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# The Veterans Navigation Center: Help Starts Here

BY BILL ABRAMS | PHOTO BY EVAN STEFANKO

**T**HE MEN AND WOMEN WHO SERVE in the United States military share a warrior ethos. They are prepared to sacrifice their lives for their country and their fellow service members. It is a huge part of why our military is so successful. Our soldiers, sailors, marines, and aviators are trained to be dependable and professional. They fight through injury. They fight through illness. They are part of a team, and they never want to let their teammates down.

That warrior ethos has a downside, however, when it comes to asking for help. The Veterans Administration estimates that 80 percent of veterans who commit suicide have never sought any assistance. It is a chilling statistic, but the transition from military to civilian life can be extremely challenging, especially when it involves injury, be it physical or psychological.

While physical injuries are easily identifiable, psychological injuries including depression, PTSD, untreated trauma, and anxiety are hard to see, and veterans themselves are often unable to articulate what they're experiencing. "Most people can't when they're in that state. And even if [they're] not, the VA can be hard to navigate," says Scott Silverman, founder of the newly established Veterans Navigation Center, one of whose aims is to help veterans get the psychological and behavioral care they and their families might not even know exists.

And even when veterans do reach out, they are rarely suffering from just one problem. "They may come to us for substance abuse, but they've got lots of other things going on," explains Jay Wylie, a retired naval officer and the secretary and veterans coordinator for the new VNC.

"In the service, we did what we had to do to cope with stress and fear," says Wylie. "I remember coming into port after a tough mission. The commanding officer put his arm around me and said, 'Great job. I know you're feeling beat. Have a couple of scotches. You've earned them.' As an alcoholic, that was a green light for me to deal with my negative emotions by drinking."

Both Silverman and Wylie now walk the walk in terms of recovery. Wylie has been sober for more than ten years, and Silverman close to 40, which may be one of the reasons for their success: their clients trust them.


A crisis coach, counselor, and author, Silverman has been working with veterans for nearly four decades. In the early 2000s he founded Second Chance, an organization that helps people coming out of incarceration get back into the workforce. He was also involved with Veterans Village of San Diego, where he learned there were a good many veterans with criminal records. And, in his work with first responders, Silverman learned some 30 percent are veterans.

"The VA is critical for these people," says Silverman. "But if you talk to veterans, many of their experiences with the VA are negative. The goal with the VNC is to create something where we can give people a safe harbor for longer periods of time and help them navigate the system."

Another staggering statistic is that addicts who do not receive a continuum of care reportedly have a 95 percent chance of relapsing, and stunningly, by some measures, half the 370,000 veterans in San Diego either do not have medical insurance or their nonmilitary medical benefits have run out.

"Every day in the service you know when to wake up, what uniform to wear, what the schedule is for the day," says Wylie. "When you get out, it's like a switch is flipped. You're on your own. You're no longer supported." The VNC is working to change that here in San Diego, and its services are in-network with TriWest, the insurance underwriter for veterans' behavioral health services.

"When a veteran or a veteran's family member calls, we embrace that veteran as [their] advocate," says Silverman. "Veterans who need support around substance abuse disorder — we bring them in as a client. If they need a higher level of care, we get them over to the VA and work with them there. And if it's something else entirely, we refer them to our partners in the coalition."

The coalition refers to the more than 150 organizations, businesses, and agencies in San Diego that make up the San Diego Veterans Coalition. In joining them, the VNC aims to do two things in particular: to help veterans in need of psychological/behavioral care navigate the VA, and to act as a concierge service for the entire San Diego Veterans Coalition. [veteransnavigationcenter.org](http://veteransnavigationcenter.org) 



Veterans Navigation Center's founder Scott Silverman with Jay Wylie, the organization's secretary and veterans coordinator

