



# 2026 San Juan County Veterans' Needs report

A Community Needs Assessment for Veterans and Transitioning  
Service Members

*“Veterans bring leadership, resilience, and service to every community they join. This report represents an opportunity for San Juan County to strengthen the connections that support those who have served our nation.”*

*— Dellard Curley, Leadership San Juan Class of  
2026*

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## Introduction

New Mexico has a higher concentration of veterans than the national average, with veterans comprising approximately 7–8% of the state’s adult population compared to roughly 6% nationally, based on recent U.S. Census and Department of Veterans Affairs estimates. This elevated presence reflects a strong tradition of military service, particularly among rural and Native communities, as well as the state’s role in supporting multiple military installations. Within this broader context, San Juan County reflects many of these statewide patterns at a local level. The county is home to an estimated 5,300 to 5,800 veterans, representing approximately 5–7% of the population, with a significant number residing in rural areas and across the Navajo Nation. As a regional hub, Farmington plays a central role in providing access to healthcare, employment, and support services for veterans throughout the Four Corners area. Together, these dynamics position San Juan County as both a reflection of statewide trends and a critical access point for veterans in a geographically dispersed and culturally diverse region.

San Juan County is the proud home of many veterans who have served our nation in times of peace and conflict. After their military service ends, many continue their lives here as neighbors, workers, parents, and community members. While numerous organizations across the county provide support for veterans and their families, navigating available resources and maintaining strong connections within the community can still present challenges.

As part of the Leadership San Juan Class of 2026, the Teacups for Veterans project team conducted a community needs assessment to better understand the experiences of veterans and the organizations that serve them. Through interviews, site visits, and conversations with service providers and veterans themselves, the team sought to identify common themes, opportunities for collaboration, and ways the broader community can strengthen its support for those who have served.

This report summarizes what we heard and offers an invitation to community organizations, businesses, civic groups, and faith communities to work together in supporting veterans across San Juan County.

## About Leadership San Juan

Leadership San Juan is a San Juan College Alumni sponsored community leadership program to cultivate informed and engaged leaders across San Juan County. Leadership San Juan was created 35 years ago fostered by the belief that many residents possess

untapped leadership potential that can be strengthened through education, collaboration, and community involvement.

Leadership San Juan is a ten-month informational program for emerging and current San Juan County leaders. The program exposes emerging leaders to the challenges and opportunities that organizations, businesses and governmental entities experience every day. Team-based projects represent the immersive aspect of the overall program. Project teams are groups of individual leaders thrust together in a common interest and purpose. The team realizes a true sense of accomplishment through their effort and intention toward the community they choose to serve.

## Teacups for Veterans Project Team

The Teacups for Veterans team, mentored by one of Leadership San Juan's founders, chose to serve the Veterans and Transitioning Service Members (TSM) of San Juan County. Our team consists of a United States Marine Corp Veteran (2008-2012) who is also President of the Western Navajo Agency Council, the Aztec District 5 Commissioner, an Administrative Director of Operations at Basin Health, a Mechanical Engineer at RTX, a Native American and Indigenous Studies Academic and parent, a community-minded Entrepreneur, and a community-engaged newcomer.

The San Juan College Alumni Association approves each Leadership San Juan Project taking scope, sustainability, visibility, accountability and financing into account.

## Project Background: From Idea to Assessment

The Teacups team initially explored the idea of installing a community flag display to honor veterans and symbolize civic pride. During early planning discussions, our mentor encouraged the team to consider the full responsibilities associated with such a project, including compliance with the U.S. Flag Code, proper lighting for nighttime display, and the ongoing maintenance required to ensure the flag and pole are cared for respectfully over time. Given the team's limited four-month timeline and project budget, it became clear that a permanent flag installation would require long-term stewardship and resources better suited to established civic and veterans' organizations. Recognizing this, the team chose to redirect its efforts toward a Veterans Needs Assessment, allowing us to use our time and resources to listen to veterans and community organizations and identify opportunities where existing groups could align their strengths to better support those who served.

## Needs Assessment Overview

### Key Areas Explored

The needs assessment focused on several themes intended to better understand both the needs of veterans and the capacity of local organizations to respond. Key areas explored included:

1. Organizational Mission and Services – The role each organization plays in supporting veterans and the types of programs or services currently offered.
2. Veteran Populations Served – The groups of veterans most frequently supported, including differences in age, service era, and transition status.
3. Access to Benefits and Resources – Challenges veterans face in navigating and securing federal, state, and local benefits.
4. Housing, Employment, and Financial Stability – Needs related to stable housing, workforce transition, and economic security.
5. Health and Wellness – Mental health, physical health, and overall well-being resources available to veterans in the community.
6. Social Connection and Community Integration – Opportunities for veterans to build relationships, find purpose, and engage with the broader community.
7. Barriers to Service Delivery – Challenges organizations encounter when trying to meet veteran needs, including funding, awareness, and coordination.
8. Opportunities for Collaboration – Ideas for small projects, partnerships, and community involvement that could strengthen support networks for veterans.

### Methodology

#### How We Gathered Information

To better understand the needs of veterans in San Juan County, the Teacups team gathered input through a combination of interviews, conversations, and site visits with organizations that regularly serve or interact with veterans. Team members conducted both in-person and phone interviews and visited several service locations, which often included discussions with site representatives and program directors about the populations they serve and the challenges they observe. In addition to organizational outreach, team members also spoke with individual veterans within their own families and community networks to capture personal experiences and perspectives. This

approach allowed the team to hear directly from both service providers and veterans themselves, providing a more complete picture of local needs and existing resources.

## Organizations Contacted

- ✓ San Juan College Veteran Center
- ✓ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (San Juan College location)
- ✓ Farmington VA Community-Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC)
- ✓ Capacity Builders Inc.
- ✓ American Legion – Totah Post 93
- ✓ San Juan County Veteran Service Office
- ✓ New Mexico Daughters of the American Revolution (NMSODAR)
- ✓ A Million Thanks
- ✓ Department of Veterans Services
- ✓ Individual Veterans and Family Members

## Key Findings

During the early stages of the project, the Teacups team explored several potential projects that could address the needs we were hearing from veterans and service providers. As we evaluated these ideas, we encountered similar challenges to those identified in our initial flag display concept: many of the projects carried long-term responsibilities, required sustained resources, or depended on ongoing stewardship beyond the timeframe of the Leadership San Juan program.

This realization led the team to step back and reconsider our role. Rather than attempting to implement individual projects ourselves, we recognized that many of the needs identified could be addressed by aligning the strengths of existing community organizations with the areas of need expressed by veterans and service providers.

Through our conversations and outreach, three overarching themes consistently emerged.

## Benefits & Services

Many veterans expressed challenges navigating and accessing available benefits and support services, particularly during the transition from military service to civilian life. Transitioning Service Members often move from a highly structured environment to one where they must independently navigate complex systems related to healthcare, education, employment, and benefits. While numerous resources exist at the federal, state, and local level, coaching, awareness, coordination, and navigation remain barriers

for some veterans and their families as they work to establish stability and direction in their civilian lives.

## Connection

A recurring theme was the importance of social connection, peer support, and meaningful engagement within the community. Opportunities for veterans to connect with one another and with the broader community play a critical role in overall well-being and successful transition into civilian life.

## Seasonality & Symbolism

Veterans and organizations also emphasized the value of recognition, ceremony, and visible expressions of appreciation. Events, public displays, and community traditions throughout the year serve as important reminders of service and sacrifice.

## Community Impact Spotlight

The following examples highlight how the insights from the 2026 San Juan County Veterans Needs Assessment can translate into meaningful, community-led action. In each case, the Teacups for Veterans project team initiated the effort, connected the right people, and helped move ideas into action.

These projects reflect a direct alignment between identified needs, particularly in the areas of connection and ceremony, and the strengths already present within the community. They demonstrate that meaningful progress does not require large-scale programs, but rather leadership, initiative, and a willingness to engage others.

These stories are intended to serve as a model for action. The opportunity now extends to the broader community. Organizations and individuals across San Juan County are encouraged to take the lead, activate their networks, and contribute their strengths in ways that support veterans. When that first step is taken, momentum follows, and meaningful impact becomes possible.

## Spotlight Stories in Action

### **American Legion Post 93 & Scout Troop 321 – Strengthening a Shared Space**

The Tycksen Scout Hut in Farmington, home to American Legion Post 93 and Boy Scouts Troop 321, reflects a long-standing tradition of shared community stewardship. As noted by the Tri-City Record, the property is held in a 50–50 trust, with ongoing support from local donors, including a 16-foot gate installed circa 2024 to 2025 by The Home Depot and Hornet Fence.

During a recent site visit, the Teacups team identified several facility needs, including insulation, storage, and fencing repairs. Focusing on the report’s theme of ceremony and recognition, the team partnered with Post leadership to design two shared showcase panels for the main meeting space. Through Leadership San Juan Alumni funding and the team’s use of local connections, Brett Hellewell and his construction students at Aztec High School were engaged to build the project.

Students developed materials plans and constructed the panels, which were installed alongside a newly donated flat-screen television gifted to the Scout troop, creating a central space for recognition and gathering. On May 9, the community will gather to celebrate the completed installation. The project exemplifies the spirit of this report by demonstrating how leadership, education, and voluntary community outreach can align to support veterans in meaningful, lasting ways.

### **Aztec VFW Post 614 – Honoring Service Through Art**

The Teacups for Veterans team was instrumental in reviving long-term interest in creating a mural on VFW Post 614 north exterior wall to honor veterans and enhance the visibility of the post. Leveraging local connections, the team engaged Darlene Lee, a regional artist known for supporting veterans through community-based art initiatives. Darlene recently met with Post leadership alongside other local artists. The concept has gained strong early traction with meaningful progress expected throughout the year.



*American Legion Post 93 trophy display area where recognitions were displayed without a dedicated showcase and preserve them.*



*Showcase Panel Assembly in progress*



*Aztec VFW Post 614 Present-day street view*

## Community Response Opportunities

The preceding stories demonstrate the impact this report hopes to inspire. Rather than proposing standalone projects, this report highlights ways in which the strengths of existing community sectors can support these needs.

The following sections invite participation from four important community partners:

- ✓ Veteran Service Organizations
- ✓ Civic and Service Clubs
- ✓ Local Businesses and Workforce Leaders
- ✓ Faith-Based Communities

Each of these groups already plays an important role in the life of San Juan County. By aligning their existing strengths with the needs identified through this assessment, small but meaningful actions can help strengthen the network of support available to veterans.

## Community Voices

As the Teacups team reviewed the needs identified through interviews, site visits, and conversations with veterans and service providers, it became clear that no single organization can meet these needs alone. San Juan County is fortunate to have a wide network of organizations, institutions, and individuals who already contribute to the well-being of veterans in different ways. For this reason, the following sections are organized around several “Voices” within the community; groups whose existing strengths, resources, and relationships position them to play an important role in supporting veterans. These voices represent an invitation to collaboration, encouraging each sector of the community to consider how its unique contributions might help strengthen the network of support available to those who have served.

### Voice of Veterans Services

Veteran service organizations are often the first point of contact for veterans seeking assistance, guidance, and connection after military service. Through our outreach, it became clear that these organizations carry a deep understanding of the systems veterans must navigate and the barriers they often encounter along the way. Voice of Veterans Services highlights the perspective of those working directly with veterans and invites continued collaboration among service providers to strengthen coordination, share information, and ensure that veterans in San Juan County are aware of and able to access the benefits and services available to them.

## Voice of Service Organizations

Civic and service organizations have long played an important role in strengthening communities through volunteerism, local projects, and community engagement. Throughout San Juan County, these groups represent a powerful network of individuals who are already committed to improving the lives of others. We invite service organizations to consider how their existing strengths, traditions, and volunteer energy might support veterans in meaningful ways, whether through community projects, events, or opportunities for connection and engagement.

## Voice of Business & Workforce

Local businesses and workforce leaders are uniquely positioned to support veterans as they transition into civilian careers and community life. Many veterans bring valuable skills in leadership, teamwork, discipline, and problem-solving that can strengthen the local workforce. We invite members of the business community to consider ways they might help bridge the transition from military service to meaningful employment, mentorship, and professional development opportunities for veterans and their families.

## Voice of Faith Communities

Faith communities often serve as important centers of compassion, fellowship, and support within local communities. Many already provide outreach, counseling, and volunteer support for individuals and families navigating difficult life transitions. This section invites faith-based organizations to reflect on how their existing ministries and community engagement efforts may help foster connection, healing, and belonging for veterans and their families

Faith communities may also provide opportunities to connect veterans with community resources in ways that respect both the spiritual mission of the organization and the practical needs of those attending. Examples of opportunities that could be explored include:

### Hosting Community Resource Evenings

Faith communities could occasionally host informational sessions where veteran service organizations share information about benefits navigation, housing resources, workforce opportunities, and local support services.

### Partnering with Recovery and Support Networks

Many faith communities host recovery meetings or peer-support gatherings where individuals are already seeking stability and connection. These established gatherings may

offer opportunities for optional informational presentations or resource sharing related to employment, housing, and veteran benefits.

## Facilitating Fellowship and Peer Connection

Faith communities often provide welcoming environments for small group gatherings, mentorship opportunities, and volunteer activities. These settings may help foster connection for veterans and their families who are seeking community and support during periods of transition.

Faith communities may be especially meaningful places of connection for Transitioning Service Members who are adjusting to civilian life, as they often provide welcoming environments where individuals and families can build relationships, find encouragement, and reconnect with a sense of purpose within the broader community.

## Aligning Community Strengths with Veteran Needs

The needs identified through this assessment are not new, nor are they beyond the capacity of our community to address. In many cases, the resources and organizations capable of supporting veterans already exist within San Juan County. The following table illustrates how the needs identified through this assessment may align with the strengths of different community sectors.

<b>Identified Need</b>	<b>Potential Community Strength</b>	<b>Examples of Community Response</b>
<b>Benefits &amp; Services</b>	Veteran service organizations, county agencies, and educational institutions	Assistance navigating VA benefits, informational workshops, transition guidance for service members, referral networks between organizations
<b>Benefits &amp; Services</b>	Business and workforce leaders	Employment pathways for veterans, apprenticeship opportunities, mentorship for transitioning service members
<b>Connection</b>	Civic and service organizations	Volunteer projects, letter writing, veteran appreciation events, opportunities for veterans to participate in community service and leadership roles

<b>Identified Need</b>	<b>Potential Community Strength</b>	<b>Examples of Community Response</b>
<b>Connection</b>	Faith-based communities	Fellowship groups, peer support networks, pastoral care, family support during transition periods
<b>Seasonality &amp; Symbolism</b>	Civic organizations, veterans' groups, and local government	Memorial Day and Veterans Day events, ceremonies recognizing service, community displays of appreciation, holiday cards & letters
<b>Seasonality &amp; Symbolism</b>	Schools and community organizations	Educational programming, student-led recognition efforts, community storytelling and history projects honoring veterans

While the purpose of this report is to highlight opportunities for collaboration rather than prescribe specific solutions, the conversations and brainstorming that occurred during the needs assessment process generated many project ideas. These ideas are included in Appendix A as examples of ways community organizations might align their existing strengths with the needs identified through this assessment.

Appendix A offers a selection of potential initiatives inspired by our outreach and discussions with veterans and service providers. They are presented as starting points for consideration and conversation among the organizations and community members who are best positioned to bring them to life.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this report is not to prescribe solutions, but to share what we heard and observed through our outreach and conversations across San Juan County. Veterans in our community are supported by a wide network of organizations, service providers, and volunteers who are deeply committed to honoring their service. At the same time, our assessment revealed opportunities to strengthen awareness, connection, and coordination so that veterans and their families can more easily access the support available to them.

The needs identified through this assessment, Benefits & Services, Connection, and Seasonality & Symbolism, are not challenges that belong to any single organization. Rather, they represent areas where many members of the community already have strengths to

contribute. Civic organizations, businesses, veteran service providers, and faith communities each bring unique strengths that can help address the needs identified in this report by expanding access to benefits and services, fostering connection, and sustaining meaningful traditions that honor those who have served.

As members of the Leadership San Juan Class of 2026, the Teacups team offers this report as an invitation to continued collaboration. The projects and ideas referenced throughout this report are intended to spark conversation and encourage small, meaningful actions that align community strengths with veteran needs. When organizations and individuals work together in this way, even modest efforts can create lasting impact.

San Juan County has a long tradition of service, volunteerism, and community pride. By continuing to build on these strengths, we can ensure that those who have served our country find a community ready to support them in the next chapter of their lives.

# Appendix A

## Project Ideas for Community Consideration

The following ideas emerged during early project exploration and conversations with community partners throughout the needs assessment process. They are presented as examples of opportunities that community organizations may consider pursuing in alignment with the needs identified in this report.

### Benefits & Services

#### **Veteran Benefits Navigation Workshops**

Community workshops hosted in partnership with Veteran Service Officers and VA representatives to help veterans and their families better understand and access available benefits.

#### **Transition Support Sessions for Separating Service Members**

Educational sessions designed to help transitioning service members and recently separated veterans navigate employment, education, housing, and health resources within the community.

#### **Veteran Resource Awareness Campaign**

A coordinated effort among organizations to increase awareness of local veteran services through community events, informational materials, and online resources.

#### **Employer Education & Veteran Hiring Initiative**

A partnership with local businesses to provide information on the value veterans bring to the workforce and to promote veteran-friendly hiring practices.

#### **Transportation Support for Veterans**

Reliable transportation remains a critical barrier for many veterans in San Juan County, particularly for those who are disabled or require specialized mobility accommodations. Community organizations, businesses, and service groups are well-positioned to help bridge this gap through coordinated, practical solutions. Opportunities include sponsoring or operating volunteer driver programs, supporting mileage reimbursement initiatives, or partnering with existing networks to provide scheduled rides to medical appointments, benefits offices, and community events. Local businesses can contribute by funding accessible vehicle services, offering in-kind support such as fuel or maintenance, or helping to coordinate transportation for important ceremonies and peer connection opportunities. Expanding transportation support not only improves access to essential

services but also strengthens social connection, dignity, and overall quality of life for veterans in the region.

## Connection

### **Veteran Coffee or Community Meetups**

Regular informal gatherings where veterans can connect with one another and build peer relationships in a welcoming community environment.

### **Community Service Days**

Volunteer opportunities where veterans and civic organizations work together on community improvement projects, strengthening both service and connection.

### **Veteran Mentorship Network**

A mentorship program connecting veterans with community leaders, business professionals, and fellow veterans for guidance, networking, and support.

### **Veteran Storytelling and History Project**

Community events or school partnerships where veterans share their stories and experiences, preserving local history while fostering connection across generations.

## Seasonality & Symbolism

### **Expanded Memorial Day and Veterans Day Community Events**

Opportunities for service organizations, schools, and community groups to collaborate on ceremonies that recognize and honor the service of veterans.

### **Community Flag and Recognition Displays**

Public displays coordinated by civic groups or local government that visibly demonstrate appreciation for veterans and military service.

### **Veteran Appreciation Community Events**

Annual events organized by community groups that celebrate veterans and provide opportunities for connection between veterans and residents.

### **Community Recognition Initiatives**

Programs that highlight veteran contributions through public storytelling, recognition events, or local media features.



### **Idea Worth Exploring**

#### **San Juan County Veteran Connection Day**

One opportunity that emerged from conversations during the needs assessment is the potential for a community-wide event focused on connecting veterans with the people and organizations that support them. A San Juan County Veteran Connection Day could bring together veteran service organizations, civic groups, local businesses, faith communities, and educational institutions in a single coordinated event designed to celebrate service while strengthening awareness of available resources.

The event could include informational booths from organizations that support veterans, employment and workforce opportunities, benefits navigation assistance, and opportunities for veterans and their families to connect with one another. Community organizations could also host recognition activities, storytelling opportunities, and volunteer sign-ups that encourage ongoing engagement beyond the event itself.

By bringing multiple sectors of the community together in one place, a Veteran Connection Day could serve as both a celebration of service and a practical opportunity for veterans to learn about the many resources available to them throughout San Juan County. Over time, the event could grow into an annual tradition that reinforces community appreciation for veterans while strengthening the network of support available to them.

## Appendix B – San Juan County Veteran Snapshot



### Total Veteran Population

5,300 – 5,800 veterans

Approximately 5–7% of county residents are veterans

(Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year Estimates)



### Service Era Profile

- ✓ Predominantly Vietnam-era veterans
- ✓ Growing population age 65+
- ✓ Smaller cohort of post-9/11 veterans



### Geographic Distribution

- ✓ Concentrated in Farmington (regional hub)
- ✓ Significant population in rural communities
- ✓ Includes veterans across Navajo Nation lands



### Economic Characteristics

- ✓ Median income below national average
- ✓ Income sources include employment, VA benefits, and Social Security
- ✓ Veterans experience slightly lower poverty rates than non-veterans



### Key Challenges Identified

- ✓ Access to specialty healthcare
- ✓ Transportation barriers
- ✓ Affordable housing and home repair needs
- ✓ Navigation of VA and state benefits
- ✓ Mental health service access
- ✓ Support for aging veterans



### Regional Context

- ✓ Rural/frontier geography
- ✓ Long distances to travel for services
- ✓ Limited public transportation infrastructure

### Sources

U.S. Census Bureau (ACS S2101, DP03)

VA National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics

Rural Health Information Hub