

The CAO Weekly Report

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Monterey County Administrative Office

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In this edition:

- Military and Veterans Affairs Office plays important role in cemetery access
- Which department hosted its third annual walk-a-thon?
- County Counsel holds training on public records



Military and Veterans Affairs Office Plays Key Role in Cemetery Access for Veterans



Lots of dignitaries joined together to turn the first dirt at the new cemetery in March.

It was decades in the making, and finally became a reality with a groundbreaking ceremony this past March with construction commencing June 22. Most of us have seen the California Central Coast Veterans Cemetery on the old Fort Ord evolve from idea to reality.

The County's Military and Veterans Affairs Office (MVAO) worked closely with the Cemetery Advisory Committee, Congressman Farr, Senator Monning, State Assembly

member Stone, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and the California Department of Veterans Affairs to create the cemetery and will be an important link for veterans who want to make it their final resting place.

The pre-opening registration process for the first phase of the cemetery has begun, and the MVAO, which already assists local veterans with benefit claims and a wide variety of other services, will be coordinating registration and responding to inquiries about burial at the cemetery.

“Since the cemetery is in Monterey County, it makes sense to have our offices coordinate the local registration process and answer questions,” explains Wes Morrill, Management Analyst in the MVAO. “All the registration information we receive will be uploaded to the State Veterans Claims system called VETPRO. From there, the State will be able to access the forms we’ve uploaded and respond to the registrants regarding their eligibility.”

Morrill says the information about pre-registration went out to county Veterans Affairs offices throughout the state and to the public July 1st. To date, there have been about 75 calls to the Monterey County office, and 35 applications have been received.

“We’ve received inquiries from surviving spouses holding urns, veterans interested in finding out about the process, and family members requesting information for elderly parents,” says Morrill, who says one common misconception is that only veterans in Monterey County can be buried in the new cemetery. Any eligible veteran can be buried in the new location.

The first phase of the cemetery will offer 5,000 niches which can each hold two sets of cremains. Families holding remains will have first access to interment and will be scheduled directly with the cemetery when it opens next summer.

Veterans’ cemeteries are not like a private cemeteries where you can buy a plot or a niche. When other state cemeteries run out of space as is the case right now, survivors are left waiting for a new cemetery to be created to inter loved ones. If you know someone who might be interested in the information and forms for eligibility, they are available online at the [MVAO website](#).



Child Support Services Continues Walk-A-Thon Tradition

When it comes to walking, Child Support Services staff really goes the distance!

The latest team walk-a-thon competition took place during the month of May, organized by the department’s Health and Safety Committee. The walk-a-thons started three years ago as a healthy activity to get staff walking during their break time at work and were so

successful, they have become an annual event. This year's theme was "Race to the Moon" and staff had a "Blast Off" as the starting point for the walk-a-thon.

There has been an increase in staff participation over the past two years and this year's event had a record high of 36 motivated participants.



Walk-a-thon participants gather at the launch of the department's third annual competition.

Walkers divided into five teams and chose a team name. The team that walked the most distance, as well as the individuals who walked the most distance, won prizes.

The competition was fierce, but 'Team Luna' came out the winner. Team members Rene Pulido, Eddie Garcia, Audra Strickland and Keiha Yonemitsu each won a bouquet of flowers and a large box of organic eggs, vegetables and fruit. The top individual walkers were Dawn Yonemitsu and Keiha Yonemitsu.



Members of the winning "Team Luna" hold their prizes.

"Congratulations to the Health and Safety Committee on another successful and fun event," says Jody Holtzworth, DCSS Acting Director. "Their efforts are important to the employees and are very much appreciated."

Staff also sends a big thank you to the folks at the Employee Wellness Program for supplying those fun exercise gadgets!

DCSS funded its walk-a-thon through fundraisers and proceeds from department recycle bins.



Training Workshops Focus on Public Records Requests

County employees serve the public in many ways. One aspect of public service has recently been the topic of two training sessions by the County Counsel's Office, which is how staff and departments should respond to Public Records Act Requests.

A public record is a record (written, electronic, photographic, etc.) that is owned, used or retained by a public entity like the County for the conduct of that entity's business. It can be as formal as an ordinance or as informal as meeting notes. Members of the public, organizations, attorneys and the media frequently request to see such records and have the right to do so by making a Public Records Act Request (PRAR). The Public Records Act defines how public entities should respond to such requests, and it identifies many "exemptions from disclosure" relative to records of public bodies.

County Counsel's Office recently held two training sessions for county staff designed as a primer on public records. Senior Deputy County Counsel Kay Reimann conducted both workshops, which were well attended. She talks about the workshops and the importance of staff response below.



Senior Deputy County Counsel Kay Reimann (above center) led two workshops for county staff on responding to public records requests.

Q. What is the law regarding requests for public records?

A. Very generally, the law concerning public records is that the records of a public body are open to inspection and copying except as provided by law. The Public Records Act contains a number of "exemptions" from disclosure, as do other statutes and related case law.

Q. You recently held two workshops for county employees. Was there a particular impetus for these?

A. Years ago, the County Counsel's Office set up and provided training for a group of land use-related "Records Coordinators" for departments which receive the bulk of PRARs in the County. That group continues to meet on a bi-monthly basis. Other departments have a much more varied scope of responsibilities and so holding County-wide workshops was needed.

The impetus for the recent workshops was the receipt of a broad, county-wide PRAR concerning travel reimbursements for all County employees, including elected and appointed officials. After some preliminary discussions, it was apparent that no one

department could respond adequately, so the workshop was designed to provide both basic training and a thorough review of a particular PRAR for all departments.

Q. What were the most common questions from staff about public records requests?

A. Common questions included a number of variations on “why me?” as well as questions about specific exemptions from disclosure. County Counsel training on PRARs tries to provide the rationales behind both the basic principle that public records should be available to the public, and some of the more common disclosure exemptions. I have found that when staff members understand the “why” behind the law, the exemptions and the process, they also understand why departmental expertise is important in conducting the initial collection and review of records.



It was standing room only in the Monterey Room at the Government Center for the Public Records Workshop.

Q. What would you say is the most common misconception among county staff regarding public record requests?

A. The most common misconception relates to responsiveness: some staff viewed PRARs as low priority; others view PRARs as panic-inducing demands. The reality is that PRARs are neither. If departments keep their files (including electronic files) organized, PRARs are (or can become) part of the normal business of the department.

Q. If there was one (or two) things you’d want people to take-away from these workshops or to understand about public records, what would it be?

A. I would want people to see that PRARs are important to a well-functioning democratic government and need to be accorded proper respect and attention. I would also want people to understand the importance of disclosing what is appropriate and preserving the non-disclosure of key records that may be privileged or inherently private. Finally, I would want people to understand that the County Counsel’s Office is available to help the departments do their jobs in responding to PRARs. Our office has developed template forms for departments to use as a basis for any written response that may be required, and often can provide review of such responses.

