebook was in reaching clients through posting	Submit analysis of Facebook data to mentor and secondary mentor for their review and feedback	April 2022
		4.2	Gather analytical data to see how effective use of Facebook was in reaching clients through community interaction (comments, etc.)	Submit analysis of Facebook data to mentor and secondary mentor for their review and feedback	April 2022
5	Report on project findings	5.1	Prepare capstone presentation in selected format	Present at Dress Rehearsal for grading	April 2022
		5.2	Final preparation for Capstone Festival	Final Capstone Festival presentation!	May 2022
		5.3	Complete reporting requirements	Final agency and capstone reports	May 2022

**Project Assessment Plan**

**Project Description**

This project sought to expose veterans and their families to agency benefits and services through the agency Facebook page, while also providing a platform for both new and current clients and families to interact. The micro-level agency problem is a majority (70%) of veterans in Monterey County are not accessing benefits for which they are eligible. The main deliverable of this project was an increase in engagement on the agency’s Facebook page, completed by early April 2022.

**Expected Outcomes**

This project had an expected short-term outcome of client engagement on the agency’s Facebook page. The expected intermediate outcome of this project is that clients will access services at the agency. The expected long-term outcome is that the agency will see an increase in clients receiving services from their office.

<b>Short term outcome (expected as a result of the capstone project)</b>	<b>Intermediate outcome</b>	<b>Long-term outcome/impact</b>
Increased client engagement on the agency’s Facebook page	Clients will access services at the agency	Agency sees an increase in clients receiving services from their office

**Outcome Measures**

The outcome measure that was used to determine the effectiveness of this project was the level of engagement on the agency’s Facebook page.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The method for data collection for this project consisted of two parts. First, the number of agency Facebook promotion cards was tallied in order to see how many were taken. And second, both the agency page reach and new number of followers were analyzed. Both of these elements were used to determine the effectiveness of the project.

**Conclusion**

There were a couple of challenges with the project. First, was making sure that posts were unique, timely and had proper audience reach, requiring careful planning and creativity. Another was making proper use of the Facebook page's management system, including the measurement of analytics. Learning to use these components properly is crucial to both project analysis and data measurement.

**Findings, Assessment Results, Recommendations, Conclusions****Findings**

As a result of this project's intervention, in collaboration with the secondary mentor, the agency's Facebook page increased both its reach and number of followers. Post reach is defined as "...the number of unique people who saw your post" (Hasa, 2021). This means that over the course of this project, 419 unique people viewed the posts made on the agency page, which was up 170.3% over the previous month. Of a total of 105 page followers, 7 new followers joined the page within a 28 day period when the analytics of this project were taken the week of April 11, 2022. Of the initial printing of the agency's Facebook promotional cards, 25 out of 100 were taken by clients, while 50% of the second and final printings of promotional cards (25 of about 50) were taken by clients.

**Assessment Results**

This project overall achieved the short-term expected outcome of increased engagement on the agency's Facebook page. The increased amount of page reach, (170.3% above the previous month), in addition to new followers, shows the success of the project.

The one area, however, that did not succeed was clients interacting with one another. While the posts did receive both likes and shares, showing engagement, there were no comments on the posts. Social platforms can many times be unpredictable and there is not always a guaranteed way for things such as this to happen; it's a choice for social media account holders to make themselves. A recommendation for the agency is to consider doing an assessment of post effectiveness in regards to post comments and/or comment interactions, such as 6 months or a year from now.

In regards to ways the project's execution succeeded, this could be seen by the findings and data, but also the type of posts that were made. For example, posts with pictures, bright colors or funny "meme"

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photos received a fair amount of interaction. The video post made of one of the agency employees also did well. The most successful post offered information on the veterans and dependents tuition fee waiver and was shared by a local county government official. As a result, this post received the most reach of any other post during the project.

One limitation was the inability to boost posts on the Facebook page. Post boosting can help Facebook pages because they, "...amplify the reach of your content to appear to a wider range of your target audience outside of people who already follow your page" (Sprout Social, 2021). Since the county doesn't allow this option because of budgetary reasons, it limited what could have been a greater reach and possible interactions between clients.

### **Recommendations**

The first recommendation for the agency is to continue to produce the Facebook page promotional cards and make them available to both current and potential new clients. This helps to provide them with the exposure they need to have more people access their page. Second, is to partner with local government officials if possible. Based on the large reach of the post that was shared by local Monterey County official Wendy Askew, this seems like a wise course of action. Finally, is to continue to post on the agency page on a regular basis. It's critical to stay active on all social media pages, including Facebook, in order for people to stay engaged and for potential future interaction.

There are still many current and future clients to be reached through the agency's Facebook page. Veterans in particular across the country are dealing with the various life impediments that necessitates accessing the many benefits and services the agency has to offer. While this project worked to create greater exposure to these elements, more posting and advertising through postings of the benefits and services could eventually lead to better overall quality and health of veterans and their families.

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## Conclusions

The biggest insight that I was able to take away from this project was simply the fact that 70% of veterans are not accessing the benefits and services available to them. This means that this funding is at risk and I was surprised that so many veterans are not taking advantage of what is available to them. I also learned that there are many difficulties these men and women face upon returning home, including familial and financial, not just medical, which highlights the even greater need to fill the gap of the 70% non-service connected veterans by getting them service-connected.

In regards to the agency's Facebook page, I learned that Facebook can be a great tool for promotion if used and monitored properly. I was able to dive deeper into how a Facebook page works and also how to analyze how successful it is or is not. In addition, I also learned that even though a county agency may have a social media page, funding is limited and employees are forced to work within the boundaries of these budget constraints. This sadly limits the amount of success that could otherwise be had if only more money was spent or even if another social media platform was available for them to use.

For future capstone students in the CHHS (Collaborative Health & Human Services) program, I above all things recommend making sure to balance time between both the capstone project and field work. Both are important and necessary in order to complete the major and have the full experience it has to offer. I also recommend that students think carefully when choosing their mentor and (possible) secondary mentor. These people are critical to the success of the capstone project and field internship experience, meaning a great deal of time will be spent working with them.

Overall the capstone experience allowed me to learn, grow and support the agency I have been serving in for almost a year and a half. The staff has been supportive of my work and learning process, making sure I have had what I've needed. I will look back in particular thankful for the great people I had

the pleasure of working with and serving at my internship, leaving me with a life experience that I will carry with me for many years to come.

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**Appendix**

Copy of agency Facebook page promotional card draft #1



The promotional card features a blue background with a white text area in the center. At the top right is the official seal of the Military & Veterans Affairs Office, which includes an eagle, a landscape, and the text 'MILITARY & VETERANS AFFAIRS OFFICE' and 'COUNTY OF MONTREY'. The central text reads 'Follow us on Facebook or visit us online!'. Below this text, on the left, is a circular icon with a white 'f' on a grey background. In the middle, the website 'www.mvao.org' and phone number '1-831-647-7613' are listed. On the right is a square QR code.



## SERVICES OFFERED INCLUDE

- Comprehensive benefits counseling
- Claims preparation and submission
- Claims follow-up to ensure final decisions are fully adjudicated
- Initiate and develop appeals when appropriate
- Networking and advocacy with federal, state and local agencies
- And many more!

Copy of agency Facebook page promotional card draft #2



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## SERVICES OFFERED INCLUDE

- Comprehensive benefits counseling
- Claims preparation and submission
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- And many more!