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University of South Florida St. Petersburg, Office of University Advancement.

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On Tuesday, Nov. 10, USF St. Petersburg will open the doors to its new Military and Veterans Success Center (MVSC) during a dedication ceremony at noon. The new office will serve an estimated 300 student veterans, active military and dependents.

“Many of our student veterans have specific needs and this is an opportunity to meet them,” said Regional Chancellor Sophia Wisniewska. “Our Veterans Center will provide assistance with benefits and tuition, navigating VA applications and programs, and promoting wellness and disabilities services available.”

Because the project has been in the works for several years, many are happy to see it come to fruition. Among them is Erin Dunn, financial aid director at USFSP. Dunn is one of the people responsible for helping the initiative receive its marching orders.

“It is our hope that prospective student veterans will feel the support of the campus and inclusion into our own ‘Band of Brothers and Sisters,’” said Dunn, whose father and step-father served in the U.S. Army during World War II and in Vietnam. She has attended the Florida Association of Veterans Education Specialists (FAVES) state conference. “The more I became educated by other schools as to what they were doing for their veterans, the more I realized just how much more we needed to do.”

The USF System, which serves approximately 2,000 student veterans, active military and dependents, provides many services, including assistance with VA education benefits, scholarship opportunities and other support programs. However, student veterans who wanted access to those programs often had to drive to Tampa for many of them.

“USF is nationally recognized as a Military Friendly school, but we at USFSP were unable to provide a specific place for Veterans to interact and to have access to some of those same services and resources,” Dunn said. “We, too, wanted to share in the wonderful array of services that USF Tampa has worked so hard to implement.”

USFSP’s center will consist of two separate areas:

- A lounge with a computer space that includes eight computers and a color printer
- A quiet space with two computers and two offices that will house the Veterans Services staff and visiting specialists from the VA and other local and state agencies
“This center fills a definitive need on our campus,” said Milton White, who worked as a financial aid counselor and veterans certifying official in Financial Aid at USFSP. White was hired over the summer as assistant director of Veterans Services to help facilitate the establishment of MVSC. “We’ve never had a real space for veterans at our campus. We had a vet representative in the financial aid office and a table in the hall that had all the benefits information we had on it.”

White, who retired as a Master Sergeant after serving 25 years in the U.S. Marine Corps, said the new center will help meet some of the students veterans’ social needs as well. “We’ll actually have a place where veterans can come together and find a sense of camaraderie with others like them—whether they are Vietnam veterans, post-9/11 vets, or those who’ve recently returned from the battlefield.”

“By expanding what Veterans Services has to offer and establishing its own location, we’ll be able to better serve our student veterans in general,” White said. “We’ll do whatever we can to assist the veteran in their transition back into civilian life, and offer assistance to help them transition into a degree program and career.”

White said once the center is up and running, he plans to host workshops for faculty and staff in the resource center to increase awareness about what it’s like to be a veteran returning to civilian life and school. “They’re going from being embedded in with troops to being embedded with younger college students. It’s a drastic change.”

Gardiner Tucker, interim regional associate vice chancellor of Student Affairs, said that this initiative reflects well on the University.

“It’s important to note that this is a significant increase in support for our veterans because we’ve been serving them for many years and now it’s finally becoming formalized in a way that is more visible to the campus community and to St. Petersburg,” Tucker said. “We are a place that welcomes veterans openly and we want to continue to support them to the best of our ability.”

The grand opening for the new Military and Veterans Success Center will be held on the lawn adjacent to The Campus Grind. On street, metered parking is available on First Street South. The celebration will be complemented by a USFSP Veterans Expo from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on HarborWalk.
A view of the new Military and Veterans Success Center at USFSP

Milton White