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FACT SHEET 2015
HB 875

Documenting Veteran Status During the Intake Process Connects Incarcerated Veterans with Services and Benefits

UNIFORMLY TRACKING VETERAN STATUS WILL ENABLE LINKAGE TO KEY ASSISTANCE AND A MORE SUCCESSFUL REENTRY

Incarcerated veterans disproportionately suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a condition triggered by exposure to a psychologically terrifying event, which can contribute to depression, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts and actions. It is estimated that while only 3.6 percent of the general population exhibits PTSD symptoms,¹ 30 percent of veterans have PTSD.² **PTSD can be a driving force behind criminal behavior, and it is often exacerbated by incarceration.**³

Texas must address the specialized needs of veterans who are incarcerated in state or local corrections facilities. **It is essential that their veteran status be recorded and verified as soon as possible** by corrections personnel. Doing so will enable veterans to work with practitioners to apply for military benefits; to compile meaningful reentry plans that assist them as they transition back into society; and to coordinate with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in its efforts to provide critical mental health counseling and assistance.

CURRENT MECHANISMS FOR TRACKING VETERAN STATUS ARE INADEQUATE

Until 2013, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) relied on incarcerated individuals to self-identify as veterans. In 2013, HB 634 mandated TDCJ to use the Public Assistance Reporting Information System (PARIS) to identify inmates who had served in the military. However, PARIS only captures data quarterly. This prevents individuals entering state-level confinement from having speedy access to benefits and other assistance. It also prohibits county jails, with their transient population, from using PARIS. There is currently no uniform, formal system that tracks veteran data in Texas' county jails.

KEY FINDINGS

- As of 2013, Texas prisons held an estimated 10,742 veterans.⁴
- It is estimated that 1 in 10 criminal defendants and inmates have served in the U.S. military.⁵
- Veterans are at especially high risk for suicide; the VA estimates that 18 veterans commit suicide every day,⁶ and the risk is greatest upon release from confinement.⁷

COST-SAVING AND PUBLIC SAFETY-DRIVEN SOLUTION: SUPPORT HB 875 BY REPRESENTATIVE FARIAS

- **HB 875 requires the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) to record an individual's veteran status at intake and use the best available federal data to verify that status.** This policy will enable TDCJ to better connect veterans to counseling services, as well as employment and housing resources, which can help lower their recidivism rate.
- **HB 875 requires county sheriffs to track the status of jailed veterans.** By requiring county sheriffs to investigate and verify veteran status using the VA's Veterans Reentry Search Service or a similar service, veterans in local corrections facilities will also have greater opportunities to be connected with federal benefits and other assistance.

Citations

- ¹ RC Kessler, WT Chiu, O Demler, EE Walters, "Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of twelve-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication (NCS-R)," *Archives of General Psychiatry*, June 2005, 62(6):617-27.
- ² Terri Tanielian and Lisa Jaycox, *Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery*, Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2008, <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG720.html>.
- ³ Brett Stetka, MD, "Caring for Convicts: Mental Healthcare in Current and Past Prisoners – An Expert Interview with Elizabeth Ford, MD," *Medscape Today*, January 21, 2011, http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/735988_4.
- ⁴ *Veteran Demographic Report on Incarcerated Veterans from 2006-2013*, Response to Open Records Request by Jorge Renaud.
- ⁵ Federal Interagency Reentry Council, *Justice-Involved Veterans*, June 2013, http://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/SnapShot_Veterans.pdf.
- ⁶ Department of Veterans Affairs, *VA Suicide Prevention Program: Facts about Veteran Suicide*, Office of Patient Care Services Office of Mental Health Services: Fact Sheet, April 2010, 1.
- ⁷ Drug Policy Alliance, *Healing a Broken System: Veterans and the War on Drugs*, 4, November 2012, http://www.drugpolicy.org/sites/default/files/DPA_Healing%20a%20Broken%20System_Veterans%20and%20the%20War%20on%20Drugs_November%202012_Final_0.pdf.