



Need For Improved Outreach  
Efforts For Veterans In Prison  
Or On Parole

Veterans Administration

*BY THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL  
OF THE UNITED STATES*

MWD-75-48

DEC 30 1974

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COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

B-114859

The Honorable Charles B. Rangel  
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Rangel:

In response to your request of April 10, 1974, and a subsequent discussion with your office, we reviewed the Veterans Administration (VA) policies and practices in counseling veterans in prison and on parole regarding their rights to veterans benefits. Our review was made at the VA central office in Washington, D.C.; at the VA regional offices in New York and Philadelphia; and at the four prisons you suggested we visit.

We interviewed prison officials and incarcerated male veterans at the Federal Penitentiary, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania; the Green Haven Correctional Facility, Stormville, New York; and the New York City Correctional Institution for Men, Rikers Island, New York. As agreed by your office, we limited our review at the Manhattan House of Detention in New York City (also known as the "Tombs") to discussion with prison officials since this institution was scheduled to close by December 31, 1974. We also interviewed Federal and State parole officers and selected veterans on parole.

We found that VA has no uniform system to be followed by its regional offices for reaching veterans in penal institutions to encourage them to take advantage of the VA benefits available to them. The two VA Regional Offices we visited had adopted a policy of visiting penal institutions only upon specific request by prison officials. We found that VA representatives had made but one visit to only one of the four institutions included in our review, the Green Haven facility. Our discussions with a selected number of incarcerated and recently paroled veterans showed that many of them were not aware they were still entitled to VA benefits.

As agreed with your office, we discussed the results of our review on October 22, 1974, with the Chief Benefits Director and other VA central office officials. We also briefed your staff on the results of our review on October 23, 1974. The following is a summary of the information disclosed, the comments of VA officials on this information, and our recommendations on how VA could improve its outreach efforts with regard to incarcerated veterans.

VA POLICY ON COUNSELING VETERANS  
IN PRISON AND ON PAROLE

Section 214(a) of the Veterans Education and Training Amendments Act of 1970 (38 U.S.C. 240-244) establishes a Veterans Outreach Services Program for providing assistance to all eligible veterans in applying for benefits and services. Although VA has determined that incarcerated and paroled veterans are entitled to all benefits except for pension benefits, it has no formal outreach program for counseling these individuals on their benefits. We have been advised that VA will respond to specific inquiries from these veterans and prison officials.

In November 1971, VA issued guidelines to its regional offices suggesting that they inform Federal and State penal officials about the types of educational training available to incarcerated veterans under the GI Bill, such as:

- correspondence courses;
- other educational courses not part of the prison rehabilitation program; and
- full-time apprenticeship programs.

At the Lewisburg, Green Haven, and Rikers Island institutions, 45 veterans were receiving either educational assistance under the GI Bill or compensation for service-connected disability. There were 182 veterans at these 3 institutions enrolled in various educational and vocational courses without GI Bill benefits. There were no VA-approved on-the-job training or apprenticeship programs at any of these institutions.

VA instructions state that periodic visits to penal institutions may be made to provide orientation and assistance to prison officials, and to make available pamphlets and informational material for hand-out to prison inmates. However, these instructions also state that routine visits to these institutions to provide interviews with inmates, except in unusual cases, is discouraged. During the 20-month period ending August 1974, VA officials made one visit to the Green Haven facility. No visits were made to the Lewisburg, Rikers Island, and Manhattan prisons.

In 1972, the VA regional offices in New York and Philadelphia sent letters to 27 various Federal and State institutions advising them of the various benefits available. Letters were not sent at that time to county or city prisons.

PRISON OFFICIALS' EFFORTS TO  
COUNSEL INCARCERATED VETERANS

Prison officials told us that, except in response to a specific inquiry from an inmate, they do not counsel veterans about VA entitlements. When inquiry is made, prison officials will advise the veteran to contact VA. These same officials said they would be receptive to visits by the VA representatives to counsel and assist veterans regarding their benefits. However, such visits would have to be arranged for in advance.

RESULTS OF GAO INTERVIEWS WITH  
VETERANS IN PRISON AND ON PAROLE

The inmate population at Lewisburg and Green Haven in July 1974 totaled 3,576, of which 806, or 22.5 percent, were veterans. Comparable figures on the number of veterans in prison at the Rikers Island and Manhattan institutions were not available. Through our interviews at Rikers Island 62 inmates identified themselves as veterans. At the time of our review the total inmate population at Rikers Island was about 1,250.

We interviewed 107 incarcerated veterans at the Lewisburg, Green Haven, and Rikers Island prisons. Of the 107 veterans, 105 had received other than dishonorable discharges from military service. The type of discharge for the other two veterans was unknown. Our interviews disclosed that:

- 87 veterans or 81.3 percent said they had not been advised of their entitlement to veterans benefits since being imprisoned.
- 57 veterans or 53.3 percent believed they had lost their rights to benefits due to incarceration.
- 70 veterans or 65.4 percent said they would like VA to contact them while in prison to advise them of their GI Bill benefits rights.
- 50 veterans or 46.7 percent said they would contact VA while in prison.
- 75 veterans or 70.1 percent said they intend to contact VA after their release from prison.

Ninety-one or about 84 percent of the veterans we interviewed were between the ages of 21 and 35, indicating a high

probability, according to VA officials, that they were still eligible for some benefits under the GI Bill.

We also interviewed 30 veterans who had been released on parole from penal institutions and who, at the time of our interviews, were reporting to Federal or State parole officers located in New York City. All 30 veterans had other than dishonorable discharges from military service. Our interviews disclosed that:

- 3 parolees or 10 percent were receiving veterans benefits; 2 were receiving educational benefits and one was receiving compensation for a service-connected disability.
- 27 parolees or 90 percent said they had not been advised about their entitlement to VA benefits since being on parole.
- 29 parolees or 96.7 percent said they were not advised of their entitlement to veterans benefits while in prison.
- 15 parolees or 50 percent believed they had lost their entitlement to benefits due to their incarceration.
- 24 parolees or 80 percent advised that they were interested in obtaining information on their entitlements and 18 parolees indicated that they would contact VA.

Ten of the 30 parolees we interviewed were between the ages of 21 and 35 and, as in the case of the incarcerated veterans interviewed, were probably still eligible for some benefits under the GI Bill.

#### AGENCY COMMENTS

On October 22, 1974, we briefed VA's Chief Benefits Director and other VA officials on the results of our review. During the meeting, the Chief Benefits Director provided us with a previously prepared statement, dated October 18, 1974, entitled, "Counseling of Incarcerated Veterans by Veterans Services Personnel" (see app. I). The statement covered a sampling of 11 VA regional offices and indicated that VA recognized a need to improve its outreach efforts at penal institutions and was considering the desirability of a change in existing policy. The change would require that all Federal and State prisons be visited by veterans services personnel at least semiannually where the prison authorities deemed this to be desirable and

necessary. The purposes of these visits would be to conduct group briefings on veterans benefits and to counsel individual veteran inmates.

After discussing the results of our review, the Chief Benefits Director suggested that he have an opportunity to poll all VA regional offices so that he could provide us with a more complete report on the service that was being given to incarcerated veterans.

VA furnished us its report with supporting schedules in November 1974 (see app. II and III). VA's report stated, among other things, that:

"There is a wide range of involvement. Veterans Services Officers have expressed deep concern towards socially and educationally disadvantaged veterans, and particularly towards the incarcerated disabled veteran.

"We find that most VA hospitals have considerable contact with Federal and State prisons through their Social Work Service. There are some 40 VA Drug Treatment Centers nationwide which have very active liaison with the prison systems."

Our analysis of VA's report and supporting schedules showed that, of the 280 Federal and State penal institutions, in which more than 44,000 male veterans were imprisoned, VA regional representatives had provided service to 142 institutions or about 51 percent. This report also showed that 14 VA regional offices were not providing any service to the 79 institutions within their jurisdictions. For the 43 VA regional offices reported to be servicing incarcerated veterans, many offices indicated on-call type service rather than scheduled periodic visits.

VA's November 1974 report did not indicate whether VA was still considering the proposed policy change to require semi-annual visits to Federal and State prisons.

#### CONCLUSIONS

VA is required under the Veterans Education and Training Amendments Act of 1970 to provide an outreach services program for all veterans, including those incarcerated in, or recently released on parole from, penal institutions. Incarcerated veterans, in particular, do not have the mobility to seek out

information regarding their benefits. Consequently, to have an effective outreach service program for these veterans, VA must take the initiative to reach them. However, many Federal and State institutions are not being served by VA in any manner. For the institutions that are being served, VA's outreach efforts have generally been limited to responding to specific inquiries from incarcerated veterans and prison officials.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

The need for an effective outreach program is evident by the many veterans we interviewed who were not aware of their entitlement to benefits. Accordingly, we recommend that the Administrator of Veterans Affairs require VA regional representatives to visit Federal and State penal institutions at least semiannually to advise prison officials and inmates about the various benefits available to incarcerated veterans, as was proposed by VA officials at our October 22, 1974, briefing.

In view of the special circumstances applicable to incarcerated veterans, who as of October 1974 numbered more than 44,000, we also recommend that VA develop and distribute, to incarcerated veterans and veterans released or paroled from penal institutions, pamphlets and other literature specifically aimed to motivating them to use the benefits available to assist them in readjusting to society.

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We do not plan to distribute this report further unless you agree or publicly announce its contents. In this connection, we want to invite your attention to the fact that this report contains recommendations to the Administrator of Veterans Affairs. As you know, section 236 of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 requires the head of a Federal agency to submit a written statement on actions he has taken on our recommendations to the House and Senate Committees on Government Operations not later than 60 days after the date of the report, and the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations with the agency's first request for appropriations made more than 60-days after the date

of the report. When we obtain your agreement to release the report, we will make it available to the Administrator and the four committees for the purpose of setting in motion the requirements of section 236.

Sincerely yours,



Acting Comptroller General  
of the United States

October 18, 1974

COUNSELING OF INCARCERATED VETERANS BY  
VETERANS SERVICES PERSONNEL

## 1. Background:

a. At one time regularly scheduled visits were made by VA personnel to prisons, hospitals, remote locations, and homes for the aged. A change in policy over the years has placed emphasis on serving these veterans by telephone and mail. WATS lines were installed and additional counselors hired to man them, Vet Reps have been placed on IHL campuses, and the energy crisis has caused stations to cut back on long-distance driving.

b. A problem exists in serving incarcerated veterans in Federal and State prisons. In some institutions there is a security problem, and prison officials do not encourage visits by VA personnel. In other institutions correctional counselors expect a VA counselor to drive 150 miles to interview and assist one veteran. The majority of cases lie in between--the prison officials would welcome VA counselors on a regularly scheduled basis.

2. A check around the Country to see what is happening right now produced this information:

a. New York: Visits are made to prisons as needed on call. Some prison officials, because of security reasons, are not in favor of VA visits. Community Service Specialists, Veterans Benefits Counselors, or Vet Reps make prison visits. The Veterans Services Officer would welcome a requirement to visit prisons on a semiannual basis.

b. Philadelphia: There has been a pretty active program in the past year. Community Service Specialist has been coordinating prison visits. Drug program people have also been making visits. Veterans Benefits Counselors have been going to Graterford and Holmsburg prisons for group

orientations. Penn State University and Northampton Community College have a tie in with the prison system. The Vet Reps assigned to these colleges assist the incarcerated veteran.

## c. Boston:

(1) Crockett Reformatory: Visit scheduled this week.

(2) Massachusetts State Prison, Walpole: Four visits have been made in the past year.

(3) Norfolk: Three visits in the past year.

A job fair was recently held in Boston for ex-offenders. VA participated in this. The Community Service Specialist is in frequent contact with prison officials in all institutions in their area. He also goes along with State social workers in their visits to prisons. A very active program.

d. Detroit: There are two major prisons in the area. The Vet Rep in the area is taking care of Jackson, Michigan, prison by frequent visits. Southern Michigan Prison allows inmates to attend community colleges on campus. The college Vet Rep is in constant contact with these inmates.

e. Washington, D. C.: Visits are made by the Community Service Specialist to Lawton Reformatory four times a year. A considerable amount of good has come from these visits.

f. St. Petersburg: The Community Service Specialist has visited all prisons in the Miami area several times a year. Personnel from the drug treatment program have made regular visits as part of their outreach program. Belgrade Prison recently requested a visit by VA personnel. This was taken care of right away by the local Vet Rep.

g. Chicago: No regularly scheduled visits are made. It has been handled on an on-call basis. Four calls for service were received in the past year. All calls resulted in a visit by a Veterans Benefits Counselor within a few

weeks. In addition, a Chicago Vet Rep recently assisted one prison to get approval for its adult high school program. The Veterans Services Officer would welcome a directive requiring scheduled visits.

h. Houston: There are 10 prisons in the area. One has a college level program in the institution. Several calls have been made at the prisons by Veterans Benefits Counselors and Vet Reps. The Assistant VSO feels that Vet Reps are too new and inexperienced to give good quality counseling to incarcerated veterans.

i. Boise: The Veterans Services Officer states that there is only one prison in his area. The State of Idaho has an extremely progressive penal system, with emphasis on rehabilitation. Visits to the prison by Veterans Benefits Counselors are made on the average of one every 6 weeks. DAV and VFW also assist greatly in this program. An interesting note--of the 197 veterans in the prison last month, 102 had bad discharges. An outstanding program.

j. Seattle: Visits are made to all Federal and State prisons on an on-call basis. In eastern Washington, visits to prison are made by the Veterans Benefits Counselor at the local VA hospital. Several requests were received for group briefings in the past year. All were taken care of within 2 weeks of request.

k. Los Angeles: Monthly visits to California Rehabilitation Center have been made for the past 2 years. Two counselors go there each month. Monthly visits are made to Terminal Island Federal Prison. Visits were made in the past year to Lompoc, Chino and Tehachapi, and Atascadero on an on-call basis. All prison visits are coordinated by the Community Service Specialist at Los Angeles Regional Office. A very active program.

3. The above sampling gives a pretty fair picture for the past year. The Veterans Services Officers at all of the above stations were asked if a requirement of at least

semiannual visits to all Federal and State prisons in their areas would place an undue hardship on them. All except one answered that they would welcome such a directive and that it would not be any problem for them to comply. The proposed new revision of chapter 13, M232-1, will reflect this change. A requirement has been written into the manual that all Federal and State prisons will be visited by Veterans Services personnel at least semiannually where the prison authorities deem that this is desirable and necessary. These visits are to be made for the purpose of conducting group briefings on veterans' benefits and individual counseling for veteran inmates.

4. Care should also be taken when these visits occur to acquaint incarcerated veterans with the services that are available to them by mail and WATS telephone. Distribution of benefits pamphlets and brochures to prison officials and distribution of needed VA forms to each prison should be arranged by VA regional office. Prison officials can also be assisted by letting them know what assistance is available from local county and/or State service officers and veterans' service organizations, particularly with regard to specialized help in the matter of applications for review of discharge.

5. VA counselors who are experienced in counseling incarcerated veterans tend to agree that frequently the most helpful and interested official in each institution is the Education Officer. He is usually a good first contact.

Date: NOV 12 1974  
 In Reply  
 Refer to: 271

VETERANS ADMINISTRATION  
 DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS BENEFITS  
 WASHINGTON, D.C. 20420



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Enclosed is a narrative summary of our findings regarding  
 Veterans Administration service to incarcerated veterans.

*Odell W. Vaughn*  
 ODELL W. VAUGHN  
 Chief Benefits Director

Enclosure

VA REPORT ON SERVICE BY THE VETERANS ADMINISTRATION  
 TO INCARCERATED VETERANS

On October 22, 1974, representatives of the U.S. General  
 Accounting Office made inquiries of the Veterans Assistance  
 Service regarding services provided to incarcerated veterans.

On that same date we queried all regional offices in an effort  
 to find out what we are doing right now for incarcerated veterans.

The replies show that there are approximately 287 prisons, that  
 we are servicing 145 of them, and that there are an estimated  
 44,473 veterans incarcerated. When we say that we have serviced  
 a prison our people frequently mean that they have an agreement  
 whereby we will service them on an on-call basis.

(See GAO note on p. 14.)

There is a wide range of involvement. Veterans Services  
 Officers have expressed deep concern towards socially and  
 educationally disadvantaged veterans, and particularly towards  
 the incarcerated disabled veteran.

We find that most VA hospitals have considerable contact with  
 Federal and State prisons through their Social Work Service.  
 There are some 40 VA Drug Treatment Centers nationwide which  
 have very active liaison with the prison systems.

Our review includes only Federal and State prisons for adult males. While the VA occasionally services county prisons, these are generally serviced by County Veterans Services Officers who are county employees. The VA provides backup and follow-through at regional offices for applications and inquiries coming from these county officers.

Several stations reported that they have an understanding with all penal institutions that VA personnel will visit these sites on an on-call basis. However, our stations report that they seldom receive calls from a high percentage of these prisons, indicating a less than enthusiastic response from prison officials.

Although most VA regional offices now have provision for toll-free telephone service, it should be noted that incarcerated veterans are generally not permitted to use the telephone to obtain counseling on veterans' benefits. This is one area where the prisons could perhaps meet us half way by making arrangements whereby prisoners can make supervised telephone calls from the office of a correctional counselor or education officer.

GAO note: VA's supporting data (see app. III) indicate that 142 prisons were being serviced out of a total of 280 identified prisons having a total of 44,475 incarcerated male veterans.

REPORT ON SERVICE TO INCARCERATED VETERANS  
AREA 1

STATION	NUMBER OF PRISONS	NUMBER SERVICED	NUMBER OF VETS	REMARKS
Baltimore	8	-	Unknown	
Boston	11	11	418	Community Service Specialist (CSS) visits all prisons
Buffalo	4	4	1,100	By agreement, visits are made by State and County Veterans Affairs personnel
Hartford	10	4	1,100	4 visits per month by Veterans Benefits Counselors (VBCs)
Manchester	1	1	240	4 visits made this year
Newark	3	3	1,285	21 visits made to explain veterans benefits and develop programs
New York	17	17	3,000	On call only, by CSS and VBC
Pittsburgh	2	2	327	7 visits made in past year
Providence	3	3	65	On call visits are made by VBC. Visits are also made by Drug Program personnel
San Juan	1	1	150	Monthly visits are made by VBC
Togus	4	4	183	On call visits only
Washington, D.C.	1	1	200	Active program at Lorton, Virginia prison

APPENDIX III

STATION	NUMBER OF PRISONS	NUMBER SERVICED	NUMBER OF VETS	REMARKS
White River Junction	1	1	60	Visits are made by regional office and hospital personnel
Wilmington	3	-	125	No visits made this year
Totals, Area 1	<u>69</u>	<u>52</u>	<u>8,253</u>	

APPENDIX III

AREA 2

STATION	NUMBER OF PRISONS	NUMBER SERVICED	NUMBER OF VETS	REMARKS
Atlanta	12	3	800	On call visits only
Columbia	5	5	2,000	On call visits only
Houston	14	-	5,500	
Huntington	5	-	419	On call visits only
Jackson	1	1	300	On call visits only
Little Rock	3	1	150	Visits made weekly by Veterans Representative (Vet Rep)
Louisville	9	-	Unknown	
Montgomery	3	3	849	Monthly visits are made
Nashville	3	3	Unknown	On call visits only
New Orleans	3	2	508	12 visits are made this year to date
Roanoke	5	-	Unknown	
St. Petersburg	12	-	2,100	
Waco	7	3	1,000	15 visits made this year
Winston-Salem	10	4	Unknown	4 visits were made by Vet Rep, 1 by Rehabilitation Specialist
Totals, Area 2	<u>92</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>13,626</u>	

## APPENDIX III

## AREA 3

STATION	NUMBER OF PRISONS	NUMBER SERVICED	NUMBER OF VETS	REMARKS
Chicago	7	-	2,100	On call visits made. Also many visits are made by Drug Program personnel.
Cleveland	7	2	Unknown	Visits made on request, by VBC or Field Attorney
Des Moines	5	-	500	
Detroit	6	4	1,685	Weekly visits made by Vet Rep, 2 visits per month by VBC
Fargo	1	1	74	4 visits made by VBC
Indianapolis	4	-	Unknown	1 visit made by Vet Rep
Lincoln	3	3	325	Visits made on request by CSS
Milwaukee	6	1	850	2 VBCs make visits every other month
Muskogee	3	-	Unknown	
Philadelphia	9	7	600	14 visits made by VBC and Veterans Assistance Center
St. Louis	7	3	1,740	1 visit made per month by Vet Rep, 2 visits per month by CSS
St. Paul	4	4	1,735	On call visits only
Sioux Falls	1	1	100	1 visit made per month
Wichita	<u>5</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>500</u>	5 visits made this year
Totals, Area 3	<u>68</u>	<u>31</u>	<u>10,209</u>	

## APPENDIX III

## AREA 4

STATION	NUMBER OF PRISONS	NUMBER SERVICED	NUMBER OF VETS	REMARKS
Albuquerque	1	1	280	2 visits made per month
Boise	1	1	197	Very closely coordinated (our best program)--2 visits made per month plus group briefings
Cheyenne	1	-	40	No visits this year
Denver	3	2	877	Have made quarterly visits plus 2 group presentations
Ft. Harrison	1	-	75	
Honolulu	2	1	85	On call visits only
Juneau	5	5	72	3 visits made this year
Los Angeles	5	4	2,781	26 visits made through October (1974)
Phoenix	7	3	700	1 visit made per month by Vet Rep
Portland	2	-	600	On call visits only
Reno	3	3	175	5 visits made by Vet Reps
Salt Lake City	1	1	202	Visits made twice a month
San Diego	7	1	1,603	Visits made every other month
San Francisco	8	8	3,500	Monthly visits are made as well as visits by Drug Program personnel

APPENDIX III

STATION	NUMBER OF PRISONS	NUMBER SERVICED	NUMBER OF VETS	REMARKS
Seattle	<u>4</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>1,200</u>	12 visits made this year
Totals, Area 4	<u>51</u>	<u>34</u>	<u>12,387</u>	

Totals: Number of prisons - 280  
 Number of prisons serviced - 142  
 Estimated number of incarcerated veterans - 44,475

**END**