

VETERANS

COVER TO COVER

New program helps connect vets to healthcare, compensation



PENNY STINE/Sentinel Special Sections

Brian Oney is a CMU graduate, a former Marine and the current Cover to Cover/Veteran Services Officer for the Aging and Disability Resources for Colorado. His office is at the Mesa County Workforce and he is a passionate resource trained and ready to help all veterans, whether they're Vietnam Vets in their 60s and 70s or Gulf War vets in their 20s.

For seniors who are struggling to pay the bills, find adequate housing or in need of help in some other way, the Aging and Disability Resources for Colorado (ADRC) office and phone number is set up to be the one place seniors can call to get connected to available resources. Last fall, ADRC partnered with Mesa County to fund a unique program designed to help connect U.S. military service veterans to health benefits through the Veterans Administration hospital and/or possible compensation for medical conditions related to military service in a new program called COVER to COVER (C2C).

Like many military-related names, COVER to COVER is an acronym, which stands for connecting older veterans especially rural to community and other veteran-eligible resources. The program was started in Utah, with the intent of making sure older veterans knew about benefits they were entitled to but weren't accessing.

Here in Grand Junction, Brian Oney is both the C2C and the veteran's services officer. He's also a vet himself, which means he understands military jargon and military culture. He is someone with whom veterans, no matter whether they served in the Korean War, Vietnam, or anywhere else,

can relate. He also knows available programs, eligibility rules, contact information and correct procedure for handling claims, hearings and other issues.

"Sometimes veterans don't consider themselves vets because they never spent time with 'boots on the ground,'" Oney said. "It can be hard to convince vets that they are eligible for benefits."

According to Oney, the treatment the vet received when he or she returned home from duty often influences his or her attitude toward looking to the VA for assistance. Vietnam vets, who were often reviled on their return home, may not have ever made those connections to other vets and vet programs.

"We have 14,000 to 15,000 vets here in Mesa County," said Oney, who added that Agent Orange exposure during Vietnam and exposure to toxic water at Camp Lejeune are both linked to several health problems.

"Anyone who joined the Marines and went to Parris Island from 1953 to 1987 could have been exposed," Oney said.

There is an Agent Orange registry for vets who were exposed to the toxin while they served, and there's also a Camp Lejeune toxic water registry for Marines who were stationed at Camp

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Butch Ankney served during the Vietnam era and was injured in a tank accident on a stateside training maneuver. His injury has caused problems for him as he has aged, and through the Cover to Cover program, Brian Oney has been helping Ankney prepare the right documentation and has also helped to give him better representation for a disability hearing.

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Lejeune, even if their stint at the camp was brief. Oney can help vets understand the procedure, get signed up and find out if there are health or disability benefits for which they may be qualified.

If someone calls Mesa County 2-1-1 phone number or the ADRC for to ask about assistance for themselves or a family member, staff members

have been trained to ask about military service. If the person in need of help is a vet, ADRC staff connect them to Oney.

“If vets, after serving their country are now in a position and asking for help, we need to be there for them,” said Christie Higgins, director of ADRC. “I know we have vets coming through or calling; some are eligible for additional healthcare or compensation.”

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