

Allied Council
Veterans Home of California – Yountville
60 California Drive
Yountville, CA 94599

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A 21st Century Yountville Veterans Home

Preface

The Yountville Veterans Home opened its doors to returning soldiers of the Mexican-American War and the Grand Army of the Republic one hundred thirty-two years ago. This was done by the Veterans Home Association, a group of citizen/veterans. While Yountville merits the title of “Pearl” of Veteran Homes, the newest residential building is sixty-three years old and while the construction leadership of Holderman and Borman created solid buildings, time and inattention has left us with a physical plant that needs to be restored and repurposed.

Nonphysical Considerations

If I were asked – What is truly the **unique feature of the Home**, my response would be that the Home provides the opportunity for Home veterans, both Independent Living and Higher Care, with their varying degrees of mobility to get around, somewhat in control of everyday acts of life. The space and complexity of our Home allows each person to maintain a degree of independence which enhances his sense of worth. Is the “Independent Living” veteran, who has severely restricted walking ability less deserving than a veteran needing Skilled Nursing Care? Two days’ ago, I watched a veteran walk out of the Mess Hall to his scooter, six inches at a time. But my favorite poster child for demonstrating the Home’s unique importance to a veteran, comes from watching 94-year-old Hula Davis, dressed to the “nines”, making his way to and from church at a very slow but independent rate. The question of which

I have found the **“soul” of the Home**. The central beloved feature of our current Home is the “Alameda”, an oval of land full of trees and grass, a source of tranquility and renewal, that centers individual veterans. Just ask my friend Bob, who sat on a bench and worked through his grief as several of his adult children died prematurely. The proof of importance of this hallowed ground is also evidenced by its only structure, the 1917 Armistice Chapel. Veterans showed the importance of this 3 football field length field several years ago when 67 % of them voted an 87 % majority to reject a plan to build Civil War battle themed flower gardens in the Alameda.

The deed for the sale of the Yountville property from the “Veterans’ Home Association” to the state of California for one 10-dollar gold piece contains words that speak to **the need to maintain the property for Veteran use** – “holding and maintaining the same (property) for the support, maintenance and well-being of aged and infirm United States ex-Soldiers, Sailors and Marines”

Yountville Veterans Home Planning Group (YVHPG)

This section will combine the committee's request to suggest ways to "best engage residents in the planning process" and the need to create a planning process sufficient to the challenge facing California as they create a 21st Century Yountville Veterans Home.

The best way forward requires many inputs to ensure that a variety of points of view are included. My ideas are meant to be helpful, not complete. Two general attributes should mark this effort – administrative transparency and member(resident) involvement.

Member involvement has been a key feature throughout the history of the Yountville Home. While the group named the Allied Council was created in legislation, by Senator Nielsen in the 1990's, there was a chapter of the Grand Army of the Republic (GK Warren Chapter) in the beginning. Later the "Commanders Council", comprised of active service organizations, like the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars acted as the veterans' spokesman. Despite the apparent preference of CDVA to centralize control within the sphere of state workers, the Allied Council remains committed to the concept that, for both historical as well as programmatic reasons, the Home works best when there is an active cooperation between administration and veterans. This effort remains a work in progress. The goal of active cooperation should produce a Home environment where "respect" for the veteran is present in every interaction and no member "fears" their remarks will cause them harm. The Allied Council appreciates the Little Hoover's recognition of the value of veterans in shaping the future of their Home.

Whatever the official structure leading the planning process there are at least three principle ways to involve members – 1. Maintain regular processes that will keep all members informed; 2. Hold periodic "Town Hall" meetings that will provide information and the opportunity to respond; 3. Include several members on the central group that will direct planning for the Yountville Veterans Home. No one has more at stake than the current and future veterans on the outcome of this process. It should be noted that members at the Home have a wide variety of skills that would help in the planning process – builder, city planner, architect, organizer are life time skills found in current members.

Over the last two years two acts have been noted in the planning process. Soon after his appointment as Secretary of CDVA, Dr. Vito Imbasciani came to the Yountville Home to introduce himself. The major topic was the future of the Home. Two of the ideas conveyed were a new skilled nursing center was the first key step to repurposing the Home and veterans in Independent Living did not need to fear being displaced. This planning effort was started by the Administrator. Several times veterans asked of progress. Responses were vague and at this moment, veterans are in the dark about progress. Each time the topic came up, I volunteered that current veterans would be an ideal "focus group". Someday those of us in Independent Living will be the occupants of the anticipated new center. That offer never aroused any interest. The question of continuation of Independent Living as one of the service areas deserves more consideration as the process moves forward.

A planning group for the repurposed Home will naturally be led by the Secretary but must have many interests represented beyond state staff and veterans. Let me name a few – Town of Yountville, the Mayor, John Dunbar, has already been active in the process; representative from the school group, YES should be included; several persons with experience in conversion of property from government to nonprofit use, like the Golden Gate Park National Conservancy; banker.

It would be best to separate the local state leader from the person who is the Yountville Administrator. Both jobs are too important to overload one state employee. The Little Hoover may want to recommend a structure and funding. Creating an identified group with specified tasks and members in legislation would be an appropriate way to recognize the importance and complexity of the task. The hearing that brings us together today will be informative.

This project is complex with a wide variety of potential contributors and interests. Yountville is not like other Veteran Homes and that difference must be used to full advantage. The space at our Home can be used to serve many interrelated veteran groups.

A “charrette” planning process could be considered to blend the many program possibilities.

Program options – briefly stated

- 1. New Skilled Nursing Center** – A study of this possibility is well along. It moves the Home toward a modern facility for this high need group. It is the key to gaining the ability to empty buildings and to repurpose those buildings for new populations.
- 2. Transitional program for returning female veterans** – An unused space, between the “Redwood Grove” and the large parking area across from Washington Hall, would comfortably fit three two story buildings. Each building would house 4-6 female heads of family and single ex-veterans. The focus would be post traumatic and sexual abuse circumstances. The buildings would be grouped with a central courtyard, suitable for program and living. As it true for some of the new housing construction, the addition of this population to be served would add to the potential school population at the Yountville Elementary school. Transportation is excellent for this population. A local non-profit housing agency coupled with a bank into Housing and community development could implement this idea.
- 3. Housing for Home staff** – The area west of the picnic area could hold many new houses. There are two large open areas at slightly different elevations. Priority could be given to state workers most in need, lowest income. It would contribute to the school population in Yountville. Water and sewage services need to be evaluated. I have seen an earlier use for this area developed by a St. Helena architect. That plan focused on part time recreational use for the area. His plan stated the need for more electricity and another entry road near the Domain Chandon.
- 4. Housing other** – Housing could be made available to other veteran connected groups like Blue Star mothers or first homes for returning veterans.
- 5. Existing structures** – As Holderman and current residences are emptied., they need to be rebuilt inside to a standard that meets VA expectations. Large and small construction firms could be used

with a specific plan of the minimum expectations. A wide variety of populations could fill the buildings – “Wounded Warriors”, state staff serving the Home, Blue Star Mothers,

6. General Expectations -

Any rebuilding of Yountville can retain the fundamental sense of place found here today. Integrity of the Alameda is central to such a goal. Buildings can have populations not served now. A study of California veteran demographics is important to understanding the expected drop in the large numbers of veterans, ending with Vietnam. New populations resulting from the nature of current conflicts can be added. All things are possible as long as the Veteran use is present.