

Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services



Second Report

October 1, 2014

Introductory Letter

Thomas P. Palladino, Chair

Dear State Leaders,

On behalf of my fellow Council members it is my honor and privilege to submit the final Second Report of the Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services (TCCVS).

TCCVS was established as the result of legislation passed by the 82nd Legislature in order to coordinate the activities of state agencies that assist Veterans, servicemembers, and their families; coordinate outreach efforts that ensure that Veterans, servicemembers, and their families are made aware of services; and facilitate collaborative relationships among state, federal, and local agencies and private organizations to identify and address issues affecting Veterans, servicemembers, and their families.

This report identifies Veteran needs, provides background information and identifies services currently provided by the state, and makes recommendations to address those needs. This report represents countless hours of research, collaboration, and discussion by the members of TCCVS. It also provides an update to those recommendations put forth by the Council in our First Report, submitted in October 2012.

The challenges for our state have not diminished. Two key factors contribute to increased demand for Veterans services in Texas. Force reductions by the U.S. Department of Defense are causing a surge of Veterans in the state, and an aging population of Veterans, specifically from the WWII, Korea, and Vietnam service eras, whose health is deteriorating, need more intensive healthcare and other services.

Texas leaders continue to answer this challenge by making significant commitments to care for Texas Veterans, their families, and survivors and by taking action to address the challenges surrounding many of the Veteran issues highlighted within this and the previous report.

Thank you for giving the members of TCCVS the opportunity to engage in this important work. We also appreciate your serious attention to these issues. Texas is widely recognized for leading the nation on Veteran issues, and we look forward to working with you on making these recommendations a reality.

Sincerely,



Thomas P. Palladino, Chair
Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	6
At a Glance	9
Issues That Cross Workgroups: Veteran County Service Officers	23
Health Workgroup Report	25
Workgroup Members	36
Employment Workgroup Report	37
Workgroup Members	42
Higher Education Workgroup Report	43
Workgroup Members	47
Criminal Justice Workgroup Report	49
Workgroup Members	65
Housing Workgroup Report	67
Workgroup Members	70
Women Veterans Report	71
Workgroup Members	76
Transportation Workgroup Report	77
Workgroup Members	84
Communication and Outreach Workgroup Report	85
Workgroup Members	93
Appendices	95
A - Actions Taken From First Report	96
B – TCCVS Agency Information and Services	104

Executive Summary

Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services

The Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services (TCCVS) was created during the 82nd Legislature by Senate Bill 1796. Senate Bill 1796 established the Council to accomplish three tasks:

1. Coordinate the activities of state agencies that assist Veterans, servicemembers, and their families;
2. Coordinate outreach efforts that ensure that Veterans, servicemembers, and their families are made aware of services; and
3. Facilitate collaborative relationships among state, federal, and local agencies and private organizations to identify and address issues affecting Veterans, servicemembers, and their families.

The initial legislation created the Council comprised of five state agencies: Texas Veterans Commission, Texas Veterans Land Board, Office of the Adjutant General, Texas Health and Human Services Commission, and the State Bar of Texas.

Senate Bill 1796 enabled the TCCVS to establish workgroups to focus on specific policy areas affecting Veterans, servicemembers, and their families. The Council elected to establish six such workgroups. Ten additional agencies joined the TCCVS as the result of the creation of the workgroups.

They met throughout the fall of 2011 and 2012, submitting its first report to state leaders in October 2012. The legislation enabled the members of TCCVS to establish workgroups to focus on specific issues affecting Veterans, servicemembers, and their families. The total number of workgroups has increased to eight since the first report was published in 2012.

After the first TCCVS report was published, it was evident that some agencies that play an important role in providing Veterans' services were not included in the Council's original composition.

Senate Bill 1892 (83rd Legislature, 2013) expanded state agency representation on the Council by seventeen agencies. The Council added Transportation and Communication and Outreach to the existing workgroups.

Executive Summary

TCCVS Report

Those agencies that appear in bold were added to the Council by Senate Bill 1892:

- Texas Veterans Commission
- Veterans' Land Board
- Texas Military Department (formerly Adjutant General's Department)
- Health and Human Services Commission
- State Bar of Texas
- **Office of Acquired Brain Injury of the Health and Human Services Commission**
- **Department of State Health Services**
- **Department of Aging and Disability Services**
- **Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services**
- **Department of Family and Protective Services**
- **Texas Workforce Commission**
- **Texas Workforce Investment Council**
- **Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board**
- **Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation**
- **Texas Department of Public Safety**
- **Texas Department of Criminal Justice**
- **Texas Commission on Jail Standards**
- **Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (formerly TCLEOSE)**
- **Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs**
- **Texas Department of Transportation**
- **Texas Department of Motor Vehicles**
- **Office of Public Utility Counsel**

Those workgroups that appear in bold were added to the Council in 2013:

- Health
- Employment
- Higher Education
- Criminal Justice
- Housing
- Women Veterans
- **Transportation**
- **Communication and Outreach**

Executive Summary

TCCVS Report

The TCCVS was tasked by the Legislature to meet regularly to discuss, identify, and research specific Veteran issues and provide a report with recommendations to the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Speaker of the House, and Chairs of the appropriate committees of the Legislature.

Beginning in September 2013, the TCCVS met regularly to begin work on this report. Each of the eight workgroups met repeatedly from September 2013 to August 2014, and the recommendations identified in the report resulted from those individual workgroups.

While there are volumes of research regarding the issues identified in this report, the background provided is not intended to be comprehensive. This report is meant to highlight Veteran needs identified by the workgroups, provide a brief background and services currently provided to meet that need, and recommendations to address that need moving forward.

On May 13, 2014, a group of military children and families stakeholders started a forum to address the needs of military families and their children. They met in San Antonio through the coordination of the Department of State Health Services initiative called Texas Children Recovering from Trauma and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Veteran and Families Policy Academy Technical Assistance Center.

When discussing Veterans issues, families of Veterans can sometimes go seemingly overlooked. These stakeholders asked the Council to consider creating a military children and families workgroup in addition to the other eight existing workgroups to highlight the needs of our servicemembers' families. Given where the Council was in its work in May, the Council made the decision to delay action on adding a ninth workgroup until the next iteration of work. The Council did however believe that incorporation of recommendations related to the initial work of that forum was appropriate and needed. These priorities have been included under the Communication and Outreach Workgroup recommendations.

The Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs and the Texas Workforce Commission abstained from the final vote of the Council approving this report.

*At
A
Glance*

Health

At A Glance

Veteran Need #1

Veterans need a standard, local point of access to local or statewide mental health resources.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Examine the role of the network of Veteran County Service Officers throughout the state and consider ways to expand and enhance its capabilities to serve Veterans in areas beyond claims representation and counseling.
- Promote the continued integration and enhancement of existing infrastructure for the delivery of Veterans' services and programs, specifically mental health resources.
- Invest state resources towards the delivery of resources or services to Veterans and their families to strengthen existing networks and infrastructure before consideration is given to investment of new delivery methods.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans in crisis need to be identified through effective suicide prevention/crisis awareness measures prior to the escalation of crisis.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Acknowledge that vibrant programs that promote peer-to-peer interactions are important suicide prevention tactics.
- Promote training for suicide intervention for those working day-to-day with Veterans and their family members.
- Recognize that those who work day-to-day with Veterans also need training to understand their community's mental health care system and how to access military- informed providers as well as partners such as the Military Veteran Peer Network volunteers and coordinators.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans need communities in which they live in to provide and promote opportunities for Veterans to gather with peers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Create a Veteran engagement primer that could be disseminated to communities seeking to establish Veteran engagement strategies.
- Develop community buy-in to utilize or develop local, county, or state property, Veteran Service Organization (VSO) facilities, National Guard Armories, churches, etc. to develop spaces for Veterans to meet with peers and service delivery outlets.
- Commit to the creation of more Veteran Peer Network Centers. This commitment should include funding to document and report results from the operations and to build tools to empower the volunteers that assist Veterans and their families

Employment

At A Glance

Veteran Need #1

Veterans need enhanced opportunities to pursue careers within Texas state government.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Veteran's employment preference statute should be reformed to allow state agencies to post positions to be filled by Veterans only and give state agencies the authority to make direct hires of highly qualified individuals qualifying for Veterans employment preference without announcing or advertising the position.
- The Veteran Employment Liaison effort at the Texas Veterans Commission should be expanded in order to increase the capacity of the program to serve all agencies of state government.
- All state agencies should be encouraged to work with the Texas Veterans Commission's Veteran Employment Liaison to receive specific assistance in increasing the employment rate of Veterans within their agency.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans and state regulatory/certifying agencies who issue occupational licenses should be aware of how to successfully implement measures to evaluate military experience.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Other regulatory agencies should use TDLR's primer for developing service credit for occupational licensing to act as a guide for accurately evaluating military service credit.
- Regulatory agencies should establish a process for a military service member or Veteran to submit an application for a license or apprenticeship and to obtain credit for verified military experience, service, training or education.
- Regulatory agencies should update the procedures for military spouses to obtain a Texas License, while recognizing the differences in scope and applicability of the existing and new statutory provisions related to military spouses.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans with occupational certifications need help starting their own businesses or utilizing their licenses to become employed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Formalize an interagency referral system between regulatory and certifying agencies issuing professional and occupational licenses and certifications to Veterans with the Texas Veterans Commission's Veteran Entrepreneur Program, Veteran Employment Services program, and other state agencies in order to assist Veterans gain the knowledge and skills necessary to start their own businesses or to gain meaningful employment as a result of their newly obtained licenses and certifications.

Higher Education

At A Glance

Veteran Need #1

The state needs more statistical data to evaluate academic outcomes for Veterans.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Veterans and their dependents should be included in the CBM system of reports provided to the state by public, private nonprofit, private for profit, community, technical and state colleges in order to better analyze the academic outcomes for Veterans and dependents enrolled in institutions of higher education.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans need continued support for the Hazlewood program.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The workgroup reviewed the language of Senate Bill 1158 (83rd Session, 2013) and applauded the Texas Veterans Commission for initiating the programs by reprogramming internal funds. The Hazlewood program requires funding to execute and sustain the mandate of Senate Bill 1158.

- The Texas Legislature should fund Senate Bill 1158 appropriately to administer all components of the mandate.
- The Texas Legislature should consider increasing the permanent trust to enhance the sustainability of the Hazlewood program.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans need the experience and skills gained as a result of their military service applied to certifications, licenses, and academic degrees in order to facilitate and expedite their integration into the civilian workforce.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The workgroup reviewed the Texas Workforce Commission's (TWC) report to the 83rd Legislature regarding College Credit for Heroes (CC4H) program as well as hearing updates from the TWC on the program's current status. The workgroup concluded that the CC4H program presents excellent educational opportunities for Texas Veterans and recommends the following to strengthen the program:

- Expand TWC's CC4H program in community college and Texas State Technical College campuses throughout the state and expand the number/type of professions in the program.
- Encourage collaboration between CC4H and Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation to expedite the licensing process through award of appropriate credit for military training and experience.
- Encourage partnerships between industry and community colleges to accelerate training for Veterans in high demand career fields.
- Encourage Texas colleges and universities to provide individualized counseling to Veterans in order to optimize the acceptance of prior military training and experience when developing degree plans for Veterans.
- Encourage Texas colleges and universities to develop articulation agreements and memoranda of understanding with Central Texas College to accept credit evaluated or awarded for military training and/or experience.

Criminal Justice

At A Glance

Veteran Need #1

Veterans Treatment Court programs should be expanded across the state.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should expand the funding available to Veterans Treatment Courts including consideration of separate funding mechanisms for the creation of Veterans Treatment Courts and the sustainment of Veterans Treatment Courts as well as funding for treatment and mentoring.
 - One such funding proposal that merits consideration is the Justice for Veterans grants submitted in the Legislative Appropriations Request of the Texas Supreme Court. As the Justice for Veterans grants are also funding legal services for Veterans, the Texas Legislature may also want to consider other funding sources such as court fees or traffic tickets. In expanding funding opportunities, however, the Texas Legislature may want to be sensitive to having too many funding entities involved.
- The Texas Legislature should affirm the compliance and reporting requirements it established last session in Senate Bill 462, as codified in Chapter 121, Government Code.
- The Texas Legislature should re-examine the governing statute for Veterans, Chapter 124, Government Code, to determine if the scope should be expanded to include Veterans whose criminal conduct resulted from a service related trauma which “materially affected the defendant’s criminal conduct at issue in the case.”
 - Such restrictions limit the eligible Veterans for Veteran Court programs and are broader than the requirements set forth for other specialty court programs.

Criminal Justice

At A Glance

Veteran Need #2

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) should have the ability to use the best available data systems to determine the Veteran status of incarcerated Veterans. County jails should also be required to use such a system.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should amend Section 501.023, Government Code, as created by House Bill 634, to remove the specific reference to the system that the TDCJ should use to verify the Veteran status of an inmate:

Sec. 501.023. VERIFICATION OF INMATE VETERAN STATUS. (a) ~~In this section, “system” means the Public Assistance Reporting Information System (PARIS) operated by the Administration for Children and Families of the United States Department of Health and Human Services.~~

(b) The department shall:

 - (1) investigate and verify the Veteran status of each inmate by, in consultation with the Texas Veterans Commission, using the best available federal data made available from the system through the Health and Human Services Commission; and
 - (2) use system that data to assist inmates who are Veterans in applying for federal benefits or compensation for which the inmates may be eligible under a program administered by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.
- The Texas Legislature should maintain the requirement for the TDCJ to use that Veteran status to apply for federal benefits or compensation.
- The Texas Legislature should mandate that counties utilize a system like the VA VRSS to determine Veteran status of incarcerated individuals.
- The Texas Legislature should mandate that information about an individual’s military service should be included in an inmate’s admission or booking sheet, as well as intake screening form.

Criminal Justice

At A Glance

Veteran Need #3

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) and County Jails should continue to expand their use of information they have about incarcerated Veterans.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Commissioner Courts, Sheriffs, and the Texas Legislature should consider how to best to implement the previous recommendations of the TCCVS related to county jails and the use of Veteran data for offenders:
 - County jails should continue to expand their use of the self-reported military service information.
 - County jails should distribute the information packets developed and provided by the VA for Veterans to those who report military service.
 - County jails should provide any inmate who reports military service with a Veterans questionnaire to gather additional information to help serve the Veteran.
 - County jails should provide the list of all inmates self-reporting prior military service to the VA Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists (VJO).
- As previously recommended, the Texas Legislature should consider providing specific resources for Veterans incarcerated within TDCJ, including:
 - Four dedicated Texas Veterans Commission counselors (2 for each the two VA Regional Offices in Texas) to support the work of the TDCJ Reentry Case Managers who are completing compensation and pension applications for incarcerated Veterans.
 - Creation of five Veteran-specific positions within TDCJ to assist the approximately 11,000 offenders within TDCJ who are Veterans, specifically a new Veteran's Coordinator position for the Correctional Institutions Division, the Parole Division, the Reentry and Integration Division, and the Community Justice Assistance Division. In addition, a supervisory Veterans Director position would be created in Executive Services.
 - Four statewide MVPN staff to support the volunteers needed for a program which connects incarcerated Veterans with MVPN volunteers during incarceration and after release for community reentry activities.
 - Expansion of groups consisting of incarcerated Veterans, with outside and inside sponsors, similar to the Veterans Incarcerated groups that exist on the Ramsey Unit and the Stiles Unit.
- The TDCJ should collaborate with the Attorney General's Office and require TDCJ to provide every incarcerated Veteran with a child support modification applications during incarceration.
 - By doing so, Veterans can take action to reduce large back pay judgments which hamper the ability to return to the community and provide for his children with earned income. The Texas Legislature should consider providing resources to the Attorney General's Office if needed to support this program.

Criminal Justice

At A Glance

Veteran Need #4

Judges should utilize, and the State of Texas should encourage, programs within Community Supervision and Correction Departments (CSCDs) that address the needs of Veterans on probation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- As previously recommended, the Texas Legislature should provide additional resources to the Community Justice Assistance Division of TDCJ to support programs for Veterans, including:
 - Creation of a Veterans Coordinator position within the Community Justice Assistance Division, which would identify resources and provide technical support to community supervision and corrections departments supervising Veteran probationers. This Veterans Coordinator would work under a supervisory Veterans Coordinator within TDCJ Executive Services and work with other Veterans Coordinator positions in Correctional Institutions Division, the Parole Division, and the Reentry and Integration Division.
 - Mandate that certain pods at various Substance Abuse Felony Punishment Facilities (SAFPF) be designated for Veterans.
 - Provide the four statewide MVPN staff members recommended as part of Veteran Need 3 who could also work to provide peer to peer support for Veterans returning to the community from a SAFPF as well as for those Veterans on specialized Veterans' caseloads.
 - Encourage CSCDs to use Veteran peer to peer support and require the Community Justice Assistance Division to provide technical assistance on implementing Veteran peer to peer support.
 - Designate a community corrections facility to solely house and treat Veterans for mental health issues and substance abuse problems.
 - This facility would serve the entire State and be used for those Veterans who have serious substance abuse and/or mental health problems that have contributed to their criminal activities and who are ineligible for VA benefits. In addition this facility would serve Veterans being supervised on community supervision and who are utilizing VA outpatient services but still need to be placed in a residential setting. Such a facility should be capable of housing between 40 and 50 probationers who are Veterans.
- Add funding in the discretionary funding (DP) line item to create specialized caseloads for Veterans on community supervision.
 - This case load should supervise no more than 50 to 60 Veterans and it would be best for the supervision officer overseeing this case load to also be a Veteran. Three types of criminal conduct for which a specialized caseload would be beneficial are:
 - Assaultive/terroristic threat offenses
 - Drug possession offenses
 - Driving while intoxicated
- This new funding should target jurisdictions with large Veteran populations. These jurisdictions would primarily be metropolitan areas, suburban areas or jurisdictions with active duty military bases. There are approximately 20 to 25 CSCDs that serve these targeted jurisdictions.

Criminal Justice

At A Glance

Veteran Need #5

The State of Texas and local governments should provide training relating to Veterans to judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, jailers, and correctional officers. In particular, first responders should increase their early intervention efforts for Veterans who exhibit brain and PTSD symptoms.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- As previously recommended, the Texas Legislature should find ways to provide training relating to Veterans to judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, jailers, and correctional officers, specifically:
 - Encourage and fund training for first responders, including 911 dispatchers, that specifically includes methods for recognizing and responding appropriately to Veterans and family members who exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress, including military sexual trauma, or traumatic brain injuries.
 - Provide incentives for municipalities and counties to develop early intervention strategies, including, where appropriate, sobering stations, psychiatric emergency centers, and data sharing among first responders and mental health outreach professionals.
 - Provide incentives for municipal, county, state, and federal agencies to cooperate in identifying and following up with Veterans and family members who become involved in the criminal justice system or the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to make them aware of options for treatment and alternatives to avoid incarceration or sanctions.
 - Create incentives for connecting Veterans and family members to Veteran County Service Officers and trained Veteran peers such as those who participate in the Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN), a project of the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) that is coordinated statewide by the Texas Veterans Commission and supported by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), and the Texas Council of Community Centers.
 - Support to the Office of Acquired Brain Injury (training support), the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (staff and/or training support), the Texas Commission on Jail Standards (staff and/or training support), the Texas Department of Public Safety (training support), the Office of the Attorney General (training support), and the Criminal Justice Division within the Office of the Governor (additional grant funds).

Criminal Justice

At A Glance

Veteran Need #6

Incarcerated Veterans should be housed with other Veterans facing similar sentences in county jails and Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), Veteran Dorms, and those incarcerated Veterans should be working with volunteers provided by the Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN) or the Veteran County Service Office both during incarceration and after release.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should provide support for the TDCJ to not only continue, but to expand Veteran Dorms within State Jails but other TDCJ correctional institutions for verified Veteran offenders.
- The Texas Legislature should provide support to the four statewide MVPN staff members recommended as part of Veteran Needs 3 and 4 so staff can provide support to the individuals assigned to the Veteran Dorms.
- The Texas Legislature should provide support to the Veteran County Service Officers to access incarcerated Veterans through the volunteer services program and upon reentry.
- The Texas Legislature should require the TDCJ to engage with the MVPN and the Veteran County Service Officers to share information regarding incarcerated Veterans and assist in access to the Veteran for assistance both during and after incarceration.

Veteran Need #7

The State of Texas and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs should expand secure mental health care facilities for eligible Veterans who have been arrested, but are incompetent to participate in their own defense.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- As previously recommended, the Texas Legislature should urge the U.S. Congress to require the VA to provide resources to Veterans in state hospitals and consider expanding such services to all incarcerated Veterans.

Veteran Need #8

Offenders who are Veterans within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) should be able to utilize Correctional Managed Healthcare to in order to complete the Disability Benefit Questionnaires required to apply for certain service-connected disability benefits with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should provide funding to the TDCJ and Correctional Managed Health Care to support the medical examinations that are part of the Disability Benefits Questionnaires required for Veteran offenders filing a Fully Developed Claim with the VA.

Housing

At A Glance

Veteran Need #1

Veterans need greater access to safe and affordable housing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Veterans Commission (TVC), coordinating with the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA), should take steps to increase the amount of funds available to expand and strengthen the existing network of non-profit organizations around the state that have the capacity to utilize funds to serve the housing needs of Veterans. These steps include:

- Increase the commitment to Housing4TexasHeroes (H4TXH) program through additional funding to the Housing Trust Fund. Funding levels should be restored to the amount appropriated by the 81st Legislature.
- Grant priority access to non-profit organizations that provide direct housing assistance to Veterans to the other Housing Trust Fund programs administered by TDHCA, including but not limited to those used for accessibility modifications.
- Increase awareness among non-profit organizations and communities by expanding outreach efforts that promote the H4TXH program and other Housing Trust Fund programs on state agency websites, grantee websites, and Veteran information websites.

Veteran Need #2

Surviving spouses of totally disabled Veterans need property tax relief equitable to that which would be provided to the totally disabled Veteran.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Legislative action could be considered, which would only apply to future tax years, in order to provide eligibility to spouses whose 100% disabled Veteran spouse would have qualified for the exemption, but passed away prior to the enactment of the exemption.

Women Veterans

At A Glance

Veteran Need #1

Women Veterans should increase their awareness of gender specific services and benefits they may qualify for within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The state should compile a report using similar metrics of analysis within the American Legion Task Force Report. Additionally, a statewide survey of Women Veterans' healthcare priorities should be included in this report to better understand factors relating to gender specific health and benefits.

Veteran Need #2

Tax incentives should be offered for housing programs that serve Women Veterans and their dependents.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The state should create property tax incentives including exemptions and/or a freeze in the tax rate paid when the property was purchased to incentivize more organizations to participate in affordable housing programs focused on serving Women Veterans and their dependents.

Veteran Need #3

Women Veterans need better access to affordable childcare.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Child care can be extremely expensive, especially for lower income families and Veterans transitioning to civilian life. Without quality child care arrangements, working parents are hard-pressed to remain effective either at work or at home. Texas is home to 1.67 million Veterans, many working for the federal and state government. According to the 2012 Veteran Workforce Summary Report, there are almost 32,000 Veterans employed by the State of Texas.

- The state should offer a version of Childcare Subsidy Program that would assist Women Veteran employees with subsidized child care. Allowing state employees to take advantage of subsidized childcare would attract top tier employees, and provide the flexibility many, including Women Veterans, consider when making employment decisions.

Transportation

At A Glance

Veteran Need #1

Veterans, specifically disabled Veterans, need reliable transportation options for accessing VA medical services.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Utilize a pilot project in one area of the state, and more specifically in the service area of a single VA Medical Center, to establish a formal relationship for communication and coordination between VA medical facilities and regional transit providers to increase access to transportation options and to promote public/Veteran awareness of existing transportation resources available within their community.
- As a component of that effort, encourage public transit providers involved to provide a minimum “benefits package” to Veterans that could be used to create a standard “benefits package” with transit providers throughout the state.

Veteran Need #2

Local governments, communities, and service organizations that provide transportation services to Veterans need access to funding and resources to ensure the sustainability of their programs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Increase awareness of funding options, specifically with local government and community organizations that provide critical transportation services to Veterans in order to make these services more sustainable.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans and communities both benefit from standardized forms of recognition and designation as “Veterans”, specifically when utilizing transportation options.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Continue to support modes and methods of recognition for Veterans through things like specialty license plates and “Veteran” designation on Driver’s License and Concealed Handgun Licenses.

Communication and Outreach

At A Glance

Veteran Need #1

State agencies should create a system to function as the point of contact for Veterans' services within each state agency.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Veterans Commission should promulgate a rule in the Texas Administrative Code that requires state agencies to develop a system to function as the point of contact for Veterans services within each state agency.

Veteran Need #2

All state services and resources for Veterans need to be coordinated so that Veterans and their families can easily find and access state information, benefits and programs regardless of point-of-entry.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- All state-funded call center and information referral network employees should receive a minimum amount of customer service training specifically for Veterans and their family members as well as have certain tools at hand (call-center software, agency flow charts) to ensure that each Veteran or family member receives current information in a timely manner.
- State-funded call center resources (including 2-1-1) and technology should be studied so that operating procedures and best practices can be analyzed and standardized for Veterans and their families.

Veteran Need #3

State outreach collaboration efforts need to improve to better target Veterans and their families for needed information and services.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Current training and collaboration among state networks and first responders should be studied so that standardized best practices can be implemented in a form that can be easily shared.
- Training in military culture, Veteran family identification strategies, and information referral should be developed for use by state networks and first responders to create a common training standard across serving agencies; in particular for first responders, judges, educators, and mental health/substance abuse providers (e.g. Veteran Tactical Response).

*Issues that Cross
Workgroups:
Veteran County
Service Officers*

Texas-Sized Challenge

Texas is currently home to 1.67 million Veterans, second in population only to California. Many Veterans either entered service in Texas or were stationed at one of the 14 active military installations spread throughout the state. Veterans remain in or migrate to Texas for many reasons, including the military-friendly culture and the many Veterans services and benefits the state provides.

This population of Veterans is spread across a huge geographic area. While approximately 70 percent of Texas Veterans live within one of the largest 25 counties, the remaining 30 percent, which represents approximately 503,000 Veterans, are spread across 229 counties, many of those rural, to very rural, with less than 7 persons per square mile. This presents huge challenges to providing comprehensive services to all Veterans across the state.

This challenge was raised in every workgroup. The network of Veteran County Service Officers throughout the state was identified as a potential solution to this Texas-sized challenge.

Veteran County Service Officers

The “reach” of state agencies and programs that provide services and resources to Veterans is greatly extended through the network of Veterans County Service Officers throughout the state.

The office of Veteran County Service Officer (VCSO) is governed by Texas Statute (Texas Government Code Chapter 434, Subchapter B). Current statute requires each county with a population of over 200,000 to employ a Veteran County Service Officer. State law is permissive for those counties with a population under 200,000, they may employ a Veterans County Service Officer, but are not required to do so.

No state funding is appropriated to Texas counties to support the implementation of this requirement.

According to 2010 Census, 23 Texas counties have populations greater than 200,000. Currently, of the 254 counties in Texas, 195 (75%) have a VCSO working in them (some counties have multiple, while others have none). Of the 195 counties staffed with a VCSO, only 97 are available to Veterans on a full-time basis. Others are either part-time or work on an “on-call” basis.

Ideally, Veterans in every Texas county would have access to a professional Veteran County Service Officer.

In addition to being experts in the field of claims representation and counseling, Veteran County Service Officers serve as the hub for information on all Veterans’ services and resources within the counties and communities they serve. While impossible to master subjects and service areas as diverse as mental health, transportation, and housing, the Veteran County Service Officer should be able to connect Veterans within their county with the agencies, programs, and subject matter experts most able to provide those services in their area.

Since these roles and duties have not been examined or updated since actions taken by the 70th Texas Legislature in 1987, this is an area the Texas Legislature may want to consider reviewing in 2015.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Examine the role of the network of Veteran County Service Officers throughout the state and consider ways to expand and enhance its capabilities to serve Veterans.
- Any investment of state resources towards the delivery of resources or services to Veterans and their families should be made to strengthen existing networks and infrastructure, specifically Veteran County Service Officers.

Health Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Veterans need a standard, local point of access to local or statewide mental health resources.

Background and Services

The efficient and effective delivery of quality Veterans' services is impeded by the challenges of a huge Veteran population spread across a vast geographic area. The reality of this challenge requires the coordination and collaboration of existing state infrastructures and networks charged with the delivery of resources and services to Veterans and their families. Several such networks currently exist with the state.

Research consistently suggests that early recognition of high-risk behavior improves the likelihood that intervention reduces suicide risk. Successful interventions are more likely if those who work in the Veteran service delivery programs, including Veteran County Service Officers and others described in this report, were trained to recognize high-risk behaviors and to respond with confidence. Every county in Texas is served, through the Local Mental Health Authorities (LMHAs). The services include a crisis intervention hotline and a mobile crisis outreach team. Many of the urban centers have more extensive capabilities through partnerships with first responders as well. Texas Veterans Commission claims and employment staff, VCSOs, Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) Veterans Resource & Referral Specialists, and others who work daily with Veterans likely could respond appropriately to situations involving Veterans or their family members if they understood these services and how to access them. Promoting stronger ties with the trained full-time volunteer coordinators who are active in their communities would help them to understand the community-based services available to Veterans and their families. The coordinators and volunteers also provide peer-to-peer counseling and support, a service that is especially important for Veterans and family members who are unfamiliar with or distrustful of the public health care system.

Veteran County Service Officers

Currently, of the 254 counties in Texas, 195 (75%) have a Veteran County Service Officer working in them (some counties have multiple, while others have none). Of the 195 counties staffed with a Veteran County Service Officer, only 97 are available to Veterans on a full-time basis. Others are either part-time or work on an "on-call" basis.

Ideally, Veterans in every Texas county would have access to a professional Veteran County Service Officer. While maintaining proficiency claims filing, the Veteran County Service Officer should act as the hub of all Veterans' services available in the area and specifically within their county.

TVC Claims/Employment Counselors

The Texas Veterans Commission provides services to Veterans through four main program areas, two of which have significant numbers of personnel in field offices spread throughout the state. The personnel in these offices interact with Veterans on a daily basis and are often closely tied in with the Veteran community within the geographic area in which they operate.

The Texas Veterans Commission's Claims Representation and Counseling (Claims) Program assists Texas Veterans, survivors and dependents in obtaining federal benefits and entitlements from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The Claims Program ensures all Texas Veterans and their families receive every benefit to which they are entitled. Claims staff is located in 37 offices throughout the state at VA Regional Offices, VA Medical Centers, VA Clinics, military installations and county offices.

The Texas Veterans Commission Veterans Employment Services Program provides a full range of employment services such as assistance with job applications, resume preparation, job matching, job searches, and other employment services. The programs 160 Veteran Employment Representatives are located in Workforce Solution Centers in more than 75 cities throughout Texas.

Both of these programs provide an existing network of specialists who, though trained and focused in different areas, see Veterans on a daily basis and serve as hubs for information and resource referral for all Veterans issues within the communities where they are located.

Military Veteran Peer Network

The Department of State Health Services (DSHS) began developing mental health services for returning Veterans and their families in 2009. In 2013, the Legislature passed House Bill 2392 (83rd Legislature, 2013), which required DSHS to develop a mental health intervention program for Veterans that includes peer-to-peer counseling; access to licensed mental health professionals for volunteer coordinators and peers; training for peers; technical assistance for volunteer coordinators and peers; grants to organizations providing services; recruitment, retention, and screening of community-based therapists; suicide prevention training; and jail diversion services. DSHS has worked with its contractors to develop this program in communities across the state.

Well-trained volunteers are the heart of the state's Veteran mental health intervention program; their interactions with their peers build trust, promote camaraderie, and restore hope. The coordinators and volunteers are trained to navigate the community-based health care system. While they are well trained, most are not professional mental health providers. They understand the value of sharing their own lived experience to help their peers to adapt to life with symptoms of post-traumatic stress, military sexual trauma, or brain injuries. They know that failure to address those symptoms in a positive way can have tragic consequences.

The trained volunteers are enrolled by the Local Mental Health Authorities (LMHAs). In fiscal year 2013, over 600 trained Veteran volunteers reported more than 53,000 interactions with peers. During fiscal year 2014, the program increased volunteer training and raised the number of full-time volunteer coordinators from 22 to 33. The coordinators are employed by the LMHAs. Since the program began in 2010, more than 1,000 volunteers have been trained to provide these services, and, as the program continues, scores more are trained each month.

Veterans who seek professional help sometimes are put on a waiting list that is too long. To address this need, the DSHS program has contracted with the Texas A&M University Health Science Center to deploy four combat Veterans who also are professional mental health providers. Known as field clinicians, these professionals can provide interim care. They also work to identify and organize training for community-based mental health professionals in military-informed care and to maintain a roster of military-informed providers who are accessible to Veterans and their families.

The Health Science Center also maintains an online resource directory (TexVet.org) and subcontracts for a wide range of services through the statewide Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN). The MVPN staff provides comprehensive consulting and training for the volunteer coordinators and volunteers, including site visits to assess program needs and close service gaps. They also identify suicide prevention training opportunities for community-based providers, including Veteran County Service Officers, Texas Veteran Commission and Texas Workforce Center staff, volunteers, and coordinators.

A new Veterans Mental Health Grants program implemented by DSHS and the Texas Veterans Commissions' Fund for Veterans Assistance (FVA) also is now funding a diverse range of mental health programs across the state, including Veteran Peer Network Centers, equine therapy, a women's program, and no-cost mental health counseling services. The first 11 awards, for a total of \$1,550,000, began funding in July 1, 2014.

Mental Health Resources at Texas Military Forces

State mental health programs are important to the Texas Military Forces (TXMF). Though there are existing resources nationally, at the state level, and locally, such as the VA, TRICARE, the Texas Veterans Commission, and community health centers, there are still gaps in availability and service which need to be addressed to fully serve our soldiers, airmen, and their families. Many Guard servicemembers cannot access the TRICARE

healthcare system available to them and must rely on state funded mental health programs in their local community when Veterans' services are unavailable.

In June of 2013, through legislative support, the TXMF was able to hire five regionally located licensed counselors to serve the TXMF population throughout Texas. The counselors are based in Austin, Fort Worth, Houston, Weslaco, and Tyler (pending mid-May 2014). TXMF Behavioral Health Team provides counseling and consultation services to assist Texas Army National Guard Service Members and their families (SM/FM), thereby promoting mental fitness and personal wellness for operational readiness and reintegration to civilian life. The team collaborates to provide unit support, psycho-educational presentations, and 24/7 coverage of a TXMF Counseling Line (512) 782-5069.

In Federal Fiscal Years 2012 and 2013, TXMF Family Support staff responded to over 2,083 behavioral/mental health crises, inquiries and cases. In Federal FY14 to date, the TXMF State Mental Health Counselors have provided 761 consultations and counseling sessions, and provided behavioral health training to over 1,667 TXMF commanders, servicemembers and families. Furthermore, between Federal FY13 and 14, the Texas Army National Guard has realized a 63% reduction in suicidal ideations, a 45% reduction in suicide attempts, and zero deaths versus 3 in FFY13 (as of April 30, 2014). We firmly believe that the reduction is due in part to increased access to full time counselors, in addition to enhanced suicide prevention training throughout the TXMF.

The addition of State Mental Health Counselors has greatly increased the quality and scope of mental health services available to our Guard population; providing counseling, building community networks of state and private providers, attending drills/FRG meetings/conferences to market their services, and providing unit crisis support as needed.

Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs)

The Department of Aging and Disability Services (DADS) administers a statewide network of Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs) to provide a single, coordinated system of information and access for older persons, persons with disabilities, individuals caring for children with special needs, Veterans and caregivers seeking long-term support.

Currently, the agency manages a network of 22 regional ADRC's providing services in every county in Texas.

The traditional means of accessing long-term support services can require contacting multiple agencies, and can be both confusing and time-consuming for consumers and their families. ADRCs are intended as a means to minimize confusion, enhance individual choice and support informed decision-making. Each ADRC is designed as a single point of entry to provide "no wrong door" access to needed services and supports. By building on common interests for service to older persons, persons with disabilities, individuals caring for children with special needs, Veterans and caregivers, a local network of community service agencies is collaborating to streamline and make access to public and private long-term care programs, resources, options, and opportunities possible for each individual consumer and his or her caregiver.

ADRCs currently partner with a wide range of military and Veteran Service Organizations. Some receive funding from Texas Veterans Commission, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), or other federal and state sources to implement Veteran specific programs to provide or link individuals to transportation, housing, and general basic needs assistance, healthcare, mental health and caregiver support services. Other ADRCs have implemented dedicated Veteran resource specialists to coordinate with County Veteran Service Officers and other Veterans service partners to provide information, referral and assistance about existing community services available to meet the needs of Veterans at the regional level.

ADRCs and their partner agencies regularly engage in cross-training activities to ensure an individual has access to the appropriate services to meet their unique needs. In 2015 all ADRCs will provide cross-training activities which promote linkages to existing military and Veteran related support services, including but

not limited to county Veteran service officers, the Military Veteran Peer Network, local Veterans Healthcare systems, TexVet, Veteran-directed home and community-based services program, VA caregiver support programs and the wide range of local community-based servicemember and Veteran support organizations in their regions.

Beginning in summer 2015, the Health and Human Services Commission will implement the new Long Term Services and Supports pre-screening tool. This tool will include a question about military service. Individuals who answer yes to the question may request a referral to the ADRC for assistance with identification of needs, and access to potential services to meet those needs.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Vet Center Program

The Vet Center Program was established by Congress in 1979 out of the recognition that a significant number of Vietnam-era Vets were still experiencing readjustment problems. Vet Centers are community-based and part of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Readjustment counseling includes a wide range of psychosocial services offered to eligible Veterans and their families in the effort to make a successful transition from military to civilian life. They include:

- Individual and group counseling for Veterans and their families
- Family counseling for military related issues
- Bereavement counseling for families who experience an active duty death
- Military sexual trauma counseling and referral
- Outreach and education including PDHRA, community events, etc.
- Substance abuse assessment and referral
- Employment assessment & referral
- VBA benefits explanation and referral
- Screening & referral for medical issues including TBI, depression, etc.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Examine the role of the network of Veteran County Service Officers throughout the state and consider ways to expand and enhance its capabilities to serve Veterans in areas beyond claims representation and counseling.
- Promote the continued integration and enhancement of existing infrastructure for the delivery of Veterans' services and programs, specifically mental health resources.
- Invest state resources towards the delivery of resources or services to Veterans and their families to strengthen existing networks and infrastructure before consideration is given to investment of new delivery methods.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans in crisis need to be identified through effective suicide prevention/crisis awareness measures prior to the escalation of crisis.

Background and Services

One Suicide is One Too Many

According to data published in its *Suicide Data Report, 2012*, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) estimates that 22 Veterans died from suicide each day in 2010, this figure does not include Veterans in Texas or California. In an investigative reporting series conducted by the Austin-American Statesman published under the title “Uncounted Casualties” in 2012, they concluded that 45 Texas Veterans died from suicide from 2003 to 2011. New information indicates that, while active duty suicide rates may have declined slightly in the last year, that of National Guardsmen and Reservists have climbed significantly.

Even one suicide is one suicide too many, and the state of Texas has undertaken concrete steps to try to stem the tide of suicides by our military Veterans.

The state’s Suicide Prevention Plan promotes a broad series of strategies, including targeted information about risk factors and warning signs for suicide, and how to connect individuals to help. The plan includes a strategy for identifying at risk groups, including Veterans and servicemembers, and working with stakeholder groups to implement suicide prevention policies and programs that address the needs of these at risk groups.

Research has consistently demonstrated that one of the best ways to combat suicide among Veterans is early recognition of key indicators prior to the onset of a crisis. To that end, there is a need for the Veteran service delivery network mentioned previously to be trained in crisis/suicide awareness and even prevention. These networks are those which interact with Texas Veterans on a daily basis, resulting in opportunities to observe and recognize behavior or situations which may escalate to the level of a crisis.

There are several components to the state’s Veteran crisis intervention infrastructure. Standardizing the training and designations within this structure would better allow for those utilizing referrals to have a picture of resources available in geographic areas and create realistic expectations of capabilities with the network.

Training

What follows is a brief description of some of those training tools already available, and currently being utilized by various components of the states’ network of Veteran service providers.

ASK About Suicide to Save a Life

ASK suicide prevention training was developed by Mental Health America of Texas. The training is designed to be delivered in a two hour workshop to provide basic information about suicide and to teach basic suicide intervention skills through a three-step process:

1. Ask About Suicide
2. Seek More Information and
3. Know how and where to refer

Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST)

ASIST is a training designed to help service providers become more willing, ready and able to help persons at risk. Just as “CPR” skills make physical first aid possible, training in suicide intervention develops the skills used in suicide first aid. ASIST is a two-day intensive, interactive and practice-dominated course designed to help service providers recognize risk and learn how to intervene to prevent the immediate risk of suicide. ASIST has five learning sections:

1. **Preparing:** sets the tone, norms, and expectations of the learning experience.
2. **Connecting:** sensitizes participants to their own attitudes towards suicide. Creates an understanding of the impact which attitudes have on the intervention process.
3. **Understanding:** overviews the intervention needs of a person at risk. It focuses on providing participants with the knowledge and skills to recognize risk and develop safe plans to reduce the risk of suicide.
4. **Assisting:** presents a model for effective suicide intervention. Participants develop their skills through observation and supervised simulation experiences in large and small groups.
5. **Networking:** generates information about resources in the local community. Promotes a commitment by participants to transform local resources into helping networks.

Bring Everyone in the Zone (Facilitator Training)

Bring Everyone in the Zone, Inc., is a 501(c)3 non-profit that provides education, training and support to service providers seeking to facilitate peer counseling. The 40-hour course includes training in all necessary activities to assist Veterans, servicemembers and their families who may be suffering from a host of needs, including the effects of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These activities include, but are not limited to: screening; intake; orientation; assessment; treatment planning; counseling; case management; crisis intervention; client education; referral; reports and record keeping; and consultation.

The training includes training which teaches facilitators to recognize cases that require additional services including but not limited to medical referral and how to provide needed resources.

Basic Facilitator Training Course

- 40 hours of classroom instruction;
- Participate in classroom exercises and role playing;
- Co-facilitate as trainee in group sessions;
- Guest facilitate at least two group sessions; and
- Passing a written exam.

Training for Law Enforcement

The Office of Acquired Brain Injury in the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) has partnered with the VA to create educational tools that equip police with basic knowledge of brain injury and stress disorders, the ability to recognize these issues during trouble calls or arrests, and ways to apply that knowledge in de-escalating dangerous situations. The centerpiece of the effort is a training — Veterans Tactical Response — which has been developed and is available to law enforcement agencies.

Armed with this knowledge, law enforcement officers in tense situations with Veterans who may have a brain injury or stress disorder will be able to ask the right questions, establish trust, cool down heated encounters and possibly save lives. The training will help Veterans with traumatic brain injury and PTSD by first helping them avoid harming themselves and others. But it also will bring law enforcement officers into a key role of helping direct former servicemembers to the medical and psychiatric care they need.

Additional Tools and Resources

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) has begun promoting the Texas Veterans App, a mobile application designed to provide Veterans easy access to the Veterans Crisis Line, Hotline for Women Veterans, Connect with Texas Veterans, and Texas Veterans Portal. The Veterans Crisis Line and Hotline for Women Veterans are nationally supported help lines. The Connect with Texas Veterans option provides a number for users to call and request help with connecting to other Veterans within their geographical area. The Texas Veterans Portal option allows a user to easily access additional online resources as well.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Acknowledge that vibrant programs that promote peer-to-peer interactions are important suicide prevention tactics.
- Promote training for suicide intervention for those working day-to-day with Veterans and their family members.
- Recognize that those who work day-to-day with Veterans also need training to understand their community's mental health care system and how to access military- informed providers as well as partners such as the Military Veteran Peer Network volunteers and coordinators.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans need communities in which they live in to provide and promote opportunities for Veterans to gather with peers.

Background and Services

The effectiveness of bringing Veterans together with other peers with the shared life experience of military service has already been demonstrated to help with a number of issues faced by Veterans, including transition from military to civilian life and crisis intervention. Living in supportive environments that recognize the value in promoting opportunities for Veterans to gather with peers can be tremendously helpful to Veterans and the communities in which they live. Some counties, cities, and communities may want to promote such opportunities for their Veterans, but may not be equipped with the knowledge or experience to get such efforts off the ground. What follows are some models communities can utilize to encourage Veteran peer interaction.

Veteran Service Organizations

A well-established network of Veteran Service Organizations (VSO) has existed within Texas for many years. Beyond a membership infrastructure, many of these organizations own or lease considerable amounts of physical property, posts, halls, and meeting spaces. The largest VSO in Texas is the Veteran of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) with chapters in nearly every municipality, boasting over 400 VFW Posts. Other sizable organizations in Texas include the American Legion, with approximately 65 posts, Disabled American Veterans with approximately 70 posts. There are also a number of smaller or more specialized organizations with local chapters including AMVETS, American GI Forum, and the National Guard Association of Texas (NGAT), to name a few. These VSOs form a backbone of the more traditional Veteran community. Their membership is largely composed of Veterans from the WWII, Korea, and Vietnam-eras of Veterans, though many have undertaken significant measures to recruit and retain younger members. These organizations, and the structure of both organization and physical meeting space, are critical components of a community's effort to encourage Veteran interaction with peers.

Engage the Faith-Based Community

Chaplain (Major) John Morris with the Minnesota National Guard (has since been promoted to Colonel) deployed to Iraq in 2004 with the 1st Marine Division in Al Anbar Province during the Second Battle of Fallujah. Based upon his experiences in combat, and particularly with Reserve and National Guard members returning from combat to non-military communities, Morris developed an essay which became a movement of how to mobilize churches and the faith-based community to care for their servicemembers and Veterans. The movement became known as "Beyond the Yellow Ribbon" and he testified about the potential of such movements to the U.S. House Veterans Affairs Committee on February 27, 2012.

His point is that every month soldiers are returning home from combat. The local church that opens its doors to combat Veterans will be offering a much needed ministry to a population often overlooked in terms of ministry. Yellow ribbons are nice and much appreciated. Genuine support and a "cup of cold water," however, is a special gift to Veterans and their families.

In his essay "Beyond the Yellow Ribbon: How Churches Can Help Soldiers and Their Families Readjust After Combat", Morris outlines seven simple steps churches can take to embrace Veterans, servicemembers, and military families.

1. Make yourself a "military-friendly" church.

A "military-friendly" church acknowledges, publicly, in church publications and from the lectern, that members of the church are in the military and their service is appreciated by the church.

2. Reach out to military families.

Many of the skills learned in ministering to families who have been through a significant crisis apply to a military family during a combat deployment. A gentle ministry of presence that lets the family know that the church wants to walk with them through the long days and nights of separation will be greatly appreciated.

3. Reach out to the deployed soldier.

If groups in the church take turns sending care packages and notes to deployed servicemembers, they will feel they are loved, valued and not forgotten.

4. When the soldier comes home, welcome them home.

By welcoming the soldier home and acknowledging the sacrifice their family has made the Church will validate their shared struggle and affirm their service.

5. Support beyond the yellow ribbon.

If the church thinks of the servicemember and their family as people who have just survived a fire, it will guide efforts to help for the long haul.

6. Listen, support, absolve and don't condemn.

Soldiers need a place where they can share the experiences of war that may trouble them. They need a safe place where they can do theological inquiry which is so necessary for anyone who has suffered trauma. They need a place where they can question, grow, and gain the strength needed to grow through their combat experience.

7. Be alert for signs of distress.

Check in on Veterans periodically and watch for signs of distress. Depression, hyper vigilance, withdrawal, inability to hold a job, anger issues and discomfort with being in crowds are common signs of stress in combat Veterans.

Coffee Bunker Concept

Communities that seek to engage returning servicemembers and Veterans in locations that are not typical “treatment” centers can have a positive impact on the physical and mental health and recovery of Veterans.

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, Serving our Servicemembers (SOS) and their component program, Coffee Bunker, is a successful model of a community committing space and other resources to engaging Veterans where they are. The organization advertises Coffee Bunker as a great place for servicemembers and Veterans to find connection, honor, support, resources and renewal.

SOS is the “umbrella organization,” covering multiple community activities, including Coffee Bunker. SOS provides Community Education Evenings, addressing subjects important to servicemembers and community members together. Subjects such as PTSD, depression, alcohol and substance abuse, domestic issues post deployment, therapeutics (service dogs), military sexual trauma, and other topics.

SOS is active in education and advocacy. Coffee Bunker is, on the other hand, a place for military personnel and families. The Coffee Bunker concept is a place to connect with others of common experience, a place of honor, where grateful citizens put their “boots on the ground,” thanking our servicemembers and Veterans by serving them coffee, soda, and other drinks, as well as great snacks. It's a place of support, where a team of counselors and other professionals help Veterans get through the difficult issues they face, in order to reintegrate successfully into both home and community. Attendees can be helped to find directions for different help needed via both information, steorage, and mentoring. There is a 12-step programs for those struggling with hurts, habits, and hang-ups, addictions of any kind, getting out for picnics or other outdoor activities that refresh and renew.

Heroes Night Out (Cedar Park) Model

A similar model of community engagement via making physical gathering space available is Heroes Night Out in Cedar Park, considered by its creators to be a Peer Networking Center. There are at least four such Peer Networking Centers in Texas where Veteran response has been positive: Cedar Park, Tyler, Seguin, and Waco. At these centers, the County Veterans Service Officers are typically on site at least a few days per week. Other service providers have also leased space to provide employment assistance, financial, legal, and educational counseling. Others are providing medical and mental health care services as well as making referrals to a wide range of services, from acupuncture to horse therapy to finding a service dog.

Peer Networking Centers are perceived as far less stigmatizing than conventional mental health care facilities. Veterans who need, but otherwise might resist seeking those services, therefore, can learn about them even if their first visit is to see someone about a job lead. Because Veterans who are returning to civilian life typically have many and disparate needs, having trained trusted peers on site can be a first step to a healthy return from service.

Joining Community Forces – Texas

Joining Community Forces is a national model, based on the Community Blueprint, suggesting ways to organize community support for returning Veterans. The Texas Military Forces Family Programs office employs a Joining Community Forces – Texas coordinator who works to document and encourage these collaborations. Collaborations may be labeled as “Army Community Covenant”, “Marine for Life”, Veterans Coalition of one geographic area or another, but bring together multiple agencies and organizations to address Veterans needs in the community. These work best when they can identify both a “Champion” – one person to serve as a point of contact, voluntarily or not, and a Veterans resource center or one-stop, where these organizations gather.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Create a Veteran engagement primer that could be disseminated to communities seeking to establish Veteran engagement strategies.
- Develop community buy-in to utilize or develop local, county, or state property, Veteran Service Organization (VSO) facilities, National Guard Armories, churches, etc. to develop spaces for Veterans to meet with peers and service delivery outlets.
- Commit to the creation of more Veteran Peer Network Centers. This commitment should include funding to document and report results from the operations and to build tools to empower the volunteers that assist Veterans and their families.

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Employment Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Veterans need enhanced opportunities to pursue careers within Texas state government.

Background and Services

The Legislature has provided state laws (Chapter 657, Section 657.004, Government Code) which mandate that public entities or public works of the state must exercise Veteran's employment preference practices until at least 40 percent of the employees of the public entity are Veterans.

Even with statute supporting Veteran hiring practices within state agencies, the actual percentage of Veterans employed by the state has trended down for the past decade. The Office of the Comptroller of Public Accounts produces an annual report detailing the number of Veteran employees at all state agencies. In the last eight years, while the number of state employees has grown by over 35,000 employees, the percentage of Veterans employed by state agencies has decreased, going from 5.94% in 2006 to 4.98% in 2013.

By contrast, the federal government has made a concerted effort to increase Veteran hiring within its federal departments. The Veteran employment rate by federal departments is triple that of Texas state agencies. In fiscal year 2012, approximately 21% of all new federal hires were Veterans.

Senate Bill 10 (83rd Legislature, 2013) was a Veteran employment preference reform bill that was filed but did not pass during the 83rd Legislature. The bill called for a number of reforms to current Veteran employment preference practices including the opportunity for state agencies to post positions to be filled by Veterans only and would have given state agencies the authority to make direct hires of highly qualified individuals qualifying for Veterans employment preference without announcing or advertising the position. These practices have enabled some of the success in increasing Veteran hiring at the federal level.

Additionally, in January 2014, the Texas Veterans Commission established a Veterans Employment Liaison (VEL) to work with public entities, with a focus on state government, to assist them with hiring Veterans. Veterans Employment Liaisons provide the following services to agencies:

- Veterans Preference Program Assistance - Resource and technical assistance regarding Veteran hiring strategies
- Career Fair Guidance - Guidance regarding career fairs so that Veterans can learn about the client agency, opportunities available, career progression, and more
- Direct Outreach to Veterans - Utilize TVC's social media and professional networking sites to inform Veterans of potential job opportunities, and reach qualified Veteran candidates
- Training for Hiring Authorities - Receive a variety of Veteran specific trainings i.e. translating military skills to ensure the client agency can interpret Veteran skill sets and language
- Job Posting Development - Learn how to develop an effective "Veteran Friendly" job posting
- Follow up - Utilize the VEL as a direct liaison between the client agency and the TVC Veterans Employment Representatives to recruit qualified Veterans

The Texas Veterans Commission's single Veteran Employment Liaison has worked with 28 state agencies to improve the rate of Veteran employment within their individual agency. These agencies represent approximately 24% of the state's entire workforce. Additional capacity would be required in order to enable the program to serve all agencies of state government.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Veteran's employment preference statute should be reformed to allow state agencies to post positions to be filled by Veterans only and give state agencies the authority to make direct hires of highly qualified individuals qualifying for Veterans employment preference without announcing or advertising the position.
- The Veteran Employment Liaison effort at the Texas Veterans Commission should be expanded in order to increase the capacity of the program to serve all agencies of state government.
- All state agencies should be encouraged to work with the Texas Veterans Commission's Veteran Employment Liaison to receive specific assistance in increasing the employment rate of Veterans within their agency.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans and state regulatory/certifying agencies who issue occupational licenses should be aware of how to successfully implement measures to evaluate military experience.

Background and Services

The Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation (TDLR) recently updated its licensing procedures to help military service members and Veterans to become licensed to work in Texas using their military service, training, and education.

Also, TDLR assists in helping military spouses to become licensed to work in Texas if they hold an equivalent license issued in or by another state.

These changes were authorized by bills enacted in 2013 by the 83rd Texas Legislature:

- House Bill 2028 (83rd Session, 2013) relating to professional licenses for plumbers;
- House Bill 2029 (83rd Session, 2013) relating to professional licenses for electricians;
- House Bill 2135 (83rd Session, 2013) relating to private security licenses;
- House Bill 2254 (83rd Session, 2013) relating to using military training towards fulfilling apprenticeship requirements;
- Senate Bill 229 (83rd Session, 2013) relating to commercial driver's licenses; and
- Senate Bill 162 (83rd Session, 2013) relating to occupational licensing requirements

TDLR has also published a primer for developing service credit for occupational licensing that can act as a guide for other regulatory agencies to accurately evaluate military service credit. Other regulatory agencies should use the same online resources used by TDLR to discover the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) designations which correspond to its licensing programs.

These resources include Career One Stop, O*NET OnLine, and ACE Military Guide.

Additionally, TDLR took administrative action to adopt a specific set of administrative rules and guidelines to ensure military-related rules would apply uniformly to their licensing programs. This effort included:

- Defining certain military terms that are used, but not defined, in statute, and developing procedures, rather than rules, for identifying "active duty" military personnel.
- Explaining the criteria for determining what is a "substantially equivalent" license from another state or jurisdiction.
- Determining the amount of military experience, service, training or education that will be credited toward meeting the licensing requirements, while recognizing any existing licensing program statutes and rules that already make this determination for a particular license.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Other regulatory agencies should use TDLR's primer for developing service credit for occupational licensing to act as a guide for accurately evaluating military service credit.
- Regulatory agencies should establish a process for a military service member or Veteran to submit an application for a license or apprenticeship and to obtain credit for verified military experience, service, training or education.
- Regulatory agencies should update the procedures for military spouses to obtain a Texas License, while recognizing the differences in scope and applicability of the existing and new statutory provisions related to military spouses.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans with occupational certifications need help starting their own businesses or utilizing their licenses to become employed.

Background and Services

Recent legislation now requires state agencies issuing occupational licenses to provide expedited licensure for military service members, their spouses and Veterans holding current licenses. Veterans who obtain these licenses need to be connected to state resources that can assist them in gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to start their own businesses or to gain meaningful employment as a result of their newly obtained licenses.

A component of this effort is the Veterans Entrepreneur Program (VEP), established by Senate Bill 1476 (82nd Session, 2011). The purpose of the VEP is to foster and promote Veteran-Owned Businesses and Veteran Entrepreneurship throughout the state of Texas. This program provides assistance to Veterans interested in entrepreneurship through a series of seminars that disseminate information regarding business plan development, financial guidance, government procurement, and information regarding franchise opportunities.

Other state agencies also have various employment initiatives that may be able to assist Veterans in gaining employment. The Governor's Office of Economic Development & Tourism has a team dedicated to traversing the state and promoting small business growth in primarily smaller communities. It provides networking opportunities to prospective and burgeoning entrepreneurs across a wide range of demographics including Veterans. The Texas Veterans Leadership Program is a Texas Workforce Commission resource and referral network connecting returning Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan with the resources and tools they need to lead productive lives and enjoy the full benefits of the society they have willingly served. Additionally, the Office of the Comptroller participates in the state's Historically Underutilized Business Program. Veterans who have a service connected disability are now eligible for preference status when bidding on state contracts.

For those newly licensed Veterans not seeking self-employment, the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) offers employment services to Texas Veterans and helps employers find qualified Veteran job applicants. TVC Veteran Employment Services program (VES) provides sound job coaching and pathways to overcome employment barriers. In conjunction with assisting Veterans, Veterans Employment Representatives (VERs) work diligently to communicate and assist employers with understanding the unique benefits and simple procedures involved with hiring Texas Veterans.

Over 150 Texas Veterans Commission VERs located in workforce center in more than 75 cities throughout Texas provide a full range of employment services and offer one-on-one assistance with job applications, resume preparation, job matching and searches, as well as other intensive services. Intensive services are offered to disabled Veterans and Veterans with barriers to employment, including but not limited to homeless, economically or educationally disadvantaged Veterans with other barriers to employment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Formalize an interagency referral system between regulatory and certifying agencies issuing professional and occupational licenses and certifications to Veterans with the Texas Veterans Commission's Veteran Entrepreneur Program, Veteran Employment Services program, and other state agencies in order to assist Veterans gain the knowledge and skills necessary to start their own businesses or to gain meaningful employment as a result of their newly obtained licenses and certifications.

Employment Workgroup

List of Workgroup Participants

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Higher Education Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

The state needs more statistical data to evaluate academic outcomes for Veterans.

Background and Services

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) is the proponent agency for higher education data reporting via the Coordinating Board Management (CBM) system of reports. The CBM system of reports fulfills the provisions of the Higher Education Coordinating Act of 1965.

The enrollment data provided by the family of CBM reports allows the THECB, the Governor, and the Legislature to gauge the success of education in higher education institutions within the state using a myriad of statistical practices utilized in the formation of policy and funding.

Currently, Veterans enrolled in Texas higher education institutions are not accounted for by the CBM family of reports nor is their benefit type(s).

In its current form, the CBM001 report gathers primarily demographic enrollment data ranging from ethnicity, residency program of enrollment and funding sources for the student's education while omitting data fields requiring identification of student Veterans, military dependents or their benefit types. Without this crucial data, analysis of our Veterans and military dependents is not possible.

Including Veterans and their dependents in the CBM001 CBM system of enrollment reports would assist state agencies and other interested groups who wish to analyze academic outcomes for our state's Veterans and their dependents in order to better serve their needs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Veterans and their dependents should be included in the CBM system of reports provided to the state by public, private nonprofit, private for profit, community, technical and state colleges in order to better analyze the academic outcomes for Veterans and dependents enrolled in institutions of higher education.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans need continued support for the Hazlewood program.

Background and Services

The Hazlewood Act is a State of Texas education benefit that provides qualified Veterans, spouses, and dependent children with up to 150 hours of tuition and certain fee exemption charges at public institutions of higher education in Texas.

Senate Bill 1158 (83rd Legislature, 2013), transferred administrative responsibility for the Hazlewood exemption from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to the Texas Veterans Commission; established a Veterans Education Excellence Award program; and, established a Veterans Education Counselor Program. The General Appropriations Act (GAA) did not specifically appropriate funding in order to accomplish implementation of this legislation. As a result, the Texas Veterans Commission utilized funds appropriated elsewhere in the GAA to initiate implementation beginning in 2014.

The Hazlewood programs simplify and standardize the eligibility determination process, enrollment, and reporting procedures, while concurrently engaging schools to create a hospitable and supportive environment for Veterans and their families. The implementation of a reliable electronic database will maintain information regarding Hazlewood recipients and number of hours exempted, by the recipient, thus enhancing effective enforcement of the program. Public recognition of schools for excellence in education and support services to Veterans will attract more Veterans to schools in Texas. Currently, the federal GI Bill introduces approximately \$1.28 million into the economy per every hundred Veteran students.

The absence of specifically appropriated funding for the Hazlewood and associated programs will essentially terminate the mandate of the 83rd Legislature. It will relegate administration of the Hazlewood tuition/fee exemption to the schools or perhaps, THECB; and will also eliminate the efforts to encourage schools to establish programs and procedures in support of Veterans and their families and remove public recognition as an incentive for schools to become “Veteran friendly”.

Senate Bill 1158 also established the Permanent Fund Supporting Military and Veterans Exemptions in order to reimburse institutions of higher education for a portion of the costs of the Hazlewood Legacy program. On an annual basis, the Legislative Budget Board and the Office of the Comptroller will order distributions based upon interest earned on the principal investment in the Fund. Given the size of the initial invest, approximately \$248 million, it is not expected that the Fund will be able to make distributions such that the entire cost associated with execution of the Hazlewood exemption will be off set. Accomplishing this would require a greater investment by the Legislature.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The workgroup reviewed the language of Senate Bill 1158 (83rd Session, 2013) and applauded the Texas Veterans Commission for initiating the programs by reprogramming internal funds. The Hazlewood program requires funding to execute and sustain the mandate of Senate Bill 1158.

- The Texas Legislature should fund Senate Bill 1158 appropriately to administer all components of the mandate.
- The Texas Legislature should consider increasing the permanent trust to enhance the sustainability of the Hazlewood program.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans need the experience and skills gained as a result of their military service applied to certifications, licenses, and academic degrees in order to facilitate and expedite their integration into the civilian workforce.

Background and Services

Senate Bill 1736 (82nd Legislature, 2011) authorized the College Credit for Heroes (CC4H) program to identify, develop, and support methods to award credit to Veterans and military servicemembers for their military experience, education, and training; and to apply those credits to accelerate technical skills certification, licensing and degree completion to enable them to more easily re-enter the workforce.

The goal of the CC4H program is to ensure that all student Veterans and servicemembers in Texas colleges and universities are awarded the maximum credit for their respective military training, education, and experience. The program can potentially eliminate institutional obstacles to efficient licensing, certification and degrees awarded at state and national levels so that Veterans transition efficiently through the educational/certification/licensing process into the active workforce.

The legislation also requires the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), in consultation with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), to report to the Legislature and the Governor on:

- Results of the grants awarded for CC4H;
- Best practices for Veterans and military servicemembers to achieve maximum academic and workforce credit for military education and training;
- Measures needed to facilitate the award of academic or workforce education credit by institutions of higher education for military experience, education, and training and;
- Other related measures needed to facilitate entry of trained, qualified Veterans and military servicemembers into the workforce.

35 colleges and universities are participating in the CC4H program. Faculty and staff at institutions of higher education already have methods to translate military training and experience into college credit. College Credit for Heroes builds on existing methods, expanding the possibilities of higher education and employment for thousands of men and women who have put their lives on the line for their country.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The workgroup reviewed the Texas Workforce Commission's (TWC) report to the 83rd Legislature regarding the College Credit for Heroes (CC4H) program as well as hearing updates from the TWC on the program's current status. The workgroup concluded that the CC4H program presents excellent educational opportunities for Texas Veterans and recommends the following to strengthen the program:

- Expand TWC's CC4H program in community college and Texas State Technical College campuses throughout the state and expand the number/type of professions in the program.
- Encourage collaboration between CC4H and Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation to expedite the licensing process through award of appropriate credit for military training and experience.
- Encourage partnerships between industry and community colleges to accelerate training for Veterans in high demand career fields.
- Encourage Texas colleges and universities to provide individualized counseling to Veterans in order to optimize the acceptance of prior military training and experience when developing degree plans for Veterans.
- Encourage Texas colleges and universities to develop articulation agreements and memoranda of understanding with Central Texas College to accept credit evaluated or awarded for military training and/or experience.

Higher Education Workgroup

List of Workgroup Participants

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Criminal Justice Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Veterans Court programs should be expanded across the state.

Veterans Treatment Court programs should be expanded across the state.

Background and Services

The last Texas Coordinating Council for Veteran Services (TCCVS) report identified the need to continue expanding Veteran Court programs across the state.

Veterans Treatment Court programs provide military Veterans who enter the civil or criminal justice system, most often as the result of substance or drug abuse or mental health issues, caused or linked to injuries connected to their military service (PTSD, TBI, etc.), an alternative to jail or prison time. Veteran Court programs were modeled after the drug treatment or mental health treatment courts first established two decades ago.

In 2009, the 81st Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 1940, authored by Senator Leticia Van de Putte, which incorporated Senate Bill 112 (81st Session, 2009) authored by Senator Rodney Ellis, and was codified as Chapter 617 of the Health and Safety Code and governs the establishment and implementation of Veterans Treatment Court programs.

It allows the Commissioners Court of a county to establish a Veterans Treatment Court program for Veterans or current servicemembers of the United States Armed Forces charged with any misdemeanor or felony offense if the Veteran or servicemember “suffers from a brain injury, mental illness, or mental disorder, including post-traumatic stress disorder, that...”\

- “...resulted from the defendant’s military service in a combat zone or other similar hazardous duty area; and
- materially affected the defendant’s criminal conduct at issue in the case.”

If a Veteran or servicemember successfully completes a Veterans Treatment Court program, the court in which the criminal case is pending may dismiss the criminal action against the defendant after determining that the dismissal is in the best interest of justice.

On December 9, 2009, the first Veterans Treatment Court program in Texas commenced in Houston, with the Honorable Marc Carter presiding.

As of this report, there are 20 known established Veterans Treatment Court programs, of which 17 are operational as reported to the Criminal Justice Division (CJD) of the Office of the Governor. As of this report, the Midland County, Webb County, and Williamson County Veterans Treatment Courts are not yet operational.

Judicial Circuit	Court Name	Primary County Served	Court Start Date	Presiding Judge
County Court #6	Veterans' Court Program	*Bexar	9/1/2010	Honorable Wayne Christian
27 th District of Texas	Cameron County Veterans Treatment Court	Cameron	1/21/2014	Honorable David Sanchez
296 th District Court	Veterans Treatment Court	*Collin	4/19/2013	Honorable John Roach, Jr.
Criminal District Ct #7	Dallas County Veterans Treatment Court	*Dallas	9/1/2010	Honorable Michael Snipes
Denton County	Denton County Veterans Treatment Court	Denton	12/16/2009	Honorable David Garcia
County Court at Law #1	El Paso Veterans Mental Health Court	El Paso	3/7/2010	Honorable Ricardo Herrera
34 th Judicial District	El Paso Veterans' Court Program	*El Paso	02/13/2012	Honorable Angie Juarez
Galveston County	Veterans Treatment Court	Galveston	2/11/2013	Honorable Mark Henry
County Court at Law	Guadalupe County Veterans Treatment Court	Guadalupe	12/1/2010	Honorable Linda Z. Jones
228 th District Court	Harris County Veterans Treatment Court	*Harris	12/9/2009	Honorable Marc Carter
County Court at Law	Hays County Veterans Treatment Program	Hays	3/15/2014	Honorable Linda Rodriguez
430 th District Court	Hidalgo County Veterans Treatment Court	*Hidalgo	8/4/2011	Honorable Israel Ramon
385 th District Court	Midland County Veterans Treatment Court	Midland	9/1/2014	Honorable Robin Darr
148 th District Court	Veterans' Court Program	Nueces	9/1/2010	Honorable Guy Williams
County Court at Law #2	Smith County Veterans Treatment Court	Smith	11/2/2010	Honorable Randall Rogers
Tarrant County Criminal Court #9	Tarrant County Veterans Treatment Court	*Tarrant	1/1/2010	Honorable Brent Carr
County Court at Law #4	Travis County Veterans Treatment Court	*Travis	11/1/2010	Honorable Mike Denton
County Court at Law #1	Veterans Treatment Court Program	Webb	TBD	Honorable Alvino Morales
406 th and 34 th Judicial Districts	406 th Veteran's Treatment Court	Webb	08/01/2013	Honorable Oscar J. Hale and Beckie Palomo
County Court at Law #2	Williamson County Veterans Treatment Court Program	Williamson	10/01/2014	Honorable Tim Wright

Participant Data

Below are the aggregate numbers for the seven Veteran Court programs from which CJD collects performance measure data – Bexar, Dallas, El Paso, Harris, Hidalgo, Tarrant, Travis. Note that the programs operate in phases with a 12-month minimum timeframe to be in the program. Taking into account relapse as a part of recovery, it takes some participants a bit longer to successfully complete the program during one year.

Objective	Actual Results FY 2013 (9/1/12-8/31/13)	Since Program Start
1. Total Number of people assessed for eligibility to participate in the program:	651	1283
2. Number of new enrollments in the program:	226	388
3. Number of participants:	451	-
4. Number of participants who successfully completed the program:	124	186

With only 20 courts, which have limits on the number of Veterans they can serve, there are many justice-involved Veterans who cannot access a Veterans Treatment Court program.

83rd Legislature

The primary action taken by the 83rd Legislature related to Veterans Treatment Court programs was the passage of Senate Bill 462 (83rd Session, 2013), authored by Senator Joan Huffman, which consolidated Texas statutes related to specialty courts into a new Subtitle K within the Government Code, including:

- Family Drug Court Programs
- Drug Court Programs
- Veterans Court Programs
- Mental Health Court Programs

Changes to the specialty court programs include:

- Established some oversight of specialty court programs by requiring them to register with the CJD of the Office of the Governor
- Required courts to follow programmatic best practices in order to be eligible to receive state and federal grant funds; and
- Modified the composition of the Governor’s Specialty Courts Advisory Council to nine members and requires the council to recommend programmatic best practices to the criminal justice division.

84th Legislature

In January 2014, Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives Straus issued interim charges for the 83rd Legislature to “help every standing committee in the Texas House begin the important work of preparing for the 2015 legislative session.” As part of those interim charges, the Speaker provided a joint charge to the House Committee on County Affairs and the House Committee on Defense and Veterans Affairs:

Study the implementation of Senate Bill 462 (83rd Session, 2013). Examine which counties currently have Veterans Treatment Courts, as well as Veterans Treatment Courts in other states, and determine how those programs are working and whether these courts provide additional services or resources for Veterans. Make appropriate recommendations.

These committees held a joint hearing in May 2014 in which they heard testimony from approximately 11 different Veterans Treatment Court programs and other counties beginning new programs who testified that the main obstacles in growing current Veterans Treatment Court programs is a lack of available funding to cover the startup and maintenance costs associated with operating Veterans Treatment Courts.

5th Annual Justice-Involved Veteran Conference and Veterans Treatment Courts

The testimony of the Veteran Courts across the state coincided with another important event related to Veterans Treatment Court programs – a programming track for them as part of the 5th Annual Justice-Involved Veterans Conference. The Department of State Health Services has sponsored a Justice-Involved Veterans Conference for the last four years. This year, the Department of State Health Services asked the Texas Veterans Commission to co-sponsor the conference and to take the lead in coordinating the Veteran Court program track. The discussions at the Justice-Involved Veterans Conference, as well as the testimony of Veteran Court programs before the joint House Committees, informs the TCCVS recommendations.

Funding

Currently the two main sources of funding available to Veterans Treatment Court programs, other than funds that could be appropriated by County Commissioners Courts, are grants available from the CJD and Fund for Veterans’ Assistance General Assistance grants from the Texas Veterans Commission. Of the 20 such courts that have begun in counties throughout Texas since 2009, the Fund for Veterans’ Assistance has provided funding to nine Veterans Treatment Courts totaling \$540,000. Additionally, since the Fund for Veterans’ Assistance grant program began in 2009, over 60 requests from county Veterans Treatment Court programs and Legal Services organizations have been submitted totaling \$9.6 million. Of those requests, 25 grants for Veterans Treatment Court programs and Legal Services totaling \$2.4 million, or approximately 25% of total funding requested, have been awarded to nonprofit organizations and units of local government. Grants to Veterans Treatment

Court programs and Legal Services organizations represent 8% of the approximately \$32.2 million that has been awarded in General Assistance grants since 2009.

In an effort to increase available funding opportunities, the Supreme Court of Texas and the Texas Veterans Commission are pursuing a partnership to provide a separate grant opportunity, Justice for Veterans grants (similar to the partnership with the Department of State Health Services for Veteran Mental Health grants), administered by the Fund for Veterans' Assistance, specifically for Veterans Treatment Court programs and organizations that provide legal services to Veterans and their families.

In their Legislative Appropriation Request for the 2016-17 biennium, the Supreme Court of Texas requested \$4 million for the purpose on interagency transfer to the Texas Veterans Commission. As part of the partnership, the Texas Veterans Commission would dedicate approximately \$1.5 million, or an amount based on available funding, from funding for General Assistance grants in order to partially match the contribution from the Supreme Court. Combined, these funds would create a Justice for Veteran grant program capable of awarding \$2.75 million per year (\$5.5 million over the biennium) to Veterans Treatment Court programs and organizations providing legal services to Veterans and their families.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should expand the funding available to Veterans Treatment Courts including consideration of separate funding mechanisms for the creation of Veterans Treatment Courts and the sustainment of Veterans Treatment Courts as well as funding for treatment and mentoring.
 - One such funding proposal that merits consideration is the Justice for Veterans grants submitted in the Legislative Appropriations Request of the Texas Supreme Court. As the Justice for Veterans grants are also funding legal services for Veterans, the Texas Legislature may also want to consider other funding sources such as court fees or traffic tickets. In expanding funding opportunities, however, the Texas Legislature may want to be sensitive to having too many funding entities involved.
- The Texas Legislature should affirm the compliance and reporting requirements it established last session in Senate Bill 462, as codified in Chapter 121, Government Code.
- The Texas Legislature should re-examine the governing statute for Veterans, Chapter 124, Government Code, to determine if the scope should be expanded to include Veterans whose criminal conduct resulted from a service related trauma which “materially affected the defendant’s criminal conduct at issue in the case.”
 - Such restrictions limit the eligible Veterans for Veteran Court programs and are broader than the requirements set forth for other specialty court programs.

Veteran Need #2

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) should have the ability to use the best available data systems to determine the Veteran status of incarcerated Veterans. County jails should also be required to use such a system.

Background and Services

The first TCCVS report identified the following Veteran need:

Neither county jails in Texas nor the TDCJ have sufficient support from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to determine Veteran status of incarcerated Veterans.

To address that need, the TCCVS made two recommendations:

- The Texas Legislature should create a program similar to the Public Assistance Reporting Information System (PARIS) Data Review for Veterans through which the list of offenders incarcerated within TDCJ is matched against the PARIS/VA match list as HHSC already has the list of offenders incarcerated within TDCJ.
- The Texas Legislature should consider ways to assist counties to participate in any state level matching program.

The Legislature, through House Bill 634 (83rd Legislature, 2013) authored by Representative Farias and sponsored by Senator Rodriguez, address the first recommendation by requiring the verification of an inmate's Veteran status by the TDCJ by using the PARIS. This bill also requires the TDCJ to use the data to assist Veterans in applying for federal benefits.

The TDCJ, in coordination with the Health and Human Services Commission, is undertaking efforts to implement use of the PARIS to verify the Veteran status of incarcerated persons. The PARIS return will provide information pertaining to previous entitlements and compensations as well as years and branch of service. The match will only be returned to TDCJ from the Health and Human Services Commission on a quarterly basis due to guidelines established by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which has overall responsibility for the operation of PARIS and the governing Memorandums of Understanding.

Although beneficial, PARIS does not offer a real-time information exchange. Receiving a return on a quarterly basis creates a risk of underserving the State Jail population due to the reduced time frames for State Jail incarceration. Moreover, since the first TCCVS recommendations and the passage of House Bill 634, the VA has created an automated system to identify incarcerated Veterans known as the Veteran Re-entry Search Service (VRSS). The VRSS will allow correctional facilities, as well as court systems, to upload their inmate registries through the VRSS, and the VRSS will analyze information in the Veterans Affairs/Department of Defense Identity Repository (VADIR).

According to the VRSS' CSV File Format guidelines, once a correctional facility registers and is approved, the VRSS will send information to the to the correctional facility/court system user's VRSS account several times a day with information containing the Prisoner and Defendant ID numbers of individuals with a record of U.S. military service. Users will also receive an e-mail notifying that an output file is ready for download. This system not only would provide real time information and status verification to the TDCJ but has potential to identify Veterans being held in the county jail system.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should amend Section 501.023, Government Code, as created by House Bill 634, to remove the specific reference to the system that the TDCJ should use to verify the Veteran status of an inmate:

Sec. 501.023. VERIFICATION OF INMATE VETERAN STATUS. (a) ~~In this section, “system” means the Public Assistance Reporting Information System (PARIS) operated by the Administration for Children and Families of the United States Department of Health and Human Services.~~

(b) The department shall:

 - (1) investigate and verify the Veteran status of each inmate by, in consultation with the Texas Veterans Commission, using the best available federal data made available from the system through the Health and Human Services Commission; and
 - (2) use ~~system~~ that data to assist inmates who are Veterans in applying for federal benefits or compensation for which the inmates may be eligible under a program administered by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.
- The Texas Legislature should maintain the requirement for the TDCJ to use that Veteran status to apply for federal benefits or compensation.
- The Texas Legislature should mandate that counties utilize a system like the VA VRSS to determine Veteran status of incarcerated individuals.
- The Texas Legislature should mandate that information about an individual’s military service should be included in an inmate’s admission or booking sheet, as well as intake screening form.

Veteran Need #3

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) and County Jails should continue to expand their use of information they have about incarcerated Veterans.

Background and Services

The first TCCVS report previously identified this need and made the following recommendations:

- County jails should continue to expand their use of the self-reported military service information.
- County jails should distribute the information packets developed and provided by the VA for Veterans to those who report military service.
- County jails should provide any inmate who reports military service with a Veterans questionnaire to gather additional information to help serve the Veterans.
- County jails should provide the list of all inmates self-reporting prior military service to the VA Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists (VJO).
- The Legislature should consider providing specific resources for Veterans incarcerated within TDCJ, including access to Texas Veterans Commission counselors and a program that provides separate dorms for military Veterans.

Four of these five recommendations are related to county jails. While statutory language related to requiring or encouraging county jails to use the data they had on incarcerated Veterans to provide services, that language was ultimately not formally considered. Yet, since the last report, county jails have made little progress related to the use of Veteran-status data to serve their incarcerated Veterans.

Thus, there is a stark contrast with the work by the TDCJ which was required by law to use data on Veteran status to assist incarcerated Veterans. Although the Legislature did not provide the specific resources for Veterans incarcerated within TDCJ, the TDCJ has taken two extraordinary steps with existing resources to serve incarcerated Veterans:

- The TDCJ partnered with the Texas Veterans Commission to train all TDCJ Reentry Case Managers to complete compensation and pension applications for incarcerated Veterans and have implemented this practice for all identified Veterans nearing release.
- The TDCJ worked closely with the Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN), the statewide coordination of which is through the Texas Veterans Commission as of September 2014, to establish a continuity program which will connect incarcerated Veterans with volunteers through the MVPN during incarceration and link to a MVPN volunteer after release for community reentry activities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Commissioner Courts, Sheriffs, and the Texas Legislature should consider how to best to implement the previous recommendations of the TCCVS related to county jails and the use of Veteran data for offenders:
 - County jails should continue to expand their use of the self-reported military service information.
 - County jails should distribute the information packets developed and provided by the VA for Veterans to those who report military service.
 - County jails should provide any inmate who reports military service with a Veterans questionnaire to gather additional information to help serve the Veteran.
 - County jails should provide the list of all inmates self-reporting prior military service to the VA Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists (VJO).
- As previously recommended, the Texas Legislature should consider providing specific resources for Veterans incarcerated within TDCJ, including:
 - Four dedicated Texas Veterans Commission counselors (2 for each the two VA Regional Offices in Texas) to support the work of the TDCJ Reentry Case Managers who are completing compensation and pension applications for incarcerated Veterans.

- Creation of five Veteran-specific positions within TDCJ to assist the approximately 11,000 offenders within TDCJ who are Veterans, specifically a new Veteran's Coordinator position for the Correctional Institutions Division, the Parole Division, the Reentry and Integration Division, and the Community Justice Assistance Division. In addition, a supervisory Veterans Director position would be created in Executive Services.
- Four statewide MVPN staff to support the volunteers needed for a program which connects incarcerated Veterans with MVPN volunteers during incarceration and after release for community reentry activities.
- Expansion of groups consisting of incarcerated Veterans, with outside and inside sponsors, similar to the Veterans Incarcerated groups that exist on the Ramsey Unit and the Stiles Unit.
- The TDCJ should collaborate with the Attorney General's Office and require TDCJ to provide every incarcerated Veteran with a child support modification applications during incarceration.
 - By doing so, Veterans can take action to reduce large back pay judgments which hamper the ability to return to the community and provide for his children with earned income. The Texas Legislature should consider providing resources to the Attorney General's Office if needed to support this program.

Veteran Need #4

Judges should utilize, and the State of Texas should encourage, programs within Community Supervision and Correction Departments (CSCDs) that address the needs of Veterans on probation.

Background and Services

The first TCCVS report identified a similar need and provided the following background:

The Community Justice Assistance Division of Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) administers community supervision (adult probation) in Texas. The approximately 415,000 offenders on community supervision in Texas serve their sentences in the community rather than in prison and local community supervision and corrections departments (CSCDs) supervise the offenders.

Some CSCDs have created programs specifically designed for Veterans. For example, Bell County has created a one-of-a-kind Substance Abuse/Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) program to assist probationers who have served in a combat zone, helping them to cope with their PTSD-related symptoms and reduce their reliance on drugs and alcohol as a means of coping. As an added benefit, this program is available to any individual on probation who has served his or her country, regardless of discharge status. In addition to PTSD and substance abuse counseling, participants receive acupuncture treatments designed to reduce stress and anxiety.

Another PTSD program in Bell County provides services through the VA, offered at the Vet Center in Harker Heights, Texas. The program provides 12 weeks of no-cost PTSD counseling to probationers who have served in a combat zone. Again, the program is offered to any probationer, male or female, who served in the military, regardless of the reason for discharge from service.

The first TCCVS report also made the following recommendation:

- The Texas Legislature should provide additional resources to the Community Justice Assistance Division of TDCJ to support programs for Veterans.

While the 83rd Texas Legislature did provide additional resources to the TDCJ, none of those resources were specifically for Veterans in community supervision.

Among the resources the Texas Legislature may want to consider are Substance Abuse Felony Punishment Facilities (SAFPF), where probationers are placed as an initial or modified condition of community supervision and therefore with a certainty will be returned to the community for continued supervision. There are several unique aspects to Veterans in the criminal justice system that would make a designated pod in a SAFPF optimal for the successful reintegration of the Veteran into the community.

First, because all of these people served in the military and many were exposed to combat, there is strong sense of group solidarity. This creates the opportunity for other probationers who are Veterans to look out for their fellow Veterans and are pulling for each other's success in completing community supervision.

Second, many Veterans come from a different culture from the civilian population, i.e., the military culture. As such, the experiences of Veterans are very different from civilians.

Finally, Veterans not only suffer from combat related stress and psychological problems, i.e., post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) and traumatic brain injuries (TBI), but also have many physical ailments. Not only do PTSD and TBI manifest in physiological ways but the very nature of military service tends to create physical ailments at a much earlier stage in life and with greater severity than is found in the civilian population.

Thus, it would be much more cost effective to have designated pods where the Veterans could be treated for physical, neurological and psychological issues as well as substance abuse problems.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- As previously recommended, the Texas Legislature should provide additional resources to the Community Justice Assistance Division of TDCJ to support programs for Veterans, including:
 - Creation of a Veterans Coordinator position within the Community Justice Assistance Division, which would identify resources and provide technical support to community supervision and corrections departments supervising Veteran probationers. This Veterans Coordinator would work under a supervisory Veterans Coordinator within TDCJ Executive Services and work with other Veterans Coordinator positions in Correctional Institutions Division, the Parole Division, and the Reentry and Integration Division.
 - Mandate that certain pods at various Substance Abuse Felony Punishment Facilities (SAFPF) be designated for Veterans.
 - Provide the four statewide MVPN staff members recommended as part of Veteran Need 3 who could also work to provide peer to peer support for Veterans returning to the community from a SAFPF as well as for those Veterans on specialized Veterans' caseloads.
 - Encourage CSCDs to use Veteran peer to peer support and require the Community Justice Assistance Division to provide technical assistance on implementing Veteran peer to peer support.
 - Designate a community corrections facility to solely house and treat Veterans for mental health issues and substance abuse problems.
 - This facility would serve the entire State and be used for those Veterans who have serious substance abuse and/or mental health problems that have contributed to their criminal activities and who are ineligible for VA benefits. In addition this facility would serve Veterans being supervised on community supervision and who are utilizing VA outpatient services but still need to be placed in a residential setting. Such a facility should be capable of housing between 40 and 50 probationers who are Veterans.
- Add funding in the discretionary funding (DP) line item to create specialized caseloads for Veterans on community supervision.
 - This case load should supervise no more than 50 to 60 Veterans and it would be best for the supervision officer overseeing this case load to also be a Veteran. Three types of criminal conduct for which a specialized caseload would be beneficial are:
 - Assaultive/terroristic threat offenses
 - Drug possession offenses
 - Driving while intoxicated
- This new funding should target jurisdictions with large Veteran populations. These jurisdictions would primarily be metropolitan areas, suburban areas or jurisdictions with active duty military bases. There are approximately 20 to 25 CSCDs that serve these targeted jurisdictions.

Veteran Need #5

The State of Texas and local governments should provide training relating to Veterans to judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, jailers, and correctional officers. In particular, first responders should increase their early intervention efforts for Veterans who exhibit brain and PTSD symptoms.

Background and Services

The first TCCVS report identified the same need and provided the following background:

While most combat Veterans reintegrate into their civilian lives without any encounters with law enforcement, traumatic brain injury or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may lead some Veterans in contact with law enforcement officers and the criminal justice system.

The Office of Acquired Brain Injury in the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) has partnered with the VA and the Austin Police Department to create educational tools that equip police with basic knowledge of brain injury and stress disorders, the ability to recognize these issues during trouble calls or arrests, and ways to apply that knowledge in de-escalating dangerous situations. The centerpiece of the effort is a training — Veterans Tactical Response — which has been developed and is available to law enforcement agencies. The HHSC-funded Veteran Tactical Response training kits combine DVD-based presentations and dramatic reenactments with trainers' syllabi, fact sheets, role-playing exercises, group discussions, resources for assistance, and more.

Armed with this knowledge, law enforcement officers in tense situations with Veterans who may have a brain injury or stress disorder will be able to ask the right questions, establish trust, cool down heated encounters and possibly save lives. The training will help Veterans with traumatic brain injury and PTSD by first helping them avoid harming themselves and others. But it also will bring law enforcement officers into a key role of helping direct former servicemembers to the medical and psychiatric care they need.

The first TCCVS report also made the following recommendations:

- The State of Texas should support efforts by the Office of Acquired Brain Injury to deploy Veterans Tactical Response to all law enforcement agencies in Texas.
- The Texas Legislature should provide funding for the Office of Acquired Brain Injury to provide this training to law enforcement agencies and to develop similar training resources for judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, jailers, and correctional officers. An additional full-time equivalent employee at the Office of Acquired Brain Injury, with funding for travel and the online training, is expected to cost approximately \$150,000 for the biennium.

While the 83rd Texas Legislature did provide additional resources to the Office of Acquired Brain Injury, none of those resources were specifically for implementing Veterans Tactical Response.

Yet, there continues to be a need to provide training relating to Veterans to judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, jailers, and correctional officers as there is substantial evidence that early intervention improves the prognosis for Veterans and family members who have traumatic brain, post-traumatic stress injuries, and military sexual trauma. Because individuals with these injuries also have been observed to resist seeking professional guidance or treatment for their injuries, public health professionals have recommended a range of intervention tactics.

Examples of successful interventions have been implemented in Bexar County, and at least eight other counties are implementing similar tactics. These, and a number of other counties, are adding training modules for first responders to help them recognize and respond appropriately to Veterans who exhibit symptoms common to brain and post-traumatic stress injuries.

Among the initiatives are:

- The Texas Office of Acquired Brain Injury has developed a training program designed for first responders.
- Bexar and Harris counties have implemented early intervention tactics, including sobering stations and crisis intervention teams that combine the expertise of law enforcement and mental health professionals. Other counties, including Travis, are considering a sobering station and a number of options for early intervention and diversion to treatment for Veterans and their family members.
- Criminal court (including Veterans Treatment Court), community supervision, prison, and jail professionals, and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO), and other Veteran mental health outreach professionals are sharing some data about Veterans who are involved in the criminal justice system in order to counsel them about treatment options and alternatives to incarceration or re-incarceration.
- The City of Harker Heights, near Fort Hood, in Bell County has implemented a healthy families early intervention strategy. First responders are trained to be alert to signs of stressful family relationships, particularly among soldiers who have recently returned from or are on orders for imminent deployment to combat. In situations where clear signs of a high risk of intimate partner violence or child abuse or neglect are detected, a licensed mental health professional contacts the family to offer access to services.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- As previously recommended, the Texas Legislature should find ways to provide training relating to Veterans to judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, jailers, and correctional officers, specifically:
 - Encourage and fund training for first responders, including 911 dispatchers, that specifically includes methods for recognizing and responding appropriately to Veterans and family members who exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress, including military sexual trauma, or traumatic brain injuries.
 - Provide incentives for municipalities and counties to develop early intervention strategies, including, where appropriate, sobering stations, psychiatric emergency centers, and data sharing among first responders and mental health outreach professionals.
 - Provide incentives for municipal, county, state, and federal agencies to cooperate in identifying and following up with Veterans and family members who become involved in the criminal justice system or the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to make them aware of options for treatment and alternatives to avoid incarceration or sanctions.
 - Create incentives for connecting Veterans and family members to Veteran County Service Officers and trained Veteran peers such as those who participate in the Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN), a project of the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) that is coordinated statewide by the Texas Veterans Commission and supported by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), and the Texas Council of Community Centers.
 - Support to the Office of Acquired Brain Injury (training support), the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (staff and/or training support), the Texas Commission on Jail Standards (staff and/or training support), the Texas Department of Public Safety (training support), the Office of the Attorney General (training support), and the Criminal Justice Division within the Office of the Governor (additional grant funds).

Veteran Need #6

Incarcerated Veterans should be housed with other Veterans facing similar sentences in county jails and Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), Veteran Dorms, and those incarcerated Veterans should be work working with volunteers provided by the Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN) or the Veteran County Service Office both during incarceration and after release.

Background and Services

Across the country there is an increasing awareness of the number of Veterans involved in the criminal justice system. As criminal justice agencies develop programs to meet the needs of incarcerated Veterans, the benefits of Veteran-only housing is being realized. Housing units providing a structured Veteran Dorm, which embraces military culture and provides targeted programming developed to address Veteran specific needs, are becoming more popular. The opportunity to restore a sense of pride in service and reconnect the Veteran to a community of his or her peers is being developed as a way to enhance reintegration and reduce recidivism.

The TDCJ has implemented a Veteran Dorm within the State Jail system. The Veteran Dorm is voluntary and is housed within the Travis State Jail. The Travis State Jail Veteran Dorm provides programming to address post-traumatic stress disorder, cognitive thinking changes, relaxation and anxiety reducing skills, home planning and reentry activities. Programming is provided by a volunteer staff consisting only of Veterans and military culture trained clinicians. The TDCJ is also partnering with the MVPN to establish programming as well as post release linkage to a peer in the community.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should provide support for the TDCJ to not only continue, but to expand Veteran Dorms within State Jails but other TDCJ correctional institutions for verified Veteran offenders.
- The Texas Legislature should provide support to the four statewide MVPN staff members recommended as part of Veteran Needs 3 and 4 so staff can provide support to the individuals assigned to the Veteran Dorms.
- The Texas Legislature should provide support to the Veteran County Service Officers to access incarcerated Veterans through the volunteer services program and upon reentry.
- The Texas Legislature should require the TDCJ to engage with the MVPN and the Veteran County Service Officers to share information regarding incarcerated Veterans and assist in access to the Veteran for assistance both during and after incarceration.

Veteran Need #7

The State of Texas and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs should expand secure mental health care facilities for eligible Veterans who have been arrested, but are incompetent to participate in their own defense.

Background and Services

The first TCCVS report identified the same need and provided the following background:

As of June 2012, there were 188 individuals being held in state hospitals awaiting restoration to competency. While the total number of Veterans who fall into this category is relatively small, the consequences for those who do can be devastating for them and their families as illustrated by the story of Adan Castaneda. According to media reports, Castaneda's mother says that he had become increasingly depressed, paranoid, and delusional since his discharge from the Marine Corps in December 2008. Then in May 2011, he used his .45-caliber semi-automatic pistol and repeatedly discharged it into his mother's house as his mother and stepfather slept inside. Castaneda not only had to endure a long delay to get from jail to the state hospital, but then could not access VA services.

Currently, VA policy is to suspend VA services to any Veteran who has been incarcerated. Thus, the VA makes the entity that has control of the Veteran responsible for services to the Veteran. Better coordination between the VA and state and local jurisdictions would allow eligible Veterans to continue to receive needed mental healthcare if the VA would either contract for forensic beds or reimburse state and local facilities so they could access forensic services for eligible Veterans. The coordination of these services, and the shifting of cost for the services back to the appropriate payer (the VA) would result in reduced cost to the state, more expeditious treatment for the Veterans, and potentially more positive outcomes for the state and the Veterans and family members involved. The fact that a Veteran who needs urgent and comprehensive mental health care, despite having been arrested, should not cause him/her to be incarcerated indefinitely simply because the state facilities needed to restore that person to competency are unavailable. After all, arrest does not equate to guilt. The presumption of innocence should be the principle that guides the VA's response. A Veteran should not be allowed to languish in a jail, where mental health care services may be more limited, simply because his/her access to VA services have been suspended.

The first TCCVS report also made the following recommendation:

- The Texas Legislature should urge the U.S. Congress to require the VA to provide resources to Veterans in state hospitals and consider expanding such services to all incarcerated Veterans.

The issues related to Veterans, competency restoration, and secure mental health facilities continue, often with tragic results, and need to be addressed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- As previously recommended, the Texas Legislature should urge the U.S. Congress to require the VA to provide resources to Veterans in state hospitals and consider expanding such services to all incarcerated Veterans.

Veteran Need #8

Offenders who are Veterans within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) should be able to utilize Correctional Managed Healthcare to in order to complete the Disability Benefit Questionnaires required to apply for certain service-connected disability benefits with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Background and Services

The TDCJ currently allows offenders who are Veterans to be transported to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for a medical examination related to an application for service-connected disability benefits.

Yet, as the TDCJ increases its support for Veterans by allowing them to apply for their service-connected disability benefits earlier in their incarceration, which potentially benefits their families and supports their reentry as described in Veteran Need 3, there is a need to increase the access that offenders have to these medical examinations. Transporting offenders to these medical examinations creates challenges for both the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the TDCJ.

One alternative is the Disability Benefits Questionnaire that can be completed as part of filing a Fully Developed Claim with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. A Disability Benefits Questionnaire can be completed by any physician. The physicians that are part of the Correctional Managed Healthcare system within the TDCJ could complete these questionnaires, which would eliminate the need to transport the Veteran offender to the VA medical facility. It would also allow the claim of the Veteran offender to be processed and not denied for lack of a medical evaluation.

Conclusions and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should provide funding to the TDCJ and Correctional Managed Health Care to support the medical examinations that are part of the Disability Benefits Questionnaires required for Veteran offenders filing a Fully Developed Claim with the VA.

Criminal Justice Workgroup

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Housing Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Veterans need greater access to safe and affordable housing.

Background and Services

According to the National Coalition of Homeless Veterans, it is estimated that 29,615 people are homeless, and of this amount, 3,878 or 13% are homeless Veterans.

The H4TXH program was established in 2012, and through it, the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) awards grants to organizations that provide Veterans with permanent and temporary housing.

During the 82nd Legislative Session, Gov. Rick Perry called on the Legislature to transfer the Veterans Housing Program from the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA) to TVC in order to increase the number of Veterans served. The Legislature determined that the Fund for Veterans Assistance would administer the program as of September 1, 2011.

The General Appropriations Act provided \$1 million over the biennium, and TDHCA transferred \$2 million in existing funds already designated for Veterans' housing assistance. With a total of \$3 million for the program, the Veterans Housing Program was designated H4TXH Program by Gov. Rick Perry.

Currently, H4TXH provides \$1.5 million each year of the biennium to eligible organizations to provide home modification assistance to very-low income, low-income, or disabled Texas Veterans, their families or surviving spouse. Each Veteran beneficiary is capped at \$10,000 of home modification assistance.

The Housing Trust Fund provides loans and grants to finance, acquire, rehabilitate and develop decent and safe affordable housing. The TDHCA Housing Trust Fund currently administers three single family programs which are the Texas Bootstrap Loan Program, Amy Young Barrier Removal Program and the Contract for Deed Conversion Program.

Budget shortfalls forced the 82nd Legislature to dramatically cut the Housing Trust Fund from \$21 million to \$11 million. This shortfall has had a severely adverse impact on programs that depend on the Housing Trust Fund for operations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Veterans Commission (TVC), coordinating with the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA), should take steps to increase the amount of funds available to expand and strengthen the existing network of non-profit organizations around the state that have the capacity to utilize funds to serve the housing needs of Veterans. These steps include:

- Increase the commitment to Housing4TexasHeroes (H4TXH) program through additional funding to the Housing Trust Fund. Funding levels should be restored to the amount appropriated by the 81st Legislature.
- Grant priority access to non-profit organizations that provide direct housing assistance to Veterans to the other Housing Trust Fund programs administered by TDHCA, including but not limited to those used for accessibility modifications.
- Increase awareness among non-profit organizations and communities by expanding outreach efforts that promote the H4TXH program and other Housing Trust Fund programs on state agency websites, grantee websites, and Veteran information websites.

Veteran Need #2

Surviving spouses of totally disabled Veterans need property tax relief equitable to that which would be provided to the totally disabled Veteran.

Background and Services

In 2009, the 81st Legislature passed House Bill 3613, the enabling legislation for House Joint Resolution 36 to provide an exemption from taxation of the total appraised value of a Veteran's residence homestead for Veterans receiving 100 percent disability compensation from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Voters approved the constitutional amendment in November 2009.

Soon after passage of the law, Veteran Service Organizations throughout the state began advocating for an additional provision that, in the event of a Veteran's death, would allow the exemption to be transferable to the Veteran's surviving spouse. Without this transferability, many surviving spouses would be experience a significant increase in their property taxes at a very sensitive time, and possibly lead to the loss their home.

In 2011, the 82nd Legislature passed Senate Bill 516, the enabling legislation for House Joint Resolution 36 to allow the transferability of the property tax exemption to surviving spouses of 100 percent disabled Veterans. Appearing on the November 2011 mid-term ballot as Proposition 1, Texas voters voted to support this constitutional amendment, which became effective January 1, 2012.

Immediately following the successful November ballot, questions arose regarding whether or not surviving spouses of eligible Veterans who passed away prior to the effective date of the new law would be eligible to claim the exemption.

The Attorney General's opinion (GA0918) issued April 13, 2012 confirmed that if a 100 percent disabled Veteran died after 2009 (the effective date of the original law creating the exemption), then the surviving spouse would be eligible to receive the allotted property tax exemption.

However, the Attorney General also determined that the exemption for the 100 percent disabled Veterans was not signed into law until June 19, 2009. Therefore, any Veteran who passed away prior to that date was never eligible for the exemption. Consequently, the surviving spouses of those Veterans never gained eligibility either. This interpretation is the one the state Comptroller and local taxing authorities are using to administer property taxes.

House Bill 214 and House Joint Resolution 21 (83rd Session, 2013) authorized the exemption for those surviving spouses whose 100% disabled veteran would have qualified for the exemption, but passed away prior to its enactment. Unfortunately, both pieces of legislation died in the Texas House of Representatives.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Legislative action could be considered, which would only apply to future tax years, in order to provide eligibility to spouses whose 100% disabled Veteran spouse would have qualified for the exemption, but passed away prior to the enactment of the exemption.

Housing Workgroup

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Women Veterans Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Women Veterans should increase their awareness of gender specific services and benefits they may qualify for within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

Background and Services

Women Veterans have voiced some unique challenges on their return from the active duty to the civilian world. These challenges range from transitioning back into civilian roles, employment, financial stability, accessing Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical/mental health services, and homelessness. How to access VA medical/mental health services is one of the top challenges for Women Veterans.

Women make up to 14 percent of the active duty personnel and that number continues to increase. Women Veterans often don't know how or where to obtain Veteran services once they get out of the service. One of the main questions they have is how to obtain medical services through the VA. According to 2010 National Survey of Veterans:

- 18.8% of Women Veterans use VA as their primary health care;
- 14.7% have additional health care coverage;
- 25.6% use VA health care as a safety net, when needed;
- 2% use VA for their prescriptions;
- .8% use VA for specialized care; and
- 33.9% have no plan to use VA health care

Texas has the highest number of Women Veterans compared to the rest of the states but hardly any of them use the gender specific services the VA offers them. According to the VA, a little more than half of the women enrolled in the VA actually use VA medical services in Texas.

The VA does not know exactly why, but some have suggested that other medical services available; VA facility isn't close by; or Women Veterans do not fully understand what type of medical benefits are available for them.

According to the VA, Women Veterans are the fastest growing segment of new VA healthcare users. Legislative action opened additional military careers to women and mandated VA to deliver gender-specific care. VA has increased their efforts to enroll returning Veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. Women Veteran users have doubled in the past 10 years. VA has projected this amount to be 10% (or higher) of total user population by 2018.

The VA is continuously trying to find new ways to improve benefits and services for Women Veterans through programs such as the Center for Women Veterans (CWV), the Secretary's Advisory Committee on Women Veterans and VA Advisory Committee on Women Veterans.

The VA has made collaborative outreach efforts led by the CWV to build awareness among Women Veterans of the benefits and services provided by VA, and to champion cultural transformation within VA.

More data needs to be compiled to find out why Women Veterans are not using their VA medical benefits.

The Women Veterans Workgroup studied a recent report conducted by the American Legion that focused on healthcare for Women Veterans. This report highlighted what perceptions and barriers prevent Women Veterans from enrolling in the VA, determine what quality-of-care challenges Women Veterans face with their VA health care, and provide recommendations and steps VA can take to improve these access barriers and quality-of-care challenges.

While compiling this report, The American Legion conducted 15 VA medical center site visits in order to evaluate the quality of care provided for Women Veterans. During these visits, The American Legion met with each facility's executive leadership team, Women Veterans program manager, patient advocate, enrollment and business office, mental health staff, homeless Veteran's coordinator, military sexual trauma coordinator, suicide prevention coordinator and Women Veterans' health committee, and reviewed the environment of care.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The state should compile a report using similar metrics of analysis within The American Legion Task Force Report. Additionally, a statewide survey of Women Veterans' healthcare priorities should be included in this report to better understand factors relating to gender specific health and benefits.

Veteran Need #2

Tax incentives should be offered for housing programs that serve Women Veterans and their dependents.

Background and Services

There are several agencies that provide supportive and affordable housing in Texas for families. Foundation Communities and Green Doors in Austin are just two examples of these affordable housing models. These and other organizations often find condemned properties and renovate them to create affordable housing opportunities, many of their clients, in which, are Veterans and their families.

These organizations face a growing hurdle in maintaining the property once renovations are complete. After a property has been renovated, the property tax increases based on the new value of the property. This factor alone is costing organizations that provide affordable housing opportunities within their community a significant amount of money in taxes.

Creating special tax incentives for affordable housing models will not only help those organizations that are already providing affordable housing, but also potentially recruit other organizations to create additional affordable housing opportunities throughout Texas.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The state should create property tax incentives including exemptions and/or a freeze in the tax rate paid when the property was purchased to incentivize more organizations to participate in affordable housing programs focused on serving Women Veterans and their dependents.

Veteran Need #3

Women Veterans need better access to affordable childcare.

Background and Services

In 2003, the federal government created a pilot program intended to subsidize childcare expenses for qualifying federal employees. Federal agencies, at their own discretion, can use appropriated funds, including revolving funds otherwise available for salaries, to assist lower income employees with the costs of child care.

The Child Care Subsidy Program (CCSP) applies to employees whose children are under the age of 13, or disabled and under the age of 18, and are enrolled, or will be enrolled, in licensed family child care homes or center-based child care. The child care must be licensed and/or regulated by state and/or local authorities. Each agency has the discretion to determine who qualifies as a “lower income federal employee” in a way that makes sense for its agency. Agencies may choose a particular definition for one location or mission and a different definition at another location or mission.

There are several methods for determining eligibility under this law. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) provides guide to agencies with a variety of suggested models. The intention is to allow agencies to determine what works best for them. All of the suggested models in this document are based on the assumptions that:

- A federal employee’s eligibility for this program considers total family income (TFI);
- The amount of subsidy will be reduced by any current State and/or local subsidy the parents/guardians currently receive, and;
- Employees must have submitted their earnings statements, verification of employment, and latest IRS 1040 or other relevant IRS tax forms to the administrators of the program for the purpose of verifying income.

State employees have the option of participating in a TexFlex Day Care Account. TexFlex is a flexible spending account (FSA) that lets employees set aside money from their paycheck, pre-tax, to use for before and after school care, nursery school, preschool and summer day camp for children under the age of 13. The annual day care pre-tax contribution limit is \$5000 per household/family.

While federal agencies can subsidize childcare, the state government only offers a pre-tax FSA which does not allow employees who participate to take advantage of the child care tax credit at the end of the year.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Child care can be extremely expensive, especially for lower income families and Veterans transitioning to civilian life. Without quality child care arrangements, working parents are hard-pressed to remain effective either at work or at home. Texas is home to 1.67 million Veterans, many working for the federal and state government. According to the 2012 Veteran Workforce Summary Report, there are almost 32,000 Veterans employed by the State of Texas.

- The state should offer a version of CCSP that would assist Women Veteran employees with subsidized child care. Allowing state employees to take advantage of subsidized childcare would attract top tier employees, and provide the flexibility many, including Women Veterans, consider when making employment decisions.

Women Veterans Workgroup

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Transportation Workgroup

Introduction

During the first iteration of the Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services (TCCVS) the fall of 2011 to the submission of its first report in October 2012, the transportation need of Veterans were not given specific focus, and were discussed in the deliberation of a number of other workgroups, including the Employment Workgroup and the Women Veterans Workgroup. A single recommendation regarding Veterans transportation was included in the first report. It was included in the section of the first report which identified issues that crossed workgroup areas and made the simple recommendation that transportation issues for Veterans be analyzed in greater detail during the coordinating council's next iteration.

During the 83rd Legislative Session, legislation added the Texas Department of Transportation, the Texas Department of Motor Vehicles, and the Texas Department of Public Safety to the council's membership, specifically to collaborate with other state agencies to analyze Veterans transportation issues. At their first meeting in the fall of 2013, the council chose to create the TCCVS Transportation Workgroup, as they felt these issues required a thorough collaboration and review, led by these new member agencies.

Veteran Need #1

Veterans, specifically disabled Veterans, need reliable transportation options for accessing VA medical services.

Background and Services

There are approximately 23 million Veterans in the United States today, and 1.67 million of those Veterans call Texas home. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) provides a comprehensive system of healthcare and other services to Veterans to ensure their continued care after departing military service. Today, more than 8 million Veterans are enrolled in services involving various kinds of medical care provided by the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), one of three administrations within the VA. VA offers assistance to eligible Veterans who are traveling for medical care.

Other reports have identified problems, concerns, and challenges with transportation services now provided to Veterans. The kinds of problems that have been observed include the following:

- Veterans report problems accessing VA medical services.
- Rural areas offer special transportation challenges for transportation services serving Veterans.
 - Forty percent of Veterans live in rural areas. The younger Veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are more likely than other Veterans to live in rural areas.
 - Veterans living in rural areas may need to travel extremely long distances to receive medical care and the other services to which they are entitled.
- According to some sources, Veterans' transportation services are frequently not coordinated with existing community and public transportation services at this time, with the result that neither the Veterans' transportation services nor existing community transportation services operate as cost-effectively as they might.
- Some volunteer-based services, such as those provided by Disabled American Veterans, (DAV) are struggling to obtain or maintain a sufficient number of volunteer drivers to meet the mobility needs of Veterans.
- As Veterans' transportation services tend to be administered locally, local administrators may not be aware of other travel options or best practices in Veterans' transportation services.
- With decentralized decision-making for transportation services for Veterans, these services exhibit a lack of uniformity and consistency.

Situation in Texas

The challenge of effective coordination of Veterans transportation services in Texas is exacerbated by the state's size and by the way that VA's healthcare network in Texas is deployed. VHA divides the country up into areas covered by Veteran Integrated Service Networks (VISN) which do not necessarily align with state boundaries. Texas is covered by three (3) different VISNs (16, 17, and 18) and within those networks there are seven (7) VA Healthcare Systems, six (6) VA Medical Centers, twenty (20) Outpatient Clinics, and thirty-six (36) Community Based Outpatient Centers.

With decisions regarding transportation services provided or coordinated through these VA facilities being so decentralized, it is not realistic in the near term to expect a statewide coordinated effort among federal, state, and local stakeholders. A more manageable approach will be to breach such coordination efforts in a single area of the state as a pilot project that could be replicated statewide.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Utilize a pilot project in one area of the state, and more specifically in the service area of a single VA Medical Center, to establish a formal relationship for communication and coordination between VA medical facilities and regional transit providers to increase access to transportation options and to promote public/Veteran awareness of existing transportation resources available within their community.
- As a component of that effort, encourage public transit providers involved to provide a minimum "benefits package" to Veterans that could be used to create a standard "benefits package" with transit providers throughout the state.

Veteran Need #2

Local governments, communities, and service organizations that provide transportation services to Veterans need access to funding and resources to ensure the sustainability of their programs.

Background and Services

Veterans Transportation Service (VTS) Program

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Healthcare System provides primary care, specialized care, and related medical and social support to serve America's Veterans' health and wellness needs. To do this, VHA needs to be a comprehensive, integrated healthcare system providing excellence in health care value, excellence in service as defined by its customers, and excellence in education and research. To enhance the VHA system, the Central Business Office (CBO) is launching a new transportation program for immobilized and remote VA patients to enhance existing programs implemented by local VA Medical Centers (VAMCs). Veterans Transportation Service (VTS) seeks to provide transportation services to include vehicle routing/scheduling software for VA Medical Facilities. The ride scheduling and routing systems will include GPS modules for VTS vehicles.

VA especially recognizes the problems Veterans who are visually impaired, elderly, or immobilized due to disease or disability, particularly those living in remote and rural areas, face in traveling to access VA health care. To work toward providing these Veterans with the most convenient and timely access to transportation services, VA's vision is to explore the establishment of a network of community transportation service providers that could include Veteran Service Organizations (VSO's); community and commercial transportation providers; federal, state and local government transportation services as well as non-profits, such as United We Ride, operating within each VISN or even local facility.

This initiative will not replace current activities, but will rather supplement existing benefits and programs to improve access to VA healthcare.

This program is currently enabled at forty-five sites, including three sites in Texas (Amarillo, Harlingen, and North Texas) and will be implemented at remaining locations by 2015.

Veterans Transportation and Community Living Initiative (VTCLI)

The Veterans Transportation and Community Living Initiative, funded and managed by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), supports efforts by local governments and transit agencies to implement technologies—ranging from “smart phone” applications to real-time transit bus locator information—that make it easier for Veterans and others to access and schedule rides on available buses, vans, taxis and other transportation systems.

Grants for Transportation of Veterans in Highly Rural Areas

Access to care for Veterans that are in highly rural areas continues to be an issue across the United States. The VA has established this program to address the issue of access to care. This program should leverage innovative approaches to transporting Veterans in highly rural areas. Veterans in highly rural areas typically have longer commute times to VA Medical Centers.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Veterans Transportation Program (VTP) is pleased to announce that it is seeking applicants for Grants for Transportation of Veterans in Highly Rural Areas. This program furthers the Department's mission by establishing a program to provide grants to eligible recipients to assist Veter-

ans in highly rural areas through innovative transportation services to travel to Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers (VA Medical Centers), and to otherwise assist in providing transportation services in connection with the provision of VA medical care to these Veterans.

Texas Veterans Commission Fund for Veterans' Assistance

The FVA awards reimbursement grants to eligible charitable organizations, local government agencies, and Veterans Service Organizations that provide direct services to Texas Veterans and their families. Texas Veterans Commission Fund for Veterans' Assistance grants addresses a broad range of needs, including:

- Limited financial assistance;
- Transportation services;
- Housing Assistance;
- Family and child services; and
- Information and referral to other services.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Increase awareness of funding options, specifically with local government and community organizations that provide critical transportation services to Veterans in order to make these services more sustainable.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans and communities both benefit from standardized forms of recognition and designation as “Veterans”, specifically when utilizing transportation options.

Background and Services

Specialty License Plates

The Texas Department of Motor Vehicles (TxDMV) offers a number of license plates specifically for military Veterans and military medal honorees at no fee and/or reduced fee. There are three categories of military license plates: Meritorious Service, Recognition Award, and Military Service.

Meritorious Service category license plates are issued at no fee (plate or registration) for the first set. Additionally, sets of license plates in the Meritorious Service Category require the payment of annual registration fees; however, there is no plate fee.

Recognition Award category license plates require the payment of a \$3 plate fee; however, there is no requirement for the payment of annual registration fees. Additionally, sets of license plates in the Recognition Award category require the payment of annual registration fees; however, there is no plate fee.

Military Service category license plates require the payment of the annual registration fee; however, there no plate fee. This applies to first and additional sets.

Disabled Veteran Plates

Veterans may apply for Disabled Veteran license plates for cars, light trucks or motorcycles if they are certified by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to have a 50% or higher service-related disability, or at least 40% due to amputation of a lower extremity.

An annual \$3 fee is collected for the first set of plates but no regular registration fee. Veterans may receive an additional set of plates, but are required to pay the regular registration fee and other applicable fees. Persons entitled to license plates for disabled Veterans may also elect to receive a standard license plate at the same cost in lieu of the first set of disabled Veteran plates.

When a vehicle with disabled Veteran plates is being operated by or for the disabled Veteran, the disabled Veteran may use any parking space or area that is designated specifically for persons with physical disabilities.

Vehicles that display Disabled Veteran, the Air Force Cross, the Distinguished Service Cross, the Army Distinguished Service Cross, the Navy Cross, Pearl Harbor Survivor, Purple Heart, Prisoner of War or Congressional Medal of Honor license plates may park free of charge at a parking meter operated by a governmental authority other than the federal government. Other fees for parking garages and lots are governed by local governments who have the option of passing ordinances for the exemption of fees for a disabled Veteran.

Additionally, certain categories of military or Veteran related plates may qualify vehicle owners for discounts or exemptions from toll fees when traveling on toll roads.

“Veteran” Designation of Texas Drivers’ License/Concealed Handgun License

House Bill 1514 from 82nd Texas Legislature requires the Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) to include a designation of “VETERAN” on the driver’s licenses issued to certain Veterans. The bill will allow any person

who served in a branch of the U.S. military as well as members of the Texas National Guard to request to have the “VETERAN” designation on their license. The Veteran must provide proof of their service and honorable discharge to obtain the designation. The legislation came in response to Veterans seeking an easier way to verify their military service to businesses, organizations and events that provide benefits and discounts to Veterans.

Senate Bill 164 requires DPS to include the designation “VETERAN” on the face of any original, duplicate, modified, or renewed Concealed Handgun License if the license is issued to a Veteran who requests the designation, and provides proof sufficient to DPS of the Veteran’s military service and honorable discharge

Training for Law Enforcement

Recognition of Veterans through license plates and drivers licenses can be helpful to the community, beyond allowing Veterans certain parking privileges and discounts. These can also be useful to law enforcement and other service providers within the community as they interact with Veterans.

While most combat Veterans reintegrate into their civilian lives without any encounters with law enforcement, traumatic brain injury or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may lead some Veterans in contact with law enforcement officers and the criminal justice system.

The Office of Acquired Brain Injury in the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) has partnered with the VA to create educational tools that equip police with basic knowledge of brain injury and stress disorders, the ability to recognize these issues during trouble calls or arrests, and ways to apply that knowledge in de-escalating dangerous situations. The centerpiece of the effort is a training — Veterans Tactical Response — which has been developed and is available to law enforcement agencies.

Armed with this knowledge, law enforcement officers in tense situations with Veterans who may have a brain injury or stress disorder will be able to ask the right questions, establish trust, cool down heated encounters and possibly save lives. The training will help Veterans with traumatic brain injury and PTSD by first helping them avoid harming themselves and others. But it also will bring law enforcement officers into a key role of helping direct former servicemembers to the medical and psychiatric care they need.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Continue to support modes and methods of recognition for Veterans through things like specialty license plates and “Veteran” designation on Driver’s License and Concealed Handgun Licenses.

Transportation Workgroup

List of Workgroup Participants

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Communication and Outreach Workgroup

Introduction

There are currently 1.67 million Veterans in Texas. Texas has a strong commitment to serving the needs of its Veterans. Because of the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, a large number of Veterans require specific assistance and services, such as filing for disability compensation from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) or finding counseling for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

As Veterans age in Texas, there is an increase in the need for care and assistance for older Veterans, which includes updating VA claims to increase a disability rating or applying to enter a Veterans' Home. Women Veterans, who need health care services that differ from their male counterparts, tend to access services at a higher rate than male Veterans.

Many Texas Veterans do not know of the many benefits and services available to them at the state level, especially as there has been insufficient coordination among the individual agencies to collaborate on statewide outreach efforts. Veterans cannot access benefits and programs they do not know about; therefore, communicating and reaching out to those Texas Veterans is important in ensuring that they receive all benefits and services to which they are entitled.

Veteran Need #1

State agencies should create a system to function as the point of contact for Veterans' services within each state agency.

Background and Services

The State of Texas has many programs and services for Veterans and not just at those agencies with Veterans in the name.

Agencies such as the Office of Public Utility Counsel (utilities), Texas Department of Licensing and Registration (licensing), Texas Department of Public Safety (driver license), Comptroller of Public Accounts (property tax) are just a few examples of state agencies that may not come to mind when navigating information, services or programs for Veterans. By having a system that serves as the point of contact at every state agency, Veterans in Texas will be better able to find programs and benefits at the state level, and state agencies will better be able to share information with each other.

The system could be modeled after the Accessibility Coordinator currently required by the Department of Information Resources. This system can be an additional duty for an employee or group of employees at an agency or the agency may decide to hire a full time equivalent (FTE) solely for that purpose.

In order to establish an Accessibility Coordinator at each state agency, Department of Information Resources (DIR) drafted and had approved Texas Administrative Code (TAC) Rule 213.21 that specifically says each agency shall appoint an Accessibility Coordinator to ensure compliance with accessibility requirements of Texas Government Code 2054 Subchapter M.

A similar rule could be established in the Texas Administrative Code for a system to function as the point of contact to ensure that Veterans are able to easily find and access all the benefits, programs and services to which they are entitled in exchange for service to their country. Legislative authority would be needed in order to accomplish this.

Once each agency has a system for Veterans' services in place, a database could be created with all agencies for the exchange of information at the state level. In addition to the work being done by the Texas Coordinating Council of Veterans Service, a group or listserv can be created to share information. This list can also be added to the Veterans Portal and distributed to other networks so Veterans and their family members can easily access the information for their state benefits and resources.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Veterans Commission should promulgate a rule in the Texas Administrative Code that requires state agencies to develop a system to function as the point of contact for Veterans services within each state agency.

Veteran Need #2

All state services and resources for Veterans need to be coordinated so that Veterans and their families can easily find and access state information, benefits and programs regardless-of-point of entry.

Background and Services

There are several resources currently in place that provide information regarding Veterans' services and programs in Texas, but each is incomplete or may not connect to other resources. The statewide resources in place include the Veterans Land Board (VLB) Call Center (1-800-252-VETS), 2-1-1, TexVet, the Veterans Portal, and the Texas Veterans App.

VLB Call Center

The VLB began taking calls on behalf of the Texas Veterans Commission via the Texas Veterans Hotline call center in March 2010 at 1-800-252-VETS (8387). The call center is currently promoted by VLB in the media and on promotional items. Approximately 43,000 calls will be answered by call center staff during Fiscal Year 2014.

2-1-1 (Health and Human Services Commission)

One of the oldest referral networks in Texas is 2-1-1. In 1997, the 75th Legislature passed House Bill 2596 establishing the Texas Information and Referral Network (TIRN) as the single point of coordination for statewide health and human services information and referral in Texas, and that system is known as the 2-1-1 TIRN.

Since the initial legislation in 1997, several additional legislative actions have expanded and refined the 2-1-1 TIRN scope of work including Senate Bill 1058 (80th Session, 2007) which requires 2-1-1 to provide referrals for reintegration services to military servicemembers and their families. Since 2008, 2-1-1 TIRN has participated in initiatives to benefit military members and their families, including Partners Across Texas which enhances support for Texas Army and Air National Guard Service and family members.

While improvements to website accessibility for military servicemembers and their families and in-take procedures to identify if a caller or their family member has served in the military have been made, there is still more that should be done to better serve to Veterans and their families. 2-1-1s that receive state funding are required by law or Health and Human Services Commission regulation to collect data and pre-qualify people for certain social services, which can be a lengthy process that can take precious time that some Veterans may not have, especially if using a pre-paid cellphone. By studying the call center and analyzing the operating procedures, improvements can be made to ensure Veterans in need are able to access resources in a timely fashion.

TexVet (Texas A&M University System Health Science Center)

The TexVet Initiative originally existed as TexVet: Partners Across Texas. It was the collaborative effort of organizations including the United States Department of Defense, Veterans Health Administration, Texas Military Forces, and State of Texas programs and agencies including 2-1-1 TIRN and the Texas A&M University System Health Science Center (TAMHSC). TexVet is an online (and now telephonic or emailed) information and referral website that curates and indexes content important to Texas military, Veterans, and family members. TexVet lists community organizations, resources, and events.

The organization provides a forum for collaboration between government agencies and private organizations and businesses that serve and support the military and their families and their communities. TexVet's original focus was to promote the health of military personnel, Veterans and their loved ones by enhancing access to health care and social services and strengthening support systems through all phases of the military life cycle.

In December of 2009, the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) entered into a contract with Texas A&M Health Science Center to develop and operate the Texas Veterans Resource Connection Program

to enhance the TexVet website. TAMHSC would also support the implementation of the Program by providing web-based services to assist military members, Veterans and their families in identifying, locating, and accessing information about social services and other resources for which they may be eligible. Since that time, DSHS has organized the peer-to-peer counseling programs around the Military Veterans Peer Network (MVPN). TAMHSC currently maintains a contract with DSHS to enhance the resources of the MVPN through TexVet.

Veterans Portal (Department of Information Resources)

The Veterans Portal was created after the 78th Legislative Session when the Legislature required the Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR) to create a web portal for Veterans. The Veterans Portal was located on the TexasOnline portal but has since moved to Texas.gov. The contract expanded services to customers, incorporated the use of new Web 2.0 tools, and significantly increased revenue to the state.

Throughout 2010 and 2011, numerous state partners combined efforts to:

- Provide easy access to relevant resources and information for Texas Veterans.
- Identify and define content of the portal; and
- Develop input and feedback mechanisms to ensure the content is accurate and current.

The Texas.gov program, through the Department of Information Resources (DIR) contract with its private partner, Texas NICUSA, redesigned and hosts the Texas Veterans Portal at no charge. The Texas Veterans Portal is supported by the Veterans Portal Advisory Council (VPAC) that provides a forum for discussion and collaboration concerning the purpose and content of the Texas.gov Veterans Portal. Specifically, the objectives of the VPAC are to:

- Ensure that the portal provides easy access to relevant resources and information for Texas Veterans;
- Identify and define content of the portal; and
- Provide input and feedback to the content and change management processes for portal requirements.

Texas Veterans App (Texas Health and Human Services Commission)

In April of 2014, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) launched a mobile phone app to give Texas Veterans quick access to crisis hotlines and other resources.

The app, which can be downloaded from both Google Play and the App Store, works on most iPhones and Android mobile phones. It provides information about local, state and national resources available to Texas military Veterans. By using the application, Veterans can:

- Get direct access to the national Veterans Crisis Line, the Hotline for Women Veterans and the VLB call center.
- Connect with other Veterans in their area.
- Quickly find services available to military Veterans.

The “Connect with Texas Veterans” feature puts the caller in contact with a member of the Texas Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN), an affiliation of Texas servicemembers, Veterans and their families. The network provides Veterans with peer support and trusted information about community resources available to them.

No matter how Veterans access information on state services, the information they find should be accurate and current across all resources available. While all of these resources are useful, they should all provide the same information to Veterans, military and their family members which will take coordination at the state level to push that information to the different resources responsible for housing it. All referral networks should have relationships and cross-train so that a Veteran will get the same information through all state-maintained networks.

The Texas Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (AIRS) offers training and certification of call center personnel in collaboration with the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems. The AIRS Certification Program awards professional credentials internationally based on established standards for the field of information and referral. The program identifies specific competencies and related performance criteria, which describe the knowledge, skills, attitudes and work-related behaviors needed by I&R practitioners to successfully execute their duties. AIRS offers the following certifications:

- Certified Information and Referral Specialist (CIRS)
- Certified Information and Referral Specialist – Aging
- Certified Resource Specialist (CRS)

Through training, technology, and coordination with the Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services, agency point of contacts, and community networks such as Veterans County Service Officers and the Military Veteran Peer Network, those state-maintained resource can have the most up-to-date information so that there is a “no wrong door” approach to ensuring Veterans have access to the benefits and services that they have earned.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- All state-funded call center and information referral network employees should receive a minimum amount of customer service training specifically for Veterans and their family members as well as have certain tools available (call-center software, agency flow charts) to ensure that each Veteran or family member receives current information in a timely manner.
- State-funded call center resources (including 2-1-1) and technology should be studied so that operating procedures and best practices can be analyzed and standardized for Veterans and their families.

Veteran Need #3

State outreach collaboration efforts need to improve to better target Veterans and their families for needed information and services.

Background and Services

The number of state agencies with services and benefits for Veterans and the size of Texas requires a coordinated outreach effort to ensure Veterans and their families are aware of the benefits and services for which they qualify.

In order to maximize the outreach efforts of each individual agency, state networks, state trade groups, social workers, local coalitions, professional organizations, and first responders should be utilized to push out comprehensive information on state benefits to Veterans at the community level.

Veterans and their families in at-risk situations are especially vulnerable so it is critical to focus outreach efforts and training on first responders such as police, truancy officers, child protective services, judges, educators, and nurses. Training should be provided on how to best to identify this population, how to address their unique needs, what programs and services are available to them, possible risks associated with this population, and appropriate resources for Veterans and their families.

Schools and child care organizations within the state are also a great resource for getting information to Veterans and their families. School counselors, nurses, and truancy officers are important points of contact in the outreach efforts and can be important for those families whose children do not reside with a Veteran, or servicemember, and consequently would not otherwise be easily identified (e.g. a Veteran father resides in Louisiana though the mother and children reside in Texas) to access benefits and programs.

Most state networks and first responder organizations have conferences or training at the state level. This would be an ideal time to provide information, resources and training to those groups so that they can serve the Veterans in their community.

The State of Texas has several programs (Fund for Veterans' Assistance, Texas Access to Justice Foundation, etc.) that award grants to eligible charitable organizations, local government agencies, and Veterans Service Organizations that provide direct services to Texas Veterans and their families. Those programs can include mandatory outreach guidelines for grantees to include links on their website, brochures in their offices on state Veterans resources like the Texas Veterans App (phone app), contact and resource information for state networks and websites such as the Military Veteran Peer Network, Veterans County Service Officers, Veterans Portal, and TexVet.

The MVPN provides military cultural competency training, called MVPN Basic Training. This training establishes a basic understanding of military service and the many challenges that servicemembers, Veterans and their families are faced with. This training can be conducted in a group environment or as a one-on-one training and is approximately 8 hours long.

Through training and providing resources such as brochures, websites, phone numbers and messaging, state networks and first responders can provide information and resources to those Veterans they encounter on a regular basis in their local communities. Veterans can receive more comprehensive information to help them get the benefits and services to which they are entitled.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Current training and collaboration among state networks and first responders should be studied so that standardized best practices can be implemented in a form that can be easily shared.
- Training in military culture, Veteran family identification strategies, and information referral should be developed for use by state networks and first responders to create a common training standard across serving agencies; in particular for first responders, judges, educators, and mental health/substance abuse providers (e.g. Veteran Tactical Response).

Communication and Outreach Workgroup

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Appendices

Appendix A

Actions Taken From First Report

Since the first report of the Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services (TCCVS) was published in October 2012, the state of Texas has made substantial progress in improving services to Texas Veterans and their families. The progress achieved is due in large part to the recommendations made by the TCCVS.

While many of the recommendations have been addressed either through the appropriations process, legislative action, or administrative rule changes by state agencies, some recommendations from the first report have not been addressed. Their importance should not be diminished. Recommendations not addressed by the first and new recommendations from the this report should be reviewed thoroughly to ensure the unique needs of the 1.67 million Veterans that currently reside in Texas are understood.

The following recommendations from the first report have been addressed with the following action:

Issues that Cross Workgroups

Veteran Need #5

State and local agencies need education and training on the challenges faced by Veterans coping with acquired brain injuries.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The state should increase its commitment and support for the Office of Acquired Brain Injury and the Texas Traumatic Brain Injury Advisory Council.

UPDATE: The Office of Acquired Brain Injury was maintained through appropriations to the Health and Human Services Commission. The Office of Acquired Brain Injury serves as the state's lead department in providing guidance, referrals and service coordination for survivors of brain injuries and their families, including returning combat Veterans.

Appendix A

Actions Taken From First Report

Health Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Veterans experiencing the effects of combat need access to health and mental health treatment resources prior to the onset of a crisis.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Access to Veterans' health and mental health resources needs to remain a funding priority for the Legislature.
- Continue to develop and implement evidence-based practices to address health and mental health issues faced by Veterans.

UPDATE: The Legislature increased appropriations to the Department of State Health Services in order to expand the Military Veteran Peer Network (General Appropriations Act, Senate Bill 1, 83rd Legislature, Regular Session, 2013, Article II, Department of State Health Services, Rider 86). Additionally, the Legislature increased appropriations to fund an additional 4 FTEs for mental health professionals at Texas Military Forces.

Senate Bill 7 (83rd Legislature, 2013) added Post Traumatic Stress to the list of conditions for which local mental health authorities may provide assessment services, crisis services, and intensive and comprehensive services, but provided no additional funding.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans need and benefit from peer-to-peer support programs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The state should continue its commitment to the DSHS Military Veteran Peer Network which links together the state's most valued resources for Veterans – well-trained, knowledgeable, and caring fellow Veterans.
- The state should provide funding for the creation of more Veteran Resource Centers. This commitment should include funding to document and report results from the operations and to build tools to empower the volunteers that assist Veterans and their families.

UPDATE: The Military Veteran Peer Network received increased funding through the General Appropriations Act, Senate Bill 1, 83rd Legislature, Regular Session, 2013, Article II, Department of State Health Services, Rider 86.

Appendix A

Actions Taken From First Report

Veteran Need #4

Veterans need access to long-term health care options.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As the Veteran population in Texas continues to age and the need for affordable long-term care services remains critical in meeting the needs of Veterans and their families, it is essential that communication of these services is efficient, easily identifiable and coordinated across the state. The availability of a centralized starting point for Veteran health care services, available in Texas, to direct families and organizations seeking assistance, to the appropriate service providers will improve care coordination and provide Texans with essential initial information.

- The Veterans Portal hosted by the Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR) and located at texas.gov/Veterans is the centralized point of reference for all Veteran services provided by the State of Texas and should also be the centralized starting point for long-term health care options.

UPDATE: The Veterans Portal continues to evolve and add agency resources, as cooperation and information sharing between agencies increases and improves. DIR has offered to develop some capability to host an online resource guide, not yet executed by TCCVS.

Appendix A

Actions Taken From First Report

Employment Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Texas state agencies should promote the hiring of Veterans within their organizations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Support an initiative that would coordinate with all state agencies and organizations to increase the effectiveness of the state's Veteran employment preference laws by educating state agency executives and human resource managers on the benefits of hiring Veterans and by assisting Veterans specifically seeking employment within state agencies.
- Structure state policy to positively promote engagement with current employees and prospective employees, including those in the networks of current employees. Highlight efforts taken to reintegrate returning Veterans who were on leave under Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) or to integrate and train new Veteran employees.

UPDATE: Senate Bill 10 (83rd Session, 2013) attempted to strengthen the Veteran's preference laws by expanding eligibility and removing outdated qualifications. Unfortunately, Senate Bill 10 was placed on the General State Calendar too late for consideration.

House Bill 2924 (83rd Session, 2013) requires that a military leave time account benefit a fire fighter or police officer who is a member of the Texas National Guard or the armed forces reserves of the United States that was called to active federal military duty while serving as a fire fighter or police officer for a municipality.

Veteran Need #3

Promote the development of Veteran entrepreneurship.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Support initiatives that targets Veteran entrepreneurs and Veteran business development with the state as a critical component of the state's larger Veterans employment efforts.

UPDATE: Senate Bill 1476 (82nd Session, 2011) established the Veteran Entrepreneur Program at the Texas Veterans Commission. The purpose of the Veteran Entrepreneur Program is to foster and promote Veteran-owned businesses and Veteran entrepreneurship throughout Texas. This program provides assistance to Veterans interested in entrepreneurship through a series of seminars that disseminate information regarding business plan development, financial guidance, government procurement, and information regarding franchise opportunities.

Appendix A

Actions Taken From First Report

Higher Education Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Veterans Resource Centers to provide centralized focal points of assistance and information tailored to Veterans and their families during their educational experience.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Encourage institutions of higher learning to establish physical space for a campus Veterans Resource Center to serve as a focal point for services to Veterans and their families.

UPDATE: Senate Bill 1158 (83rd Legislature, 2013) established the Veteran Education Coordinator Program to assist colleges and universities in their respective areas to institute or enhance programs and procedures which would increase the probability of Veterans and their families successfully completing the academic experience.

Veteran Need #2

Establish a comprehensive definition of the requirements which determine that a university/college/school campus is “Veteran Friendly”.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Establish a statewide benchmark definition for institutions of higher learning to earn a “Veteran Friendly” certification. To be certified as a “Veteran Friendly” program, schools must establish Veterans’ services programs that include the following elements:

- A Veterans Advising board
- Veteran specific space
- Central point of contact
- VA work study program
- Admissions and enrollment policies for Veterans
- Veterans orientation and courses
- Student Veterans organizations
- Academic support services
- Disability health and mental health services
- Veterans housing policies
- Faculty and staff training specific to Veterans’ needs
- Career services

UPDATE: Senate Bill 1158 (83rd Legislature, 2013) established the Veterans Education Excellence Award program that will encourage schools to exceed standards for providing services to Veterans. By awarding schools that demonstrate excellence in providing services to Veterans, the state of Texas hopes to help Institutions of Higher Learning find, and implement, best practices in services for Veterans.

Appendix A

Actions Taken From First Report

Veteran Need #5

Veterans need to be able to receive academic credit for military training/experience which is directly applicable to the degree, certification, or license which they are pursuing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Amend the TEC, Sec. 54.341, (a-2)(1)(E), (a-2)(2)(B), (b)(1)(E) and (b)(2)(B) and repeal (b-2) to reflect the more easily understood eligibility criteria for the Hazlewood exemption for disabled Veterans and their families.

UPDATE: Phased implementation of the College Credit for Heroes program continues to maximize college credit awarded to Veterans and servicemembers for their military experience, helping Veterans and servicemembers obtain their degrees and certifications more quickly and expedite their entry into the workforce. Administered by the Texas Workforce Commission, seven community colleges were selected in 2011 to help create standards for assessing military training that can be used by any college in Texas with emphasis on allied health programs. In May 2013, Phase II of the College Credit for Heroes program began. Phase II expands the initiative to other professions and regions in Texas, including six new partner schools.

Appendix A

Actions Taken From First Report

Criminal Justice Workgroup

Veteran Need #2

Neither county jails in Texas nor the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) have sufficient support from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to determine Veteran status of incarcerated Veterans.

Conclusions and Recommendations

While this self-reported information is a useful starting point for providing assistance to Veterans, it would be more valuable if Veteran status was verified by the VA. Veteran status is currently exchanged with the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) as part of the Public Assistance Reporting Information System (PARIS) and a pilot

Program mandated by the Legislature to identify and assist Veterans currently receiving public assistance.

- The Texas Legislature should create a program similar to the PARIS Data Review for Veterans through which the list of offenders incarcerated within TDCJ is matched against the PARIS/VA match list as HHSC already has the list of offenders incarcerated within TDCJ.
- The Texas Legislature should consider ways to assist counties to participate in any state level matching program.

UPDATE: House Bill 634 (83rd Session, 2013) requires the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to investigate and verify the Veteran status of each inmate by using data made available, through the Health and Human Services Commission, from the federal Public Assistance Reporting Information System and to use system data to assist inmates who are Veterans in applying for federal benefits or compensation for which the inmates may be eligible under a program administered by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Veteran Need #5

The State of Texas and local governments should provide training relating to Veterans to judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, jailers, and correctional officers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The State of Texas should support efforts by the Office of Acquired Brain Injury to deploy Veterans Tactical Response to all law enforcement agencies in Texas.

- The Texas Legislature should provide funding for the Office of Acquired Brain Injury to provide this training to law enforcement agencies and to develop similar training resources for judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, jailers, and correctional officers.

UPDATE: The Office of Acquired Brain Injury was maintained through appropriations to the Health and Human Services Commission. It continues to refine and disseminate Veteran Tactical Response training.

Armed with this knowledge, law enforcement officers in tense situations with Veterans who may have a brain injury or stress disorder will be able to ask the right questions, establish trust, cool down heated encounters and possibly save lives. The training will help Veterans with traumatic brain injury and PTSD by first helping them avoid harming themselves and others. But it also will bring law enforcement officers into a key role of helping direct former servicemembers to the medical and psychiatric care they need.

Appendix A

Actions Taken From First Report

Housing Workgroup

Veteran Need #3

Homelessness among Veterans continues to be a need that the state should continue its efforts to address.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Continued support for the Housing4TexasHeroes program will allow the Texas Veterans Commission, through the Fund for Veterans' Assistance, to grant funds to local non-profit organizations already specializing in this work, as a highly effective and efficient way of addressing Veteran homelessness and other housing needs, immediately.
- Aggregating homelessness data into a single database would provide more sophisticated statewide data on Veteran homelessness that will enable service providers to better direct their resources and services.

UPDATE: The 83rd Legislature made specific appropriations in the General Appropriations Act to continue the Housing4TexasHeroes program within the Fund for Veterans Assistance. Since the program began in 2011, the Fund for Veterans Assistance has awarded nearly \$6 million in Housing4TexasHeroes grants to help over 1200 Texas Veterans with housing needs.

Veteran Need #5

Create incentives for service-enriched housing for Veterans.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Representatives from the Texas Veterans Commission should be added as participating agencies in statute. This would ensure that the viewpoints of Veterans, with respect to supportive housing, are communicated, understood and included in future HHSCC work.
- The recommendations HHSCC included in the first biennial plan should be considered as an avenue for policy changes that could increase Service Enriched Housing available for Veterans in Texas.

UPDATE: House Bill 736 (83rd Session, 2013) added the Texas Veterans Commission to the Housing and Health Services Coordination Council at the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs. The purpose of the council is to increase state efforts to offer service-enriched housing through increased coordination of housing and health services.

Appendix B

TCCVS Agency Information and Services for Texas Veterans

Texas Veterans Commission

The Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) provides claims representation and counseling for Veterans, their dependents and survivors, employment services to Texas Veterans and helps employers find qualified Veteran job applicants, assists Veterans in utilizing their higher education benefits, and offers grants to eligible charitable organizations, local government agencies, and Veterans Service Organizations that provide direct services to Texas Veterans and their families.

<http://www.tvc.texas.gov>

Veterans Land Board

The Texas Veterans Land Board (VLB) operates six programs that provide benefits and services for Texas Veterans, military members and their families. They include: providing for low interest land, home, and home improvement loans; skilled nursing home care in eight state Veterans homes; burial and interment services in four state Veterans cemeteries; and Veterans benefit information and assistance services through the joint VLB/TVC state wide Veterans marketing and communication call center.

<http://www.glo.texas.gov/vlb>

Texas Military Forces

The Texas Military Forces (TMF) is commanded by The Adjutant General of Texas, the state's senior military official appointed by the governor, and is comprised of the Texas Military Department, the Texas Army National Guard (TXARNG), the Texas Air National Guard (TXANG), the Texas State Guard (TXSG) and the Domestic Operations Task Force (DOMOPS) which provides the Governor and the President with ready forces in support of state and federal authorities at home and abroad.

Through the Family Support Services Office, the Texas Military Department has a number of programs and partnerships with services available to Texas Service Members, Veterans, and families such as: Family Assistance, Transition Assistance, Mental Health & Counseling Services, Employment and Financial Assistance, Retirement Services, and TRICARE Services.

<http://www.txmf.us>

Health and Human Services Commission

The Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) mission is to maintain and improve the health and human services system in Texas and to administer its programs in accordance with the highest standards of customer service and accountability for the effective use of funds. HHSC oversees the operations of the health and human services system, provides administrative oversight of Texas health and human services programs, and provides direct administration of some programs.

HHSC's Veterans initiative is responsible for reviewing programs and benefits available for Veterans and recommends ways to improve and better coordinate those services. The initiative will work with staff at all five health and human services agencies as well as other state agencies and community-based organizations that serve Veterans.

<http://www.hhsc.state.tx.us>

Appendix B

TCCVS Agency Information and Services for Texas Veterans

State Bar of Texas

The State Bar of Texas administers the Texas Lawyers for Texas Veterans program to develop and assist pro bono legal clinics throughout the state for military Veterans who otherwise cannot afford or do not have access to the legal services they need.

<http://www.texasbar.com>

Department of State Health Services

Programs implemented by the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) are based on recommendations included in the 2008 DSHS report Behavioral Health Services for Returning Veterans and Their Families: Service Gaps and Recommendations and a 2011 update. The programs use funds appropriated by the Legislature. The primary objective is to provide Peer-to-Peer support for servicemembers, Veterans, and family members by organizing activities to identify individuals who can benefit from support services provided by trained Veterans. The activities include one-on-one mentoring, and support group discussions. The aim is to develop trust relationships built on shared life experiences in developing skills and access to resources useful in adapting to post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries.

<http://www.dshs.state.tx.us>

Department of Aging and Disability Services

The Department of Aging and Disability Services (DADS) aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs) help individuals with information and access to community-based long term services. ADRCs promote linkages to existing military servicemember Veteran and family related support services as well as other local and state level support services. Services vary by region and may include but are not limited to; transportation, benefits and system navigation assistance, care coordination, benefits application assistance and Veterans directed home and community-based services.

<http://www.dads.state.tx.us>

Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services

The Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services (DARS) is engaged in a memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs- Veterans Rehabilitation and Employment (VA-VRE) to expand employment and rehabilitation services to Veterans with disabilities in geographic areas beyond the reach of VA-VRE. DARS counselors work directly with VA employment counselors to address the unique needs in each of DARS five regions. DARS cultivates business partnerships with major employers to create employment opportunities for people with disabilities. One particular effort is the partnership with the second largest home improvement store chain designed specifically for eligible Veterans with disabilities. The program is being replicated statewide to serve more Veterans with disabilities.

<http://www.dars.state.tx.us>

Department of Family and Protective Services

The Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) works with communities to protect children, the elderly, and people with disabilities from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. It also works to protect the health and safety of children in daycare, as well as foster care and other types of 24-hour care. We do this through investigations, services and referrals, regulation, and prevention programs.

<http://www.dfps.state.tx.us>

Appendix B

TCCVS Agency Information and Services for Texas Veterans

Texas Workforce Commission

Although the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) provides employment assistance as well as education and training to the general public who are seeking employment. Along with specific federal and state statute to provide priority of service to Veterans, TWC has a long tradition of supporting Texas Veterans because we believe Veterans are equipped with the technical skills, education, professionalism, and leadership experience sought by Texas employers. The TWC Veterans program includes:

<http://www.twc.state.tx.us>

- College Credit for Heroes:
- Texas Veterans Leadership Program
- State of Texas Soldier Employment Initiative
- Red, White, and You Veteran Job Fair
- Veterans Workforce Outreach Initiative
- Skills for Veterans
- Apprenticeship for Veterans
- Texas Wide Open for Veterans

Texas Workforce Investment Council

The Texas Workforce Investment Council assists the Governor and the legislature with strategic planning for and evaluation of the Texas workforce system, which is comprised of eight state agencies, their local program providers, and over 20 diverse and dynamic programs. The Council assists with the coordination of determining employer workforce needs and satisfaction with programs and services. The Council's partner agencies, including TVC, gather data from employer customers at appropriate intervals to determine employer needs and satisfaction.

TVC's efforts to determine and respond to employer needs, thereby enhancing employment opportunities for Veterans, was initiated under the previous system strategic plan and continues under Advancing Texas. TVC's work to gather information and data by surveying employer continues, and results demonstrate a high response rate and a very high satisfaction level among employers who used the agency's employment services.

<http://governor.state.tx.us/twic>

Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board provides leadership and coordination for the Texas higher education system. Since being created by the Texas Legislature in 1965, the Board has worked to achieve excellence for the college education of Texas students. The Board meets four times a year. Meetings occur in Austin but are usually also broadcast on the Web.

<http://www.theccb.state.tx.us/>

Appendix B

TCCVS Agency Information and Services for Texas Veterans

Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation

The Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation (TDLR) is committed to providing expedited services to Veterans and military spouses and is proud to be a member of the Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services. TDLR made recommendations in its Strategic Plan regarding occupation licensing for Veterans and military spouses.

<http://www.tdlr.texas.gov>

- TDLR provides a supplemental application for military spouses to expedite their licenses in Texas.
- The agency has so many unique programs that rather than an assigned military advocate or liaison, we created a military advocate team that rotates every 6 months to ensure uniform processes across programs.
- At the top of each of TDLR's program web pages is a highlighted box to direct military Veterans and military spouses to the information they need to get licensed.

Texas Department of Public Safety

The Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) proactively protects the citizens of Texas in an ever changing threat environment while always remaining faithful to the U.S. and State Constitution. DPS offers a designation of "VETERAN" on driver's licenses issued to Texas Veterans so they can easily prove their eligibility when applying for various benefits in addition to free and discounted licenses.

<http://www.txdps.state.tx.us>

Texas Department of Criminal Justice

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) manages offenders in state prisons, state jails and private correctional facilities that contract with TDCJ.

TDCJ honors and supports Veterans by granting them employment preferences, and fully recognizes, honors, and enforces the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, a law which protects the civilian job rights and benefits of United States military service personnel.

TDCJ has a history of successful recruiting at military bases and continues to actively recruit personnel who are about to be honorably discharged. Military Veterans and staff have a great number of skills and quality training, along with experience handling a variety of responsibilities.

<http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us>

Appendix B

TCCVS Agency Information and Services for Texas Veterans

Commission on Jail Standards

The Texas Commission on Jail Standards is the regulatory agency over Texas county jails. While the agency does not provide direct services to Veterans, the agency actively engages with sheriffs, county officials, and jail administrators about available resources for justice-involved Veterans.

Our activities include disseminating technical assistance memos to counties about Veterans' services found at the local, state, and federal level, writing articles on Veterans' resources in our agency newsletter, and inviting Veterans groups to speak during our agency presentations at training conferences.

As part of its regulatory requirements, the Commission mandates county jails ask whether an inmate has prior military service during the intake screening process. By providing information and resources to counties, when justice-involved Veterans are identified, our goal is that counties can link Veterans to available services and resources.

<http://www.tcjs.state.tx.us>

Texas Commission on Law Enforcement

The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement has been committed for several years now to assist and expedite the ability of Veterans to re-enter the Texas workplace in the field of law enforcement. We have had in place since 2009 a process through which Veterans with military law enforcement experience can become Texas peace officers without having to participate in redundant training.

<http://www.tcole.texas.gov/>

Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs

The Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA) is the state agency responsible for promoting and preserving affordable home ownership, financing the development of affordable rental housing, ensuring long-term stability and habitability of housing for low-income households, supporting community and energy assistance programs, and providing housing activities in the colonias. TDHCA is also responsible for the regulation of the state's manufactured housing industry.

<http://www.tdhca.state.tx.us>

Texas Department of Transportation

The Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) is organized by administration, districts, divisions and offices. Four regional support centers provide operational and project delivery support for the agency's 25 geographical districts. TxDOT's workforce is made up of engineers, administrators, financial experts, designers, architects, sign makers, accountants, purchasers, maintenance workers, travel counselors and many other professions. All of our employees work together to realize the TxDOT mission: providing safe and reliable transportation solutions for Texas.

TxDOT provides funding and assistance for transportation services and programs that can be used to serve and support Veterans.

<http://www.txdot.gov>

Appendix B

TCCVS Agency Information and Services for Texas Veterans

Texas Department of Motor Vehicles

The Texas Department of Motor Vehicles (TxDMV) offers a number of license plates specifically for military Veterans and military medal honorees at no fee and/or reduced fee. There are three categories of military license plates: Meritorious Service, Recognition Award, and Military Service.

Meritorious Service category license plates are issued at no fee (plate or registration) for the first set. Recognition Award category license plates require the payment of a \$3 plate fee; however, there is no requirement for the payment of annual registration fees. Military Service category license plates require the payment of the annual registration fee; however, there no plate fee. This applies to first and additional sets.
<http://www.txdmv.gov>

Office of Public Utility Council

The Office of Public Utility Counsel (OPUC) was created in 1983, in response to legislative and consumer group concerns that residential and small business electric and telephone customers were not receiving adequate representation in utility proceedings. In addition to electric and telephone service ratepayers, the agency now advocates for water utility rate payers. OPUC provides information to assist residential and small commercial consumers in navigating the competitive electric market as well as finding utility assistance.

The agency also provides base-specific information to servicemembers and their families and provides presentations to military and Veteran organizations upon request.
<http://www.opuc.texas.gov>

Texas Veterans Mobile App

The Texas Veterans Mobile App gives Texas Veterans quick access to the Veterans Crisis Line, the Hotline for Women Veterans, the Military Veteran Peer Network, and the Texas Veterans Portal. The app, which can be downloaded from both Google Play and the App Store, works on most iPhones and Android mobile phones.

Texas Online: Texas Veterans Portal

The Texas Veterans Portal provides information from federal and state agencies in a comprehensive collection of links about Veteran's benefit information. The website contains information to assist you and your family in buying a home or land, receiving education benefits, finding a job, health care resources and more.
texas.gov/veterans

