



Legislative Testimony

OREGON DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

February 2, 2017

The Honorable Paul Evans, Chair
House Veterans and Emergency Preparedness Committee

**RE: Implementation Update on Recommendations of the Task Force on Incarcerated Veterans
(HB 2838, 2015)**

Chair Evans and members of the committee, I am Heidi Steward, Assistant Director of the Offender Management and Rehabilitation Division for the Oregon Department of Corrections (DOC). I am here to provide information on the services provided to inmates entering DOC custody at the Intake Center located at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville.

One of the most important aspects of working with incarcerated veterans is to assist them in understanding Federal VA disability compensation, education, and pension benefits. During incarceration, disability compensation is reduced, pension and health care benefits are suspended, and educational/training benefits are limited. It is critical the Federal VA be notified immediately upon a veteran's incarceration so benefits are suspended or reduced and apportioned to family members when possible. If the Federal VA is not notified and payments continue, they are deemed overpayments and the veteran must repay the Federal VA upon release.

However, in order to assist veterans, we have to be able to identify them and, until just recently, this has been a significant challenge. We have relied on "self-report" information where adults in custody check a box on an intake form. The department found many inmates who are not veterans are checking the box, and many inmates who are veterans do not check the box.

Through collaboration and a strong working relationship with the Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs (ODVA), a state Veteran Service Officer (VSO) has been assigned to meet twice per month with people going through DOC intake who know (or believe) they are veterans in order to verify their status. This work began in August 2016. As of January 2017, 31 percent of the adults in custody who self-report as a veteran upon entry to DOC have been confirmed as veterans by ODVA. Once veteran status is confirmed, ODVA provides information and begins the process for suspending benefits or reducing and apportioning those benefits to family members.

Additional efforts are also underway to verify veteran status among the current prison population. During the month of February 2017, ODVA is reaching out to all incarcerated people who have previously self-identified as a veteran, asking them to complete and return a questionnaire designed to help ODVA verify veteran status. This will also assist ODVA and the Federal VA to establish ongoing communications and reach-in processes to specifically assist these verified veterans to access benefits. During this questionnaire process, people who did not self-identify as a veteran when going through

DOC's Intake Center are welcome to complete a questionnaire requesting assistance to determine their status.

I would be remiss if I did not mention that I had the honor to chair the Task Force on Incarcerated Veterans (HB 2838 from the 2015 Legislative Session). Work of the task force is outlined in a [September 16, 2016, report](#), which is available online.

Work of the Incarcerated Veterans Task Force resulted in several recommendations on how to create a formalized veterans' program within DOC. The good work happening at the Intake Center today is a direct result from conversations had – and recommendations made – by the task force.

Because I am proud of the work happening not only at intake, but throughout the department, I have attached to my electronic testimony a document detailing all services DOC provides to incarcerated veterans.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Submitted by:

Oregon Department of Corrections
Heidi Steward, Assistant Director of Offender Management and Rehabilitation
heidi.r.steward@doc.state.or.us
Phone: (503) 945-9055

Attachment: Overview of Services to Incarcerated Veterans



Overview Document

OREGON DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

Services to Incarcerated Veterans

Intake to Oregon Department of Corrections (DOC)

During January 2016, DOC Intake staff and the Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs (ODVA) established plans to place a state Veterans Service Officer (VSO) at DOC's Intake and embed the VSO role into the DOC Intake process, as well as processes for information sharing between agencies. As of August 2016, ODVA had assigned a state VSO to work at DOC's intake offices once-a-month to meet with incoming inmates. By October, the VSO was scheduling twice-monthly meetings in order to meet with incoming inmates who know or believe themselves to be veterans in order to verify their veteran status ahead of the individual's move from Intake to a DOC prison. The long-range goals for this are integral to establishing a process for ensuring DOC and ODVA obtain an accurate accounting of the number of veterans in the DOC system.

Veterans Reentry Search Service (VRSS)

Historically, veteran status information has been "self-reported" as persons sentenced to the DOC go through the department's central Intake process. In addition to embedding ODVA staff at Intake (referenced above), DOC has piloted a process where incoming persons fill out a release of information that allows for identification of veterans status using the National Veterans Re-entry Search Service (VRSS). This process does require some automation enhancements by the DOC to allow timely and accurate data-sharing with VRSS. These enhancements are being explored.

In addition, and specific to the female inmate population already housed by DOC, a process is being vetted to determine the number of women veterans incarcerated at the Coffee Creek Correctional Institution in Wilsonville. Data will be collected voluntarily. Individuals interested in participating in the identification exercise will have their information run through the VRSS to confirm their veteran status.

Expediting Post- Incarceration Requests to Reestablish Compensation Payments

Beginning February 15th, 2016 the Federal VA put in place a process to complete post-incarceration requests to reestablish compensation payments within four (4) working days. Previously this process was taking up to nine (9) months, or longer, to accomplish leaving Veterans without means of support. In the first month, five (5) veterans had their benefits expedited through this process.

Services to Incarcerated Veterans

Health Care for Reentry Veterans (HCRV) VISN 20 VA Northwest Network

In collaboration with the ODVA, DOC is working with the Federal Veteran's Administration to improve their out-reach concerning reentry services for incarcerated Veterans who received general, general under honorable, honorable, or medical discharges; specifically those needing assistance with the following services and resources:

- Enrollment in the VA's Health System (which differs from that of the Affordable Care Act)
- VA Medical Care
- VA Mental Health Care
- Substance Abuse Treatment Program Access
- VA Vocational Rehabilitation for Employment Assistance
- VA Domiciliary Care
- Vet-Center Counseling Referrals

The VA's HCRV representative travels to DOC facilities, statewide, to meet with groups of inmates claiming Veterans status who will release from prison in a six- to nine-month period. The meetings are voluntary and inmates must sign a release of information authorizing HCRV/VISN 20 to assist the inmate with any above-referenced issues in context of the state's release planning processes. Use of the VRSS system to verify Veteran status will greatly enhance this collaboration ensuring focus on those who qualify for these federal VA services. Additional supports are provided by County Veteran Service Officers who provide outreach throughout the state, and ODVA that provides outreach to DOC facilities in Marion County.

“Telejustice” and “Telehealth” Technology and Services

Information Technology (IT) support for DOC, ODVA and the Federal VA's Health Care Services are finalizing connections and processes to enable the Federal VA to use existing technology to reach out to incarcerated veterans preparing to transition to the community. This “telehealth” approach is designed to enable both the Federal VA and ODVA staff to over more DOC facilities and reach more veterans prior to release from prison.

This Federal VA “portal” will also allow the veterans to participate in appeal and pre-hearing meetings through a “telejustice” program. In the past, the Federal VA Benefits Administration would not allow video conference appeal hearings for persons in DOC facilities because the VA's IT infrastructure did not have an approved system in place. The establishment of this virtual program lays the groundwork for better representation and more timely benefits determinations for incarcerated veterans, as well as reentry planning for those preparing for release.

Services to Incarcerated Veterans

More Technology Advancements Behind the Walls

In support of ODVA and county-based Veteran Services Officers (CVSOs) who assist veterans in DOC institution with documents associated with their military service, procedures are now in place allowing the CVSOs to bring in a laptop and signature pad whereby CVSOs are able to upload and submit forms to the Federal VA who will soon end submission of paper/manual forms. This new process – which relies on equipment and internet-based connections inside an institution's secure perimeter – allows CVSOs to process the forms while meeting with veteran inmate and will decrease the time to process benefit "restarts" and other services by several weeks (or months in some cases).

Oregon State Penitentiary Veterans' Memorial Wall

A dedication ceremony for the Veterans' Memorial Wall at the Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP) in Salem, Oregon was held in May 2014. Believed to be the first veterans' memorial in the country to be constructed within U.S. prison walls, the memorial honors all five branches of the U.S. military with the seals of the Army, Marine Corps, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard displayed on a black granite wall.

The OSP Veterans' Association, comprised of 118 members, raised the \$8,500 needed to build the memorial by hosting fund-raisers, collecting inmate donations, and by writing letters soliciting donations from veterans' groups across the county such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Constructed by inmates over a period of two years, the memorial is flanked by flags of the United States and the State of Oregon, includes a plaque dedicated to the memory of all veterans, and bronze sculptures of boots and a helmet inmates crafted from a flat plate of steel.

Incarcerated Veterans Housing Unit

Snake River Correctional Institution (SRCI) has designated a 72-bed housing unit to adults in custody who are military veterans. The idea for a veterans housing unit was conceived from involvement SRCI staff had with the Snake River Veterans Association (SRVA) within the institution. Realizing that a housing unit could be beneficial to veterans housed at SRCI, a team of prison staff went to Washington State to see a similar unit in one of its correctional facilities.

Individuals must meet certain criteria to be housed in the SRCI veterans unit including being honorably discharged from a branch of the U.S. Armed Forces, as well as meeting the behavior standards to live in the housing complex of the institution. Although institution operations are always the priority to ensure the facility is running in a safe and secure manner, specific goals were established for the Veterans Unit:

- Enhance overall behavior and personal well-being for veterans in custody by giving them an opportunity to pro-socially associate with like-minded, like-experienced individuals.
- Make available supports, resources, and programs designed to assist the unique needs of veterans.
- Assist incarcerated veterans in accessing federal resources and benefits, specifically in the areas of transition, release, health, and well-being.

Services to Incarcerated Veterans

DRCI American Legion Post 131

The American Legion, Oregon Department of Corrections, presented their charter and installed officers of Deer Ridge Post 131 on Saturday, February 7, 2015, at the Deer Ridge Correctional Facility (DRCI) in Madras, Oregon. Deer Ridge Post 131 is the first American Legion Post in an Oregon correctional institution and only the fourth Post nationwide at a correctional institution.

The charter was presented to 15 of the original 19 inmate veterans who initiated formation of Post 131. Founding members worked diligently with the Jefferson County Veteran's Services Officer to create the constitution and bylaws, raise membership fees, and elect officers for the post. Deer Ridge Post 134 follows the guidelines set by the American Legion holding regular meetings, paying membership dues, holding fundraisers and giving back to the community and fellow veterans in need. American Legion membership not only provides the veterans with connections to fellow veterans while incarcerated but also provides connections upon release to help them reconnect with their respective communities. Members learn valuable life and job skills such as organization, budgeting, recording meeting minutes, communication and much more.

SERVe (Study for Employment Retention of Veterans)

Through a partnership with the Portland State University, DOC participated in SERVe (the Study for Employment Retention of Veterans). The project was funded by the Department of Defense with the goal of improving the health and well-being of veteran employees by creating a work environment that is supportive of service members, in particular, and all employees in general. DOC supervisors completed online training and behavior tracking targeting how to best support veteran employees.

Qualifying veterans completed online surveys used to help evaluate SERVe's supervisor training at three points over a period of months relating to both work and free time. They were also asked to complete optional surveys of their spouse and partners, if applicable. All employees who served in the military after December 31, 2001, were strongly encouraged to take part in the SERVe study.