Making a Difference in San Diego

San Diego County Sheriff's Department

"Veterans Moving Forward Program"

By: Erika Frierson, Captain
Detention Support Division
erika.frierson@sdsheriff.org

Abstract of the Program

The Veterans Moving Forward program at the Vista Detention Facility is a partnership between the San Diego County Sheriff's Department and the San Diego office of the U.S. Veterans Administration. It is dedicated to assisting incarcerated veterans by providing tailored in-custody treatment and services, links to community programs, and reentry assistance. The program is helping turn around the lives of veterans, many of whom have post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, and other service-related issues underlying their crimes. The Veterans Moving Forward program aims to prepare residents for reintegration into society after incarceration by helping them access information about community programs and government services and benefits. All inmates who leave the program are provided with a reentry plan, housing, and support. Many of the inmates enter in-patient substance abuse treatment for several months after release from jail to build on their in-custody sobriety and treatment. In the first year of the program, which started in November 2013, 77 inmates were successfully returned to the community, and not one returned to custody on a new charge. The success in reducing crime means taxpayers avoid the costs of future incarcerations and victimizations.

The Need for a Special Program

California is home to more veterans and military service members than any other state in the nation. San Diego County in particular is home to a wide variety of military veterans, active duty and guard/reserve personnel, and several military bases, including Camp Pendleton, the Marine Corps Naval Air Station at Miramar, the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, the Naval Base at Coronado, and Point Loma Navy Base. San Diegans are very proud of the military and our veterans.

Unfortunately, at any given time, the San Diego Sheriff's Department has about 225 veterans in custody. According to recent estimates made by the San Diego Veterans Administration (VA) in 2014, 100 self-identified military veterans are booked into San Diego County jails every week. Based on the age of these individuals, it is estimated that around 25% of these veterans served during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. About 42% of San Diego's incarcerated veterans are between the ages of 51 and 70, 38% are 35 to 50 years old, and 20% are 18 to 32 years old. Most of the veterans have substance abuse issues, and common troubles such as PTSD underlie many of their problems. Some "self-medicate" and abuse drugs.

Whatever brings veterans into our system, they present a unique challenge and also a unique opportunity. Veterans are used to living in a group and following rules and regulations in a structured environment. They tend to have a higher level of education than our other inmates, they know how to work together for a common cause, and they share a sense of brotherhood. Though the majority of sentenced inmates in our facilities receive reentry services, a program specifically for veterans was needed to more effectively help current and former servicemen. The program needed to address and remove the particular obstacles veterans face in re-integrating into society after incarceration. At the same time, it needed to draw on positive factors to strengthen their chances of success: a sense of shared experience with other inmates, and access to unique government benefits and veterans' programs in the community.

Getting Underway

With a growing number of veterans returning home with numerous mental health issues, the number of veterans incarcerated is expected to increase in the coming years. Specialized courts for veterans have been implemented across the country. Veteran-specific housing units for those already serving time in custody have been rarer, but they are starting to appear across the nation. The intention of these specialized units is, first, to create an atmosphere that is familiar to the veteran. Then, their issues related to their military service can be addressed in order to produce better outcomes. The concept of a dedicated veteran's unit program was first proposed to the San Diego Sheriff's Department by the San Diego VA, based on a handful of similar programs around the country that were shown to be effective.

Our San Diego Sheriff's team looked at several national and state veterans housing modules, including one in San Francisco, before developing our own program. We also hosted a meeting to talk with local community-based organizations about in- and out-of-custody services that would be provided or needed for the veterans upon release. We highly recommend that any jail considering a new program ensure you have support from the VA and your local community-based partners, including faith-based organizations that offer housing.

In addition to working with the VA to build the program, the Sheriff's Department core staff built relationships with community-based organizations and partnered with other San Diego County departments, such as the Health and Human Services Agency, the Superior Court, the District Attorney's Office, the Public Defender's Office, and the Probation Department. The Sheriff's Department embraced the concept, and its staff worked with the local VA as a team to plan and develop a program at the Vista Detention Facility. Prior to the opening of the module, deputies and reentry staff who were selected to work in the unit received training from the VA on issues common to veterans, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The Grand Opening

The San Diego Sheriff's Department joined a handful of detention systems across the county when it launched the Veterans Moving Forward program in November 2013. Our high number of veterans in jail made it important to assist incarcerated male veterans by providing them the necessary in-custody treatment, services, and community linkages to reduce their future incarceration. It was also a pleasure to share our experiences with other nearby counties that have since adopted similar programs, including Kern and Riverside Counties, though the military presence in their counties is not as large.

The first 32-bed housing unit of the Veterans Moving Forward program opened on November 1, 2013.

Due to the impressive results in the first year and the fact that the waiting list was fairly long, the Sheriff's Office quickly decided to expand the program. A second 32-bed module was opened a year after the initial launch.

Participants currently range in age and service experience; some are long-time offenders, and others are in jail for the first time. Regardless of their age, all the veterans program well together and tend to help each other out. Most have committed a felony or misdemeanor crime linked to alcohol and substance abuse. Veterans can request to be housed in the unit or can be referred there, but anyone who joins must agree to abide by all rules and participate in programs. Detention deputies assigned to the unit are themselves veterans, and the common bond of service in the housing unit forms a support system. The staff is now quick to point out that this is "not just a new program but a new way of doing business." Rule violations and behavior issues are rare, and there has been no violence in the units.

The modules are painted red, white, and blue and have patriotic murals painted throughout. The murals were painted by a deputy and an inmate who shadowed him during the project, while the deputy provided directions, guidance, and supervision of the inmate helper. All five military branch flags and the U.S. flag hang from the ceiling.

Figure 1. Artwork with military themes appears throughout the Veterans Unit. (Murals by Deputy Charlie Vasquez.)

Figure 2. Deputy Vasquez works on one of the panels on the Veterans Unit.

During the anniversary celebration and the opening of the second module, the Vista Detention Facility conducted an 'Open House' for the local media stations. Every media station attended the celebration.

During this celebration, a few of the veterans put on a show for the attendees, who included representatives from all our justice partners, command staff, and jail staff—altogether about 50 guests. With the guidance of their music coach, a San Diego State University music major who volunteers, they performed a song they wrote themselves titled, "Sixty-Four Men on the Run, Now as One," to welcome the additional 32 veterans added to the program. As a line from their song says, there are now 64 men working toward one goal: success. *(See video link at the end of the article.)*

Better Quality of Life in Jail

The Veterans Moving Forward program is viewed as a form of Incentive Based Housing (IBH). In the IBH model, a living environment of responsibility and accountability is promoted, and positive participation and offender behavior is rewarded through quality of life privileges and responsibilities. Inmates who are cleared to participate in the program must read and sign a "Veterans Module Housing Request" form. It outlines the expectations for participation in the voluntary program, including willingness to participate in all assessments and programming. Residents also must demonstrate positive actions and the ability to work proactively toward their own success.

The form also notes that residing in this module comes with privileges and incentives not available to mainline housing units, and that a participant can be removed from the unit as a sanction for noncompliance with program participation. They must agree to live, work, and study alongside all of their peers, no matter their race or nationality. This alone distinguishes the veteran's module from other jail groups, where combative cliques often are formed based on ethnicity and gang affiliation.

Core Curriculum and Incentives

Upon assignment to the module, inmates receive an orientation that covers the rules and expectations of the programs. They then begin to actively participate in the 5-day-a-week program.

The following courses are available to the participants:

- Community group
- Problem solving
- Personal growth
- Career planning
- Healthy living
- Celebrate Recovery
- Thinking for a Change
- Reading Legacies
- Non-denominational religious studies
- Substance abuse treatment
- Voice for Vets
- Outpatient process group
- Stress management
- Communication literature improvement
- Family relations
- Financial planning
- Domestic violence
- Parenting mentoring
- Creative writing
- Veterans Administration services
- Combat Veterans of America mentorship

Residents in the module have access to incentives including extended dayroom time, additional recreation yard time, extra visitation, use of a microwave, daily coffee, entertainment media, games, movies, an extra mattress and pillow, bedding, extra undergarments, regular pencils, a barber kit for daily use, access to soda and frozen food machines, shorts for exercising, tennis shoes, and exercise equipment.

A Multi-Disciplinary Team Approach

Many volunteers and partners are committed to the Veterans Moving Forward program. The VA's Veterans Outreach Specialists are key partners in coordinating in-custody programming and building links to community programs and services after release. VA social workers assess each inmate for medical and mental health needs using the same assessment as the VA hospital to streamline pre and post-release care. The social workers visit the jail and help manage the cases of the inmates, and the time in jail is focused on preparing inmates for success in the community. Inmates receive substance abuse treatment, cognitive behavioral therapy, and employment services. A Sheriff's correctional counselor dedicated to the program is available each day. Approximately 20 community-based organizations volunteer their services, providing wellness programs such as yoga, meditation, music lessons, art classes, and creative writing.

A Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) was established that consists of the Correctional Counselor, Veterans Deputy, Classification Deputy, Sheriff's Mental Health Clinician, Medical Supervisor, Facility Administrative Lieutenant, and representatives from all the justice partners. The MDT meets bi-weekly to discuss the transition plan for inmates who are approaching release. The hard work and dedication of those involved in the project have contributed to the success of the program, making it a truly collaborative initiative.

Technology in Use

The staff assigned to the Veterans Moving Forward program use a variety of technologies to manage the program: the Internet, the Sheriff's Department Intranet and the San Diego County Intranet, the Jail Information Management System, our Correctional Counseling Programming database, data sharing with the Veterans Administration, and iPads, cable television, and laptop computers.

The Sheriff's Department is currently using the VA's Veterans Reentry Search Service (VRSS). This data sharing system allows the Sheriff's Department to connect with VRSS to identify inmates who are currently in custody, thus streamlining the process for placement into the module. The system also provides current data to the VA social workers.

Technologies used by inmates for programming include a computer with Microsoft Word, PowerPoint, and Excel, a laptop computer, and cable television. An Xbox Gaming System is available to inmates as a behavioral incentive.

Why We Do This…

The Veterans Moving Forward program also helps veterans access information about government services and benefits and community programs for veterans as part of preparing them for reintegration into society after incarceration. Prior to their release, the Veterans Justice Outreach specialist from the VA helps inmates sign up for healthcare and other benefits so that their progress can continue. Most go into in-patient and out-patient programs for several months after release from jail to build on their in-custody sobriety and treatment. Others are referred to VA-funded homeless outreach programs, such as the Veterans Village of San Diego, which delivers psychological, substance abuse, and other services to homeless vets.

All inmates who leave the program are provided with a reentry plan, housing and support. In addition, we created a partnership with Second Chance of San Diego, which donates suits, shirts, and ties for all participants being released. Approximately 2 weeks before their release date, the veterans are transported to the Second Chance office to be fitted for their suit. Along with their certificates of completion, all veterans being released into our community from the module are presented with a program challenge coin that was created to remind them of where they've been…and where they're going. The words, "Veterans Moving Forward" and "Thinking for a Change" are boldly printed on the coin. The coin also has a picture of the Sheriff's star and the VA's emblem. The participants look forward to leaving jail in a suit and with their challenge coin in hand.

Figure 3. The artwork for this panel is repeated in the Challenge Coin given to Veterans Unit residents on release from jail. (Artwork by Deputy Charlie Vasquez.)

Voices of the Vets

One inmate, a former Army soldier, describes the Veterans Moving Forward program as a "beacon of light." When he arrived in custody, he said, "All hope was lost. I was at rock bottom. We served our country with pride and got lost in a rabbit hole." He concludes, "This is an opportunity to finish right." This "opportunity" requires dedication from our deputies, the correctional counselor, and all the volunteers each and every day. What they are doing to affect the lives of veterans in custody isn't just good for the veteran, but in the long run, it is good for the communities we're sworn to protect.

"My daily plan for my life no longer consists of staying out of jail. That's how I was living, and I know that it's flawed. Thinking for a Change is such a simple concept, but it's good," said another offender who is one of the original 32 men assigned to the unit. "You can't change anybody; you can only change yourself," he went on to say. He also said he has never known his mother sober. "Now my mother is seeing the change in me, and she has joined a program too."

Costing, Outcomes, and Worthiness

The creation of this program in San Diego did not require additional full time employees (FTEs). The staff assigned to the program was already in place; however, they are now dedicated to this program and only work in this area. There were no capital costs involved, as the modules

were already in existence and we simply added the programming piece to it. In an effort to provide a therapeutic and normative environment, we utilized approximately $10,000 from the Inmate Welfare Fund to purchase technical equipment, classroom equipment, exercise equipment, military décor, merchandise used for incentives, and other necessities.

While the services provided by the VA and the community volunteers create no costs to San Diego County, in-custody substance abuse programs and the dedicated Correctional Counselor are slightly enhanced costs beyond most basic jail housing costs.

The aim is to reduce recidivist behavior, increase law-abiding behavior, and thereby increase public safety in our community. So far, we've seen some incredible results. In the first year of the program, 77 inmates were successfully returned to the community from the program, and not one returned to custody on a new charge. A handful returned to custody on technical violations during the first year. This success in reducing crime means taxpayers avoid the costs of future incarcerations and victimizations.

Figure 4. Artwork on the unit expresses the support Veterans Unit residents offer each other. (Artwork by Deputy Charlie Vasquez.)

In addition to the measuring recidivism rates, the facility also measures things such as inmate vs. inmate assaults, inmate vs. staff assaults, disturbances, maintenance issues, jail destruction by inmates, and overall incidents in the module. Since inception, there have been no acts of

violence toward other inmates or staff, no disturbances, and no maintenance or any destruction issues.

While anecdotal data suggests that the units are having a positive impact with reduced behavioral problems, improved attitudes, reduced recidivism, and better in-custody program participation, there currently is no formal evaluation to support this evidence. However, the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) was recently awarded a $334,000 grant from the National Institute of Justice to complete a full evaluation of the program. The evaluation study was started this January and will cover a 3-year period. In the meantime, we're confident that we are doing the right thing, which is why the expansion of the second module was supported.

The Veterans Moving Forward program benefits taxpayers by helping veterans return to our community with skills they need to become productive and contributing members of society. This saves on expenses associated with new crimes, such as the cost of future incarceration, law enforcement response, and victimization. Likewise, this program runs very efficiently, because local and federal government entities that normally work separately combine efforts, working together every day to make sure veterans—and taxpayers—get the results they deserve.

Veterans Moving Forward is a model of good governance: an efficiently run program that required no new costs, reduces or eliminates future costs, serves public safety, and enables positive re-integration into society for veterans who selflessly dedicated themselves to our country. Most San Diegans would agree these veterans deserve our ongoing respect and support, the Veterans Moving Forward program provides it efficiently and effectively.

For More Information:

Videos

"Sixty-Four Men on the Run, Now as One." (Video.) San Diego County News Center, Dec. 1, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWGsZnFrmTw

Veterans Moving Forward—San Diego County Sheriff's Department. (Video.) San Diego County Sheriff's Office. https://vimeo.com/80286595

Other Media Coverage

"When Veterans Serve... Behind Bars." Margaux Farrell. NeonTommy/Annenberg Digital News, May 7, 2015. http://www.neontommy.com/news/2015/05/when-veterans-serve-behind-bars

"New Program Helps Jailed Veterans." San Diego County News Center, Nov. 1, 2013. http://www.countynewscenter.com/news/new-program-helps-jailed-veterans

"Vista Jail Expands Veterans Program." (Video.) Sharon Chen, Fox/KSWB, San Diego, Nov. 8, 2014. http://fox5sandiego.com/2014/11/08/vista-jail-expands-veterans-program/

"County jail to open 2nd veterans unit." Jeanette Steele, *San Diego Union-Times* , Sept. 26, 2014. http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2014/sep/26/county-jail-veterans-unit-american-combat-war/

"Veterans housed together in San Diego County jail." Associated Press / *San Diego Union-Times*, November 13, 2013. http://www.utsandiego.com/news/2013/nov/18/veterans-housed-together-in-san-diego-county-jail/

Additional Resources

VA San Diego Helps Veteran Inmates Move Forward. (Web page.) (Posted Nov. 19, 2013.) U.S. Veterans Administration. http://www.sandiego.va.gov/features/veteran_inmates.asp

Vista Detention Facility. (Web page.) San Diego County Sheriff's Office. https://www.sdsheriff.net/DetentionFacilities/VDF.html

About the Author:

Erika Frierson joined the San Diego County Sheriff's Department in 1996. She currently serves as Detention Support Division Captain at the Sheriff's Administration Office. Prior to that, she was the Facility Commander of the Vista Detention Facility, where she implemented a number of innovative programs and concepts, such as the Veterans Moving Forward Program. Mrs. Frierson served as a detentions deputy at the Las Colinas Detention Facility and worked a variety of specialized assignments there. In 2004, she was promoted to Sergeant and worked at the George Bailey Detention Facility, where she served as Facility Training Sergeant and Administrative Sergeant. She was also assigned to the Personnel Division as a Career Path Sergeant. She was promoted to Lieutenant in 2008; she worked at the Vista Detention Facility and the Las Colinas Detention Facility as a shift Watch Commander, and then was assigned to oversee the Jail Population Management Unit & Detention Investigations and Gangs Unit. She was later assigned to the Detention Support Division. In March of 2012 she was promoted to the rank of Captain and assigned to the Vista Detention Facility.

Mrs. Frierson has been involved with the San Diego County Sheriff's Department's effort to manage the implementation of the California's Public Safety Realignment Act of 2011 (AB 109) since early 2011. Mrs. Frierson also teaches courses at the Standards and Training for Corrections (STC) Academy (1 - Mission, Vision and Core Values; 2- Leadership, Professionalism and Ethics; 3 – Public Safety Realignment – A Paradigm shift in Criminal Justice). She feels privileged to have served in her many assignments in her career thus far and enjoys the ability to continue to mentor personnel each and every day.

For more information, contact Erika Frierson at Erika.Frierson@sdsheriff.org.

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