

## UCLA and Brentwood School accused of shortchanging veterans at West L.A. facility

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The Brentwood dog park is a flashpoint in the ongoing debate about development of the VA's West Los Angeles campus for hundreds of homeless veterans. (Katie Falkenberg / Los Angeles Times)

UCLA and the Brentwood School are under fire from advocates who say that neither institution is providing the veteran services they agreed to under their leases on the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs' West L.A. property.

UCLA, whose Jackie Robinson baseball stadium sits on the sprawling, 388-acre federal land tract, promised veterans a legal clinic, a family welfare center and game tickets. The Brentwood School pledged to share its 22-acre athletic complex on the property with veterans and to give their children 150 scholarships to its summer day camp.

But in September, then-Rep. Steve Knight (R-Palmdale) accused the Brentwood School of making it difficult for veterans to use the athletic facilities.

"It appears that veterans face an onerous process to access the facility," Knight, who was defeated by Democrat Katie Hill in November's election, said in a letter to VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "And the process is designed to discourage veteran usage of the leased land."

Dan Garcia, chief executive officer of a veterans advocacy group, said the VA had fallen down on oversight of the UCLA legal clinic.

“UCLA’s performance in providing legal services to veterans is highly suspect,” Garcia said.

The VA and the schools said they are keeping their bargains, which also include annual rent payments from UCLA of \$300,000, and from Brentwood School of \$850,000, as well as \$918,000 in non-monetary consideration.

“The services provided by Brentwood School and UCLA principally benefit veterans and their families, and service to veterans is the predominant focus of UCLA’s activities on campus,” VA spokesman Blake K. Anderson said.

Originally deeded to the government as a home for disabled soldiers, the West L.A. property deteriorated for decades while VA officials parceled out land rights to dozens of commercial and nonprofit entities.

A federal judge [ruled in 2013](#) that the campus should be used for veterans’ healthcare, not for profit, and the VA booted out eight lease holders, including a hotel laundry and a movie studio warehouse. The federal agency also launched a plan to [build 1,200 housing units](#) as part of a model veterans community.

Ralph Tillman, a former VA administrator who had been accused of accepting \$286,000 in bribes from a parking lot operator with a campus lease, later pleaded guilty to tax fraud and making a false statement and was [sentenced to five months](#) in federal prison.

After a lobbying campaign in Washington, D.C., UCLA and the Brentwood School were [allowed to remain](#) on the federal property, but were told along with other leaseholders that their use of the land had to be “veteran-centric” — meaning of more benefit to veterans than not.

VA Inspector General Michael Missal, [in a September report](#), said the Brentwood School misused its lease “because the principal purpose of this lease is to provide the Brentwood School with continued use of the athletic facilities.”

Advocates said the Brentwood School kept veterans waiting for months to go through its verification process to use the sports amenities.

Gennifer Yoshimaru, assistant head of the Brentwood School for advancement, said veterans who live at the VA campus or attend programs there had first priority for the sports complex. The school now has an [online registration form](#) that makes it easy for any veteran to sign up for access, she added.

The school also put on a beauty day with makeovers for female veterans and other special events, she said.

“Each and every year, Brentwood School touches the lives of thousands of veterans and their families through the aggregate impact of our efforts — recreational activities, meals, educational scholarships, special events, student service, employment opportunities, and more,” Yoshimaru said in an email.

But Missal’s report said that while the VA provided the names of 67 veterans approved to access the sports venue, neither the VA nor the Brentwood School provided documentation of what they used or how often. The VA also did not provide verification that veterans’ children received the summer day camp scholarships, the report said.

Garcia said UCLA’s legal clinic is poorly advertised, keeps limited hours and takes no walk-in clients. Nearly half of the 267 cases that the clinic handled were closed by referral to other legal groups, according to [a 2018 UCLA report](#).

UCLA spokesman Ricardo Vazquez said critics misunderstood the clinic’s mission, which is to guide law students during a semester-long class of legal aid for veterans — including resolving tickets for jaywalking or other minor offenses and signing up for government benefits.

“The clinic has already helped hundreds of veterans, and developed a guide for referring veterans to other agencies for aid that falls beyond its scope or capacity,” Vazquez said. “UCLA is paying fair-market rent for the stadium ... in addition to providing veterans at the West L.A. VA with a large variety of programs and services.”

The inspector general did not discuss the UCLA lease. But he also found a parrot refuge, a summer Shakespeare festival and [a city of L.A. dog park](#) to be in violation of their land leases.

During site visits, the dog park was being used by non-veterans who did not seek prior approval from the VA, as required by the lease, the report said. The inspector general said there was no evidence the dog park was veteran-focused.

Gale Holland covers homelessness and poverty for the Los Angeles Times. Starting in 2005, she edited the cops and courts beat, wrote news columns and covered higher education. A series about college construction abuses that she wrote with Michael Finnegan won a 2012 investigative reporting award from the Nieman Foundation. A Los Angeles native, she has worked for USA Today, Copley News and L.A. Weekly and wants to understand the consequences of urban inequality.