

“California Welcomes Home Troops with New Program”

New Program will assist recently discharged troops.

By [Michael Gardner](#), U-T SACRAMENTO BUREAU

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SACRAMENTO - Touched by troops fighting wars overseas and convinced that the state should do more when they return, Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#) will launch the Operation Welcome Home outreach campaign tomorrow.

His initiative will set aside \$20 million in one-time special funds to hire 325 combat veterans who will personally connect with newly discharged service members in need of job assistance. More than 30 of the workers, who are scheduled to start this year, will be based in [San Diego](#) County.

Money for the program - the first of its kind in the nation, those knowledgeable about its provisions say - will come from the Employment Development Department. Future funding is dependent on the next governor.

Schwarzenegger also envisions recruiting 1,000 volunteers as part of a new, ongoing CalVet Corps to expand outreach for housing, health care and other services for veterans. The volunteers would help participant's access services provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, municipal governments, professional organizations and charities. They also would stay in touch with the veterans to monitor their progress.

Schwarzenegger wants troops to “transition successfully from the battle front to the home front,” according to a briefing paper obtained by The San Diego Union-Tribune that was later confirmed by people familiar with the plan.

The goal is to encourage more aggressive outreach, especially because veterans might not be aware of certain services or they avoid seeking them out of fear of government bureaucracy.

Operation Welcome Home will be unveiled as part of the governor's State of the State address before the Legislature, but it doesn't need legislative approval.

“This is really going to help us reach out to veterans,” said Tom Splitgerber, veterans' service officer for San Diego County. “They've paid a price. We should be able to help support them when they get back.”

Roughly 17,000 troops leave the armed forces each year in the San Diego region, Splitgerber said. [California](#) has slightly more than 2 million veterans - including about 244,000 in the county - and an estimated 30,000 who return each year from a combat tour.

Tom Richards, chairman of the newly formed San Diego Veterans Community Action Coalition, welcomed the job-outreach program, particularly as the ranks of jobless veterans have swollen.

“I think that's a national tragedy,” Richards said. “These people put their lives on hold and on the line for freedom. We have an obligation.”

Schwarzenegger feels the same way.

“California has more returning veterans than any other state. So our state, as well as the federal government, has a special responsibility,” Schwarzenegger said in draft remarks quoted in the briefing document. “We have a fundamental obligation to anyone who has shed or risked blood for this country.”

The governor has been a champion of veterans, going so far as to issue condolences to the families of each service member killed in action.

Operation Welcome Home grew out of Schwarzenegger’s pre-[Thanksgiving](#) surprise visit to troops stationed at Camp Victory in [Baghdad](#). The trip convinced Schwarzenegger and his advisers that more had to be done for military personnel as they transition to civilian life.

The briefing paper notes that nationally, combat veterans generally have high rates of [unemployment](#), homelessness, substance abuse and mental health problems. They also are more likely to commit suicide than most other groups.

But Schwarzenegger also wants to stress that most veterans have returned with an education and other skills that they want to channel into solid jobs.

“Veterans have cutting-edge training and exceptional leadership skills,” the briefing document said. The new program, it said, “will help transfer military training to California’s labor force.”

The governor will demand more coordination among far-flung state agencies to help organize nine regional outreach teams, including one based in San Diego. That way, he reasons, they can more effectively connect veterans with local offerings.

“Services for veterans are Balkanized and spread throughout various levels of government,” according to the briefing paper.

Schwarzenegger also will call on cities, counties and nonprofit groups to increase cooperation and communication as they serve veterans.

Splitgerber and Richards, while not disparaging local efforts, said teamwork can always be improved.

“There are many different organizations trying to do the same things,” Richards said.

Splitgerber said organizations helping veterans in San Diego County are in the process of building a coalition that can better close gaps in services.

“This is to maximize everything we have,” Splitgerber said.

Schwarzenegger has listed benchmarks to determine whether Operation Welcome Home succeeds. Among them: seeing whether veterans’ rates of unemployment and homelessness eventually drop, whether more veterans enroll in college, and whether more veterans are screened and treated for mental illness related to combat.

Irene Estrada-Young

Chief of Staff

Southern Workforce Services Division, (760) 639-3753 - Direct Line, (760) 639-3766 - FAX