

HAWAII VETERAN

Vol. 24, No. 1 State of Hawai'i Office of Veterans' Services May 2021

New Cemetery Operations Manager



**Robert S.K. Lee, CCMSgt (Ret.) USAF
HSVC Operations Manager**

Aloha Ka Kou, As a local boy who grew up just blocks away from the Hawai'i State Veteran Cemetery (HSVC) and a 36-year USAF/ANG retiree, I am honored to be a part of the HSVC ohana as their Operations Manager.

Honoring those who have dedicated a portion of their life by answering the call to defend America's freedoms is our kuleana (responsibility) here at the Hawai'i State Veterans Cemetery. A kuleana that is steeped within a dedicated staff of professionals who offer their aloha by instilling reverence as we e ho'omāmalama I ke ala (light the path) to their resting place within these hallowed grounds and I can assure you that these heroes and their ohana are in very capable hands.

As we strive to maintain the highest level of dignity for our fallen and their ohana, I reach out to our communities to ask for everyone's support in assisting us within this endeavor. As much as our health is a personal priority

and getting out into the fresh air to exercise (walking/jogging/riding bikes etc.) is an escape from the hustle and bustle of life, I would like to convey a gentle reminder that the HSVC is not a place for those types of activities and as some may deem those activities as harmless, in reality it does not align with the reverence we owe and bestow upon those laid to rest within the hallowed grounds of the HSVC.

Another common practice that is not in alignment with our kuleana at HSVC is bringing any type of food items onto the cemetery grounds as food is the primary contributor to attracting animals and rodents onto the resting places. For the reason of safety, health concerns and unsightly gaggles of chickens, roosters, feral pigs and cats, food is not allowed with the exception for religious purposes as offerings.

Our partnership with and support from our communities is vital in perpetuating the dignity and honor in conveying our appreciation to our fallen heroes and their ohana of how grateful we are

for their sacrifices while defending the freedoms we all enjoy today. God Bless America and God Bless our military ohana.

Mahalo piha for your kind understanding and support,

Rob Lee

Cemetery Operations Manager Background

Mr. Lee retired in February 2016 with 36 years of dedicated service as a member of the United States Air Force and the Hawai'i Air National Guard. He served as Governor David Ige's Chief Protocol Officer and Deputy Military Affairs Liaison and then transferred to the Department of Transportation, Airports Division, serving as the Special Assistant to the Deputy Director. When Southwest Airlines (SWA) committed to serving the Hawaiian Islands, Mr. Lee was selected as the Station Manager for SWA at the Daniel K. Inouye International Airport assisting in the launching and overseeing the daily operations. He returns to the State of Hawai'i Department of Defense after serving as the Senior Enlisted Advisor to the Adjutant General of the Hawai'i National Guard.



Director's Message

Ronald P. Han, Jr., COL USA (Ret.)

Director State Office of Veterans' Services

Aloha! 2021 is off to an incredible start!

By the time you receive this newsletter, most of our State residents will have taken their first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine and we will have concluded the proceedings of the State Legislature. Our OVS offices across the State have not opened for face to face sessions, but they also have not closed their doors to taking Veteran claims and queries since the start of the pandemic protocols that went into effect in March 2020.

In fact, at this point in the year, we are on track to have significantly increased the number of our disability claims output by 25%-30%. Our effectiveness in doing telework and working in a concise partnership with clients has led to this efficiency and productivity as we have taken on more clients than we ever have before and we have kept our staff and our clients safe from the virus throughout. With this the new year, comes much change.

Our State Veterans Cemeteries have also never shut their doors and have been busier than ever.

In this issue, we have welcomed new OVS staff personnel and have promoted deserving individuals who have worked tirelessly to promote mission operations in serving our veterans.

We have also welcomed new State Advisory Board of Veterans Services Members and brought on a much needed Healthcare Coordinator to support our construction and operational milestones in the years ahead for the second State Veterans Home that is already seen grading work and dust fences being installed in Kapolei.

The OVS offices have also embraced virtual outreach sessions in almost every spectrum. From working with the Lanakila Multi-Purpose Senior Center, to the AARP Concert honoring Veterans and their families featuring the legendary musician Henry Kapono, to our podcast with the US Army Soldiers for Life, to our Island Focus segment on Olelo and with the Mike Buck Radio Show highlighting our cemetery operations. These are just a few examples where our OVS team is engaged to ensure we can connect more veterans with the services they have earned.

I also want to thank the many veterans throughout the State that participate in their Veteran Councils, their chapters and posts, the auxiliary component and many who we have counted on to provide needed support to projects. Travel restrictions may have precluded on site attendance, but our on-island veterans were invaluable in continuing our mission.

In closing on a somber note, OVS expresses its heartfelt condolences to the family of the late BG Irwin Cockett. A former OVS Director, a distinguished Korean and Vietnam War Veteran and inspired leader in the community, one could always count on BG Cockett for support and guidance anytime. He did not have the word "no" or phrase "no-can" in his vocabulary. Just ask the Vietnam Veterans he lifted and rescued in his chopper when no one else stepped forward because the mission was deemed too dangerous. A fond aloha and a hui hou to this warrior!

Please continue to stay safe and to take care of one another! It's what we all do best!

New Employees & Promoted Staff



Thomas M. Driskill

Mr. Driskill is the new Healthcare Coordinator for the Second State Veterans Home. He is a retired US Army Colonel who worked in the Dept. of the Army's Surgeon General's Office. He also served as the Deputy Commander/Chief of Staff for both Walter Reed Army Medical Center (AMC) and Tripler AMC, as the President and CEO for the Hawai'i Health Systems Corporation and he retired from the Veterans Affairs Pacific Island Health Care System as their Rural Health Coordinator. He brings over 45 years of healthcare experience and expertise to this contract position.



Darren Eugenio

Mr. Eugenio was promoted to Supervisor for the Maui OVS Office. He enlisted in the Air Force when he was 19 years old. His brothers also enlisted during the Vietnam War time period. Mr. Eugenio's last job was at Maui Youth and Family Services where he worked as a director of programs for teenage drug addiction and outreach prevention programs.



Kelcie K. Figueira

Ms. Figueira was promoted to Supervisor for the Hawai'i Island OVS Office. She previously served her community as the AFL-CIO Labor Community Services Liaison for Hawai'i Island in partnership to Aloha United Way with experience in other nonprofit organizations. Born and raised in Hilo, Ms. Figueira is a graduate of University of Hawai'i Hilo with a degree in Sociology and obtained her master's degree in human resource management from Shidler College of Business - UH Manoa with focus in labor relations; her passion is helping people. Her grandfather was a purple heart recipient from WWII veteran.



M. John Condello

Mr. Condello was recognized as the State Department of Defense Manager of the Year.

Continued on page 4

New Employees & Promoted Staff



**Cherie
Gnehm Wright**

Ms. Gnehm Wright was recognized as the Office of Veterans' Services Employee of the Year and recently retired from the State of Hawai'i with over 25 years of service.



**Melegalenuu
Sene-Whitehead**

Ms. Sene-Whitehead is the new Veterans' Services Counselor at the O'ahu Tripler Office. Before working for OVS, she worked at U.S. VETS as a Peer Specialist for homeless veterans and then became a case manager for Supportive Services for Veteran Families assisting veterans at risk of losing their home. Ms. Sene-Whitehead is the daughter of a Vietnam War Veteran who served in the U.S. Marine Corps, and a spouse to a U.S. Army veteran.



Kelle Raitz

Ms. Raitz was promoted to Supervisor for the Kaua'i OVS Office. She graduated from the University of Hawai'i, West O'ahu with a Bachelor's Degree in Social Sciences and a minor in Human Services. Ms. Raitz's previous employment includes High School Substance Abuse Counselor and Intake Specialist at Supportive Services for Veteran Families. Ms. Raitz is the daughter of a WWII Army Veteran.



Cynthia K. Ruiz

Ms. Ruiz is the new Office Assistant at the O'ahu Tripler Office. She was at TPL Insurance and managed medical claims for 22 Years. In her spare time Ms. Ruiz loves going to the beach and working with non-profit groups.

New Veterans Advisory Board Members



Roxanne E. Bruhn

Roxanne E. Bruhn is a retired Senior Master Sergeant in the Air Force with over 31 years of distinguished service. Representing four generations in uniform, her grandfather, father, and daughter served during WWII, Vietnam, and the Gulf War respectively. She is currently the Exec. Assistant to the Deputy Federal Security Dir. at the Dept. of Homeland Security, Transportation Security Administration (TSA).



Mary Kay Hertog

Mary Kay Hertog is a retired Major General in the Air Force with over 34 years of service and six command tours. She is currently a member of the Kaua'i Police Commission and Commander of the Kaua'i Veterans Council.



Reyn Kaupiko

Reyn Kaupiko graduated from the US Naval Academy and is a U.S. Navy Veteran. He served on-board the USS Wasp and USS Nimitz aircraft carriers as a Surface Warfare Officer during his 5 years on active duty.



Blair Suzuki

Blair Suzuki graduated from the US Naval Academy and is a U.S. Navy veteran. He spent 7 years as a Surface Warfare Officer and served multiple deployments in support of the Global War on Terrorism. Blair currently works as a business and community leader on O'ahu and is a champion for Veteran issues, especially those affecting Post-9/11 veterans and under-represented members of the veteran community.

What does the Veterans Advisory Board do?

The Advisory Board on Veterans' Services advises the Director on veterans' issues, legislative proposals and program operations. The Board is made up of eight voting members representing all of the state's counties. Members of the Advisory Board, with the consent of the Senate, are appointed by the Governor and hold four-year

terms of office. At least five of the board's seven members must be veterans.

The Board meets on the first Friday of each month at 9:00 am to discuss matters related to the state's 120,000 veterans. Meetings are held through Microsoft Teams Meeting and are open to the public.

OVS Advisory Board meeting agenda can be viewed on the state's public event calendar. Scroll/select the month to see that month's agenda.

Please contact your nearest OVS office or email ovs@hawaii.gov for more information if you would like to get involved.

Debunking Common COVID-19 Vaccine Myths

The vaccines developed to fight COVID-19 have been shown to be both safe and highly effective at preventing the disease. You may have heard some inaccurate information about them. Let's set the record straight, with truths from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Johns Hopkins, the Mayo Clinic and other respected health organizations.



Myth: "You can get COVID-19 from receiving the vaccine."

Fact: *No*, you cannot get COVID-19 from receiving the vaccine because the COVID-19 vaccines do not contain the SARS-CoV-2 virus. mRNA vaccines help human cells make a protein that triggers an immune response.



Myth: "You already had COVID-19 so you don't need the vaccine."

Fact: *No*. You should get the vaccine. While a previous coronavirus infection might prevent you from reinfection, experts are not sure how long this protection may last. When enough people are vaccinated against a disease, it is harder for the disease to spread. This "community immunity" prevents the virus from traveling easily from person to person.



Myth: "COVID-19 vaccines can cause severe side effects."

Fact: Though most people have no significant reactions, the vaccine may cause side effects including fever, chills, muscle aches, joint pain, headaches and redness and pain at the injection site. Allergic reactions are more common than what we see with other vaccines but are still relatively rare and much lower than the risks associated with getting COVID-19. Each vaccine site is well equipped to handle severe allergic reaction.



Myth: "COVID-19 vaccines alter your DNA."

Fact: *No*, mRNA vaccines that protect us from COVID-19 do not alter DNA. Rather, these vaccines work outside of our cells' nucleus (where our DNA is kept) and teach the cells how to make a protein that triggers an immune response. Your cells break down and get rid of the mRNA soon after they have finished using the instructions.



Myth: "You can stop wearing a mask once you've had the COVID-19 vaccine."

Fact: *No*, you still need to wear a mask. Getting the COVID-19 vaccine prevents you from getting sick but may not stop the coronavirus from entering your body. It's uncertain whether people who have been vaccinated can still carry and transmit the virus. You still need to practice accepted COVID-19 precautions: keep your mask on and continue physical distancing when you're out in public.



Myth: "COVID-19 vaccines are unsafe because they were developed so quickly."

Fact: *No*. COVID-19 vaccines were authorized under the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) Emergency Use Authorization (EUA). An EUA includes the same steps taken in full-term clinical trials—including testing the vaccine on thousands of human participants—only with a consolidated timeline. Multiple federal agencies have worked together to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective.

Your safe care is our mission.



I am not Invisible Project

I Am Not Invisible project, which is a photographic exhibit of women Veterans across all eras, was designed to increase awareness of the service of women in the military to this country.

It is the only permanent project the Center for Women Veterans has ever adopt-

ed. This project to date consists of photographs of over 2,800 women veterans who have been photographed in 49 states and Puerto Rico. Hawai'i was the final state to participate in this special project.

Gene Russell is the main photographer. He has managed

to photograph three of the surviving six women Veterans from the 6888th, and are hoping to be able to capture the images of the remaining three in the next few months. Mr. Russell has taken the vast majority of these 2,800 photographs.



Gene Russell prepares Betty Kramer (USMC Veteran) for her photo session



Gene Russell, VA Photographer with Media Services, Alma Grocki, Chandra Lake (Associate Director of VA Pacific Island Health Care System and Retired CMSgt, USAF) and Betty Kramer (USMC Veteran) take a pause during the session before being photographed.

Photos from the Office of Veterans' Services



Roxanne Bruhn (Retired SMSgt, USAF) and Project Lead, Alma Grocki (Retired RADM, USN) go over details before the photo-shoot for the "I AM NOT INVISIBLE, HAWAII" project tied to the VA Center for Women Veterans



Executive Director of the O'ahu Veterans Center, Claire Levinson spends time going over details with one of the photo-shoot candidates



OVS is overhauling the Hawai'i Veteran Newsletter

**By Jayme Nagamine
Information Specialist**

Office of Veterans' Services
State of Hawai'i
E-Wing, Room 1-A103
459 Patterson Road
Honolulu, HI 96819-1522

Gov. David Y. Ige
Commander in Chief

Maj. Gen. Kenneth S. Hara
The Adjutant General

Col.-R Ronald P. Han, Jr.
OVS Director

Jayme Nagamine
Editor/Layout

<http://dod.hawaii.gov/ovs>
Email: ovs@hawaii.gov
433-0420 (OVS)
433-0385 (OVS fax)

The Office of Veterans' Services (OVS) is going virtual. We are starting a brand new Veteran Newsletter electronic database. If you would like to receive the Hawai'i Veteran Newsletter please email ovs@hawaii.gov

Feel free to pass on the newsletter to your friends. Your assistance in this new endeavor will be greatly appreciated.

Thank you very much for your continued participation.