

Little Hoover Commission testimony (June 22, 2017)

John F. Dunbar

Mayor, Town of Yountville

Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today as part of your analysis of the California Veterans Home system.

The California Veterans Home in Yountville has long been a unique and honored part of our community of just under 3,000 residents. We share numerous facilities and public services including our municipal water source, Rector Reservoir, which is owned and operated by the Veterans Home, our wastewater treatment plant operated by the Town, and our community swimming pool, operated and maintained by the Town.

The Napa Valley Performing Arts Center at Lincoln Theater, Napa Valley Museum, Borman Baseball Field and the Vintners Golf Club also are community partners on campus.

For more than 132 years, the Home has served our veterans in myriad ways. From the early days when residents farmed the property to today's delivery of services like health care and housing, the Veterans Home stands tall in support of the many veterans who return to California to get the support they need and deserve.

California is home to an estimated 1.8 million veterans. An additional 30,000 discharged members of the armed services are expected each of the next several years. Vietnam and Korean War veterans are entering a period in their lives when they need more care. Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, often under the age of 30, return home with very different needs and interests in terms of their military benefits, medical care and support services.

As we say goodbye to our aging World War II heroes, we are challenged by how best to serve these next generations of veterans.

With the new age of veterans comes evolving needs and opportunities. We need to identify how to deliver behavior and mental health services, addiction treatment and

housing choices, as well as educational and vocational training for veterans who may not need or want domiciliary care. Outpatient treatment programs make sense for delivering today's veteran services.

The Town of Yountville and the Napa Valley community as a whole are ready, willing and able to support this transition of facilities and services at the Yountville Veterans Home.

We see great potential in integrating the federal Department of Veterans Affairs and CalVet along with public and private partnerships to deliver these services.

One example of this collaboration that already exists locally is The Pathway Home, a non-profit organization headquartered on the campus that offers educational and vocational support to college veterans who need clinical mental health assistance to fulfill their potential in civilian life.

I support CalVet Secretary Dr. Vito Imbasciani's efforts to build a Skilled Nursing Facility on the campus to replace the deteriorating Holderman Hospital and provide more effective and appropriate care. Upgrading facilities and modernizing the service delivery model should be a top priority.

Parallel to that effort, one of the most significant steps the California Department of Veterans Affairs and the Yountville Veterans Home can take to support veterans of today and tomorrow is to provide new housing on the Yountville campus.

The growing number of homeless veterans in California, and across the nation, is alarming. We have an opportunity to move the needle in a positive direction by developing housing for veteran residents, caregiving staff and the local Napa Valley workforce.

Many of the more than 900 employees of the Veterans Home in Yountville travel from outside Napa County, often driving more than an hour to get to work due to a severe shortage of affordable housing options in Napa Valley. This has real consequences on child care, schooling, family life and community balance.

In 2016, the State Board of Equalization stated that data from the California Association of Realtors reported the median price for a home in Napa County had risen to \$606,494, the highest level in eight years, with monthly rents approaching \$2,500 per month on average. Home ownership, even rental of single family residences, is out of reach for many families who make up the Yountville Veterans Home workforce.

This certainly creates challenges for individuals and families entering the housing market. The opportunity for the State, meanwhile, is that housing development on the Veterans Home grounds would result in housing opportunities for the workforce and general public, as well as new long-term revenues for the State of California.

Yountville staff estimates our municipal systems can support 300 or more living units on the Veterans Home grounds. That would include a mix of single family and multi-family residences. Additional investment in expansion of the Town's infrastructure could raise that number even higher. The State could see a dramatic and ongoing return on its investment, and it would lead by example giving critical support to its veteran-serving workforce and meet regional housing goals stated as a priority by Governor Brown.

We also recognize the value of multi-generational interaction that would result from on-campus housing. Engaging the veteran population with other age groups would enhance lives and provide unique learning opportunities as well.

Rather than CalVet spending additional money on failing infrastructure and outdated facilities, funds should be invested in modern facilities and new dwelling units that, in turn, would offer the added benefit of supporting significantly higher numbers of our veterans than are being cared for today.

We also can construct this housing using environmentally sustainable building practices, which would help fulfill the State's own goals for residential development with zero energy consumption and greenhouse gas reduction. We can take vehicles off the roads, reduce traffic congestion throughout the Napa Valley, and provide affordable housing opportunities at the same time.

Workforce housing on the property also has the distinct benefit of supporting the Napa Valley Unified School District and Yountville Elementary School in particular. Upvalley housing would attract families with school-aged children that would have a positive impact on declining enrollment numbers in our local public education system. Having public school learning available to a culturally and economically diverse population makes our community more vibrant.

These top priorities do not exhaust the list of opportunities on the Yountville campus. As have been identified in CalVet's Facilities Master Plan report, other service delivery and revenue generating models have potential.

One example is welcoming onto the campus other state agencies or private partners who offer vocational training to individuals who, in turn, could put their skills to work on the property.

These types of partnerships provide the added benefit of satisfying the federal government's mission as stated in the Departments of Labor and Education's Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act, signed by President Obama in July of 2014, to improve access to education and workforce services for individuals with barriers to employment, including veterans returning from their service only to be confronted by challenges reintegrating into home life, careers and other social or economic settings.

Fulfilling the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) mission opens the door to federal financial support for services offered through the California Veterans Home.

Another example is working with a hotel partner to build overnight lodging that could be available to veterans' visiting family members and the general public that would generate revenue for CalVet and the State.

The Yountville Veterans Home could host a business incubator, given the rare amount of underutilized property and buildings on campus that are centrally located in the Napa Valley. We hear regularly about the lack of corporate event and meeting space, office space and even retail space that may be another long-term source of revenue to support the CalVet mission.

As stated earlier, the Town of Yountville is open to these types of development opportunities. What is critical for us is to be part of the ongoing dialogue, so we can integrate the evolution of the Veterans Home into our community and also help CalVet maximize the potential of the property to better meet the needs of current and future generations of veterans.

I, along with Town staff, enjoy a healthy, supportive relationship with our local Veterans Home administration and the CalVet leadership in Sacramento. We already have collaborated on finding ways to best serve our resident population, as well as how we can adapt veteran services and facilities to serve thousands more veterans that need our help.

We can create a model that would be the gold standard for all the Veterans Homes in California and across the nation, while advancing the core mission of serving our veterans.

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to speak to you today. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.