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Task Force on Incarcerated Veterans

Executive Summary | Report to the Oregon Legislative Assembly
September 2016

The Task Force on Incarcerated Veterans was established through House Bill 2838 (Chapter 824, Oregon Laws 2015), which passed during the 2015 Oregon Legislative Session. The mission of the Task Force was to research, study, and make recommendations to the Legislature regarding outreach, information, and assistance to incarcerated veterans with respect to their earned federal and state veterans' benefits, as well as other available services and resources.

The Task Force found obtaining accurate data on the number of veterans in ODOC's custody was a significant challenge. On July 1, 2016, there were 14,721 inmates in ODOC facilities. ODOC and ODVA estimate 1,250 – or 8.5 percent – of these inmates are veterans.

Understanding Available Benefits

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. Veteran status is a lifetime designation and Federal VA benefits are available to eligible veterans throughout their lives.

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.

Pilot Projects

Through the commitment and dedication of Task Force members, and in collaboration with the Federal VA, pilot projects were developed. The pilot projects support the recommendations of the Task force. However, these projects are not sustainable without permanent funding and cannot meet the needs of all veterans without adequate staffing.

- Intake: ODOC and ODVA determine the accurate number of veterans entering ODOC's custody; assist the veteran in managing his/her Federal VA disability and pension claims; and provide information on education opportunities.
- Veterans Re-entry Search Service: New inmates sign a release of information allowing verification of veteran status using the National Veterans Re-entry Search Service (VRSS).
- Veterans Benefits: Re-establishes benefit payments within four days upon release from prison.
- Telehealth and Telejustice: Utilize video conferencing technology to connect Federal VA health care specialists with veterans to conduct physical health care and/or mental health care assessments and utilize video conferencing for telejustice appeals and pre-hearing meetings.

Summary of Recommendations

1. **Collecting accurate data:** Identifying veterans at ODOC Intake is essential to providing them with services and information regarding their benefits. Collecting data on veterans is critical to developing and implementing appropriate policies and programs.

Recommendation: ODOC and ODVA develop systems to accurately identify veterans and gather, maintain, and share data on incarcerated veterans including numbers of veterans, benefits claims, and veteran services provided.

2. **Outreach:** It is critical veterans receive counseling on how to manage their Federal VA disability and pension claims, so veterans are not burdened with repaying overpayments upon their release from ODOC . In addition, it is important all veterans understand education and job training benefits for veterans during incarceration and post-release.

   Recommendation: ODOC and ODVA establish a formalized process at Intake to counsel veterans on how to manage their Federal VA disability and pension claims and provide information and advocacy to veterans on benefits they have earned.

3. **Re-entry Services:** Reinstating and/or connecting veterans to benefits and services so benefits and services are available upon release is critical to successful re-entry from prison to the community.

   Recommendations: ODOC and ODVA establish a coordinated and formalized re-entry program that includes reinstating benefits, connecting veterans to a county Veteran Service Officer post-release, and facilitating the transition to Federal VA health care. To do this, ODOC and ODVA will need to develop partnerships with county Veteran Service Officers, non-profits, and transitional housing and employment organizations that focus on assisting incarcerated veterans post-release.

Resources Needed for Veterans' Program

A robust and formal program for incarcerated veterans provides the opportunity for success post-incarceration, reduces the veteran's risk to recidivate, and reduces potential costs to the state for expensive safety-net services including housing, health care, and living expenses. In order to fully implement the recommendations of the Task Force and operationalize the pilot projects, adequate staffing is necessary. The Task Force recommends the following positions:

Oregon Department of Veterans' Affairs

- One Veteran Service Officer to provide intake services, including screening, Federal VA claims management and filing, at the Intake Center at Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville. The position would also providing services to veterans in the four Salem institutions (Mill Creek Correctional Facility, Oregon State Correctional Institution, Oregon State Penitentiary, and Santiam Correctional Institution).
- One higher-level Veteran Service Officer to provide some of the same services as the Veteran Service Officer, coordinate the Incarcerated Veterans Project and liaise with ODOC. ODVA will train and certify ODOC coordinators as veteran service officers.

Oregon Department of Corrections

- Six Re-entry Benefits Coordinators trained and accredited as Veteran Service Officers by ODVA to work in all 14 ODOC institutions. These advocates for incarcerated veterans will educate and assist veterans in filing for Federal VA benefits. In addition, the Re-entry Benefits Coordinators will assist veterans with all other state and federal benefit applications; coordinate benefit acquisition efforts during release planning; assist in developing a viable release plan; coordinate institution veteran activities; and liaise with veteran community service providers and county veteran service officers.
- One mid-level manager to supervise the six Re-entry Benefits Coordinators and the researcher, ensure quality and consistency, and manage the overall veterans' program within ODOC.
- One research position to collect, evaluate, and manage the integrity of data, collected on veterans and the programs and services provided.

Respectfully submitted by: Heidi Steward, Chair, Legislative Task Force on Incarcerated Veterans. Access the full report on the ODVA website www.oregon.gov/odva/INFO. Direct links: E published version or PDF Version. For a printed version, contact ODVA at (503) 373-2000.