

Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services



Third Report

October 1, 2016

Introductory Letter

Thomas P. Palladino, Chair

Dear State Leaders,

It is my honor and privilege to submit the final Third Report on behalf of the Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services (TCCVS).

TCCVS was established as the result of legislation passed by the 82nd Legislature (2011) in order to coordinate the activities of state agencies that assist veterans, servicemembers, and their families; coordinate outreach efforts that ensure 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, discussion, and ultimately consensus by the members of TCCVS.

Veterans have showed a continued desire to settle or relocate to Texas. Despite the dedicated effort of those working to assist veterans, there remains a persistent need and demand for veteran services. The continued influx of veterans into the state coupled with the increasing demand of an aging population of WWII, Korea, Vietnam, and Gulf War I era veterans validate the needs for continued coordination and support.

Texas citizens take pride in recognizing and showing appreciation for the sacrifices military women and men have given to the United States. As Texas continues to lead the nation in support of veterans, state leaders have an opportunity to continue the Texas legacy by boldly addressing the veteran issues and challenges highlighted within this 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

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Executive Summary

Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services Report

The Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services (TCCVS) was created during the 82nd Legislature (2011) by Senate Bill 1796. The Texas Legislature 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 Council, originally comprised of five state agencies, currently consist of the following 22 Texas agencies and departments:

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

Senate Bill 1796 enabled the TCCVS to establish workgroups to focus on specific policy areas affecting veterans, servicemembers, and their families. For the purposes of this report the Council has established the following nine workgroups:

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

* Agency functions assumed by the Health and Human Services Commission on September 1, 2016 as a result of Senate Bill 200 (84th Legislature, 2015).

[†] Agency function assumed by the Texas Workforce Commission on September 1, 2016.

Each of the nine workgroups met no less than five times from September 2015 to August 2016, 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 recognize the services currently available to meet that need, and recommendations to address the need moving forward.

Issues That Cross All Workgroups

At the close of the workgroup process, three themes present themselves as issues that cross all workgroups. Identification of these themes is crucial to understanding where extended efforts are needed by state agencies and policymakers in order to effectively address the needs presented. The three issues described below are expanded upon in the pages that follow and accompanied by recommendations to state leaders and legislators for addressing the issues.

1. Communication and Outreach

Each of the nine workgroups discussed the difficulty in communicating and outreaching to Texas veterans about the state supported services available. A large state such as Texas which included urban, rural, and frontier populations requires equally diverse methods of disseminating information on veteran programs and services. Despite the geographic diversity of the state, there should be a singular, cohesive, state-supported strategy for reaching all veterans to ensure they are aware of benefits they have earned through service.

2. Transitioning Servicemembers

Transitioning servicemembers are those men and women who are in the process of retiring or exiting the military. Texas has a deep history of respect for those who volunteer to serve our country and when exiting the military, the state should go above and beyond to ensure that these future veterans are aware of every opportunity that Texas has available. Therefore, Texas would benefit from a comprehensive statewide outreach plan to pass on pertinent information to transitioning servicemembers in Texas regarding the services available to Texas veterans.

3. Veteran County Service Officers

Veteran County Service Officers (VCSO) serve as the hub for information on all veterans' services and resources within the counties and communities they serve. While impossible to master all subjects and service areas as diverse as mental health, transportation, and housing, the VCSO 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. Any additional state support of these officers would assist local communities in addressing the needs of their veterans.

Workgroups at a Glance

Health

At a Glance

Veteran Need #1

Veteran County Service Officers and other Veteran Service Organizations need training seminars as it relates to health care options available to veterans and their families.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature and state agencies should consider ways to expand and enhance local and regional collaboration between Veteran County Service Officers (VCSOs) and state, county, and local agencies that provide social services and benefits or referrals. Supplementary funding may be required to provide for additional training to VCSOs.

- In partnership with applicable agencies of the TCCVS, develop and implement quarterly training and networking events to create awareness of existing programs, their leadership, access points, and critical policy changes.
- Develop county or regional partnerships with VCSOs and state agency regional coordinators, regional councils of government, and county agricultural agents.
- Plan and coordinate periodic informational conferences between area VCSOs and regional coordinators of state agencies that provide support services in order to share up-to-date information of services available in that region and develop working relationships between state service providers.

Veteran Need #2

Texas veterans would benefit from coordinated efforts to increase public awareness of veteran related services provided by state and federal agencies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should support the development of a public service announcement (PSA), developed in collaboration with the VA to raise awareness of the Choice Program and Community Care efforts to include other veteran benefits. Partner with agencies of the TCCVS to develop networking events and build a unified veteran-centered website with contact information and veteran resources across the state.

- The Texas Legislature should promote the establishment and expansion of the “MyVA Community model” across the state, especially in rural areas. This model brings together local veteran service providers, advocates, and others community partners to improve outcomes for veterans and their families.

Health

At a Glance

Veteran Need #3

Texas veterans would benefit from the increased participation of health care professionals in the VA Choice Program.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should support outreach efforts directed towards the Texas Medical Association (TMA) and similar organizations of specialty providers designed to assist the VA with recruiting and placement of health professionals in rural VA facilities and Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs). This includes providing education and awareness to medical professionals and support staff in military/veteran cultural competency. TMA should build a partnership with the VA to incorporate ongoing efforts to educate health care systems and medical professionals on military competency.

- TMA should provide information on Veteran Health Administration (VHA) Scholarship & Education Programs and loan repayment programs in order to encourage medical professionals to work in rural areas. The goal being to meet the specific needs of the Texas veteran population while ensuring that the VHA continues to promote, enhance, and provide quality clinical training opportunities to the next generation of health care providers.

Employment

At a Glance

Veteran Need #1

Transitioning veterans need coordinated services and resources that align with civilian career pathways.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should support and advocate for an expanded timeframe for transitioning servicemembers remaining in Texas to receive counseling on Texas specific veteran programs and services that mirror the four DoD Transition Tracks (Employment, Education, Career Technical Training, and Entrepreneurship). The timeframe should be extended from 90 days to 180 days prior to the servicemembers separation date.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans need improved job matching services.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- In conjunction with applicable TCCVS partners, the Texas Legislature should support an annual report that:
 - Conducts a gap analysis between common military training and experience and the training requirements for civilian occupations to successfully pursue civilian employment opportunities.
 - Identifies the top five Military Occupational Specialties (MOS) transitioning out of the military in order to focus counseling services on the largest need for services.
 - Identifies the top five occupations for which those top five MOS offer transferrable skills that meet the needs of employers.
 - Identifies industry-based certifications that align with the top five MOS.
 - Identifies other data and information that informs the College Credit for Heroes program to support veteran transition into targeted occupations.

Employment

At a Glance

- Veterans Success Initiative – The Texas Legislature should encourage the implementation of the promising practices from *Complete College America’s Student Success Initiative* which include identifying the specific needs of veterans to produce more effective outcomes for veterans (e.g. increased awareness of Student Veterans Association representatives at Community and Technical Colleges).
- Investigate methods to raise employer awareness of the number of veterans with MOS that align with demand occupations to support retention of trained veterans in Texas.
- Duplicate and reconfigure the “Reality Check Budget Calculator” on Texas Workforce Commission’s *Labor Market and Career Information* website to have veteran theme with possible links to College Credit for Heroes (CC4H).
<http://www.texasrealitycheck.com/>

Higher Education

At a Glance

Veteran Need #1

Texas veterans would benefit from sustainment of the Hazlewood Exemption Act.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should act preserve the state's Hazlewood Exemption Act to ensure Texas veterans, their families, and survivors are recognized for their service and sacrifice and allowed the opportunity to further their education.

Veteran Need #2

Student veterans and the State of Texas would benefit from the collection and evaluation of additional data on veterans enrolled at institutions of higher education in the state.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should provide clear and consistent instructions through legislation identifying what data institutions of higher education shall collect and report on students utilizing veteran benefits. Legislation should also identify what agency should be the repository for the reported data.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans need post-secondary credit for military training.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Texas institutions of higher education should develop articulation agreements/memoranda of understanding with the clearinghouse for College Credit for Heroes transcripts (Central Texas College) to enable academic credit to be granted for completed and documented military training.
- The Texas Legislature should enable and direct the College Credit for Heroes program to annually report the number of credit hours awarded under College Credit for Heroes that were applied towards a degree or certification program at Texas institutions of higher education.

Criminal Justice

At a Glance

Veteran Need #1

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 in the 2014 TCCVS Report, the Texas Legislature should provide additional resources to the Community Justice Assistance Division of Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) to support programs specifically designed for veterans.
- The Texas Veterans Commission should consider entering into a memorandum of agreement with the TDCJ to (1) identify state resources for justice involved veterans, (2) coordinate efforts to serve veterans on probation or parole, (3) expand training opportunities for probation and parole officers, and when appropriate, (4) provide probation and parole officials technical assistance to enhance the supervision of veterans.
- The Texas Legislature should encourage CSCDs to utilize existing veteran peer-to-peer support programs offered through the Texas Veterans Commission.

Veteran Need #2

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) should continue to expand the use of information it has about incarcerated veterans.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- As previously recommended in the 2014 TCCVS Report, the Texas Legislature should consider providing resources for incarcerated veteran support within TDCJ, including:
 - Dedicated Texas Veterans Commission counselors to complete and submit compensation and pension applications for incarcerated veterans to supplement the efforts of TDCJ Reentry Case Managers.
 - Four statewide Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN) staff to support the volunteers needed for a program to connect incarcerated veterans with MVPN volunteers during incarceration and after release for community reentry activities.
- The Texas Legislature should set a reasonable timeframe for sheriffs in Texas to integrate the Veterans Reentry Search Service (VRSS) into a jail's central tracking system so that veteran status is automatically verified.

Criminal Justice

At a Glance

Veteran Need #3

Veteran Treatment Courts (VTCs) should be encouraged to expand training, programming, post court services and the use of mentors and peer support.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should support the integration of services related to Veteran Treatment Courts including:
 - Education for defense attorneys on VTCs;
 - Dedication of prosecutors to a VTC; and
 - Identification and utilization of non-VA community resources in VTC programs.
- The Texas Legislature should support amendments to the VTC framework which mandate the inclusion of post-court transition plans based on available community resources and individual veteran's needs.
- The Texas Legislature should encourage counties with 5,000 or more veterans to have a Veterans Treatment Court program and consider mechanisms to provide funding to support the operation and expansion of VTC programs.

Veteran Need #4

Explore ways the State of Texas can coordinate with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to assist incarcerated veterans in receiving Compensation & Pension (C&P) exams from VA funded doctors.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Initiate a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the VA to allow for VA funded doctors to complete C&P exams in facilities operated by TDCJ.¹
- Create an MOU with the VA to allow for VA funded doctors to complete C&P exams via telemedicine in facilities operated by TDCJ.²

¹ Precedent established in the states of Washington and Nevada.

² Precedent established in Oregon.

Housing

At a Glance

Veteran Need #1

Veterans need greater access to safe and affordable housing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should increase the commitment to the Housing4TexasHeroes (H4TXH) program through additional funding to the Housing Trust Fund.
- Study the feasibility of funding and implementing a state-wide risk mitigation fund that would reduce the liability for property owners who offer housing to at-risk veterans.

Veteran Need #2

Homeless and low-income veterans, especially those with children, need access to affordable housing.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should find ways to offer tax relief incentives to non-profit organizations attempting to provide housing to veterans with children.

Veteran Need #3

Disabled veterans in Texas would benefit from revisions to the disabled veteran tax exemption schedule.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should consider amending the tax exemption for disabled veterans living in Texas by transitioning the current exemption schedule from a fixed dollar amount exemption to a percentage of the home's assessed value.

Women Veterans

At a Glance

Veteran Need #1

Homeless and low-income veterans, especially those with children, would benefit from affordable housing.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should find ways to offer tax relief incentives to non-profit organizations attempting to provide housing to veterans with children.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans in Texas would benefit from a program that recognizes child care training and licensing from military installations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) should explore ways to support veterans who wish to become day care providers.
- DFPS should recognize and award training credit to those veterans who were previously licensed through the Department of Defense Family Child Care (FCC) program.

Veteran Need #3

Women veterans would benefit from additional medical providers, especially those who have military competency and familiarity with Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and mental health services for veterans.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should promote outreach efforts to the Texas Medical Association (TMA) to encourage VA CHOICE program education and military competency training, with the goal of encouraging additional fee-based female medical providers to participate in the VA CHOICE program.

Women Veterans

At a Glance

Veteran Need #4

Veterans who have acute financial needs would benefit from local programs that provides short-term assistance.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should consider developing a specific grant fund and/or a reimbursement framework to support Veteran County Service Offices.

Transportation

At a Glance

Veteran Need #1

Disabled veterans need equitable relief from toll road fees across the state.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should reexamine the toll exemption program for veterans and consider ways to provide funding to toll entities including but not limited to:
 - Voluntary donation options on toll road billing statements to support exemptions for disabled veterans.
 - Utilizing proceeds from the sale of excess/surplus property from state agencies.
 - The Texas Legislature should consider requiring toll entities that do not exempt disabled veterans toll fees to display road markers designating non-exempt toll roads.
 - Toll authorities should provide exemption information to veterans when applying for a tag.
 - State agencies may increase outreach efforts to veterans in order to clarify various exemption programs. These efforts can include easily readable maps and listings of exempt and non-exempt tolls.

Veteran Need #2

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

Conclusions and Recommendations

- VA medical facilities and regional transit providers should establish formal relationships for communication and coordination to increase access to transportation, promote public/veteran awareness of existing transportation resources available within their community.
- 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.
- Address gaps in mental health services to veterans, including rural veterans, through further development and improvement in state telemedicine programs. (*Cross workgroups – Mental Health*)

Transportation

At a Glance

- Encourage municipal transit agencies to create more routes that include Veterans Health Administration facilities.
- Encourage ride sharing companies to offer discounted fares to disabled veterans who are traveling to medical and employment appointments.

Veteran Need #3

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.
- Provide grant writing assistance to organizations interested in applying for transportation grants.

Veteran Need #4

The state should better assess the transportation barriers faced by veterans.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Texas Department of Transportation established the regional service planning projects within the Public Transportation Division in 2005 and requires that each of the 24 planning regions in the state submit a regional transportation coordination plan to the division. Planning grants were awarded to lead agencies to support this requirement and stakeholders were identified and organized to begin the planning process. This plan represents a Federal Transit Administration mandated update to the Regional Coordinated Public Transportation plan.

- The state should assess and implement recommendations for improving transportation services to veterans made in the regional coordinated public transportation plan.
- The state should use this information as the basis for a broader and more thorough assessment of the transportation needs of veterans.

Communication and Outreach

At a Glance

Veteran Need #1

Texas veterans would benefit from coordinated efforts to increase public awareness of veteran related services provided by the state.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should grant state agencies that provide direct services to veterans the statutory authority to contract for marketing and outreach services in order to grow veteran engagement.
- State agencies and programs that have veteran services should develop, formalize, and support a cohesive and consistent strategy to outreach and inform veterans, their families, and survivors.
- All state agencies should have knowledge of and access to direct points of contact for veteran services provided by the state. In addition, all state agencies not included in TCCVS should have the voluntary option of designating a Veteran Liaison that would operate and function as designed in Rider 17.06.

Veteran Need #2

Veteran services and initiatives provided by state agencies should be uniformly highlighted and structured in order to provide Texas veterans and their local communities a consistent message and easier access to their benefits.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Each TCCVS member agency should contribute office locations and contact information in an Open Data Format to the Veterans Portal (via DIR and the Open Data Portal) in order to increase visibility and access to state services.
- The Texas Legislature should encourage the development of informational material for community veteran advocates, specifically the faith-based leadership, to assist them in connecting veterans to services.

Mental Health

At a Glance

Veteran Need #1

Veterans need local mental health resources to assess and treat behavioral health issues prior to the onset of a crisis.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should continue to support existing programs that provide training and certification for Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) and Military Cultural Competency.
- The Texas Legislature should support programs to catalogue and index providers who meet VHA requirements to provide behavioral health treatment.
- The Texas Legislature should support programs to encourage providers to enroll in TriWest.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans need communities in which they live to provide and promote opportunities for peer engagement to prevent the onset of a crisis and/or prevent crisis escalation.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should continue supporting mental health programs for veterans including the Military Veteran Peer Network.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans would benefit from the expanded availability of telemedicine services.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should address gaps in mental health services to veterans, including rural veterans, through further development and improvement in state telemedicine programs.

Health Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Veteran County Service Officers and other Veteran Service Organizations need training seminars as it relates to health care options available to veterans and their families.

Background and Services

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.

Texas Government Code Chapter 434, Subchapter B defines and describes the role of Veteran County Service Officers (VCSOs). Current statute requires each county with a population of over 200,000 to employ a VCSO. State law allows for those counties with a population under 200,000 to employ a VCSO, but such counties are not required to do so. It should be noted that Texas counties that employ Veteran County Service Officers are not reimbursed by the State of Texas.

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 all subjects and service areas as diverse as mental health, transportation, and housing, VCSOs have the ability to connect veterans within their county to the agencies, programs, and subject matter experts capable of providing services in their area.

Given that the roles, duties and requirements for VCSOs has not been revised since actions taken by the 70th Texas Legislature in 1987, the Texas Legislature should consider reviewing such items in the next legislative session.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The Texas Legislature and state agencies should consider ways to expand and enhance local and regional collaboration between Veteran County Service Officers (VCSOs) and state, county, and local agencies that provide social services and benefits or referrals. Supplementary funding may be required to provide for additional training to VCSOs.

- In partnership with applicable agencies of the TCCVS, develop and implement quarterly training and networking events to create awareness of existing programs, their leadership, access points, and critical policy changes.

- Develop county or regional partnerships with VCOSOs and state agency regional coordinators, regional councils of government, and county agricultural agents.
- Plan and coordinate periodic informational conferences between area VCOSOs and regional coordinators of state agencies that provide support services in order to share up-to-date information of services available in that region and develop working relationships between state service providers.

Veteran Need #2 (*Cross workgroup - Communications and Outreach*)

Texas veterans would benefit from coordinated efforts to increase public awareness of veteran related services provided by state and federal agencies.

Background and Services:

The Veterans Choice Program, or Choice Program, is a supplemental program to provide veterans the ability to receive medical care in their local community. However, many veterans are either unaware of the Choice Program or have difficulty understanding the program’s requirements and guidelines. Since the implementation of the Choice Program, there have been multiple revisions to the eligibility requirements which has contributed to the complexity and confusion surrounding the new program.

In today’s complex and changing health care environment, where VA is experiencing a steep increase in demand for care, it is essential for VA to partner with providers in communities across the country to meet the needs of veterans. To be effective, these partnerships must be principle-based, streamlined, and easy to navigate for veterans, community providers, and VA employees. Historically, VA has used numerous programs, each with their own unique set of requirements, to create these critical partnerships with community providers. This resulted in a complex and confusing landscape for veterans and community providers. Acknowledging these issues, VA is taking action as part of an enterprise-wide transformation called MyVA.

MyVA will modernize VA’s culture, processes, and capabilities to put the needs and interests of veterans and their families first. Included in the transformation plan are objectives for consolidating community care programs, to include:

- offering a continuum of care coordination services to veterans, tailored to their unique needs;
- utilizing analytics to improve veterans’ health by guiding them towards personalized services and tools (e.g., disease management, case management);

- enabling community providers to easily exchange health information with VA; and
- designing efficient customer service systems to resolve veteran inquiries.

Transformation of VA’s community care program will address gaps in veterans’ access to health care in a simple, streamlined, and effective manner. This transformation will require a systems approach, taking into account the interdependent nature of external and internal factors involved in VA’s health care system. The Texas Legislature can be a valuable partner in the VA’s community care program initiative and should support public service announcements (PSA) and outreach events to enhance awareness of the program to Texas veterans and their families.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should support the development of a public service announcement (PSA), developed in collaboration with the VA to raise awareness of the Choice Program and Community Care efforts to include other veteran benefits. Partner with agencies of the TCCVS to develop networking events and build a unified veteran-centered website with contact information and veteran resources across the state.

- The Texas Legislature should promote the establishment and expansion of the “MyVA Community model” across the state, especially in rural areas. This model brings together local veteran service providers, advocates and others community partners to improve outcomes for veterans and their families.

Veteran Need #3

Texas veterans would benefit from the increased participation of health care professionals in the VA Choice Program.

Background and Services

Cultivating military/veteran cultural competence can help providers deliver appropriate and effective care that acknowledges the veteran’s unique history and its significance in a veteran’s life. Health care systems and providers need to understand the unique realities of military culture in order to provide effective quality health care for veterans and military families. Military service, and combat experience in particular, is a profound life experience that many medical providers outside of the VA medical facilities do not understand. All professionals should be culturally competent when working with any unique demographic or population, but competency is particularly important when providing care to veterans because they may shut you out if they suspect a lack of understanding. Providers outside of the VA often do not think about a client having military experience or how that service might affect the veteran’s presenting condition;

how to treat them; or how they'll respond to treatment. Critical issues include asking about past military service and following up with questions about hazardous exposures that are known to be specific to their era of service. The basic framework for military competency training has already been established and is currently being utilized by peace officers across Texas, behavioral health specialists, and other entities.

The Veterans Choice Program is making it easier for thousands of veterans to receive their health care from providers outside of the VA system. However, many community providers are not trained or experienced in treating this unique veteran patient community. To make it easier for health care professionals to understand veterans and their military experience, VA and the Department of Defense have developed a free online continuing education course, Military Culture: Core Competencies for Health Care Professionals. The course is aimed at helping providers to better serve veterans and servicemembers by increasing their knowledge and awareness of military culture and experiences. This free course is being offered to community health care providers nationwide through the Veterans Health Administration's TRAIN website.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Legislature should support outreach efforts directed towards the Texas Medical Association (TMA) and similar organizations of specialty providers designed to assist the VA with recruiting and placement of health professionals in rural VA facilities and Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs). This includes providing education and awareness to medical professionals and support staff in military/veteran cultural competency. TMA should build a partnership with the VA to incorporate ongoing efforts to educate health care systems and medical professionals on military competency.

- TMA should provide information on Veteran Health Administration (VHA) Scholarship & Education Programs and loan repayment programs in order to encourage medical professionals to work in rural areas. The goal being to meet the specific needs of the Texas veteran population while ensuring that the VHA continues to promote, enhance, and provide quality clinical training opportunities to the next generation of health care providers.

Employment Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Transitioning veterans need coordinated services and resources that align with civilian career pathways.

Background and Services

An average of 22,000 servicemembers will be transitioning from the military into civilian life from military installations in Texas over the next two years. Close to 30% of these transitioning servicemembers will remain in Texas. There is also a substantial number of transitioning servicemembers who are returning to Texas from military installations around the world. Recognizing the unique needs of this population, Governor Greg Abbott has established the **Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative** to assess local economic activity, examine workforce challenges and opportunities, and consider innovative approaches to meeting the state's workforce goals.

Governor Abbott has charged the Commissioners responsible for the Tri-Agency Workforce Initiative with the following:

- Commissioners should identify gaps in services to Texas veterans, advance strategies to enhance their education and employment opportunities, and develop solutions to ensure a seamless and accelerated transition into the Texas workforce.
- Commissioners should make recommendations that build the skills of the Texas workforce and advance regional economic expansion, job creation, and the goals of Governor Abbott's plan to elevate Texas' higher education system, aims to ensure 60 percent of Texas' 25 to 34 year-old workforce achieves a postsecondary education credential by 2030.

In keeping with the Governor's charge, it is vital to have access to transitioning servicemembers in order to (1) assist them in making more informed choices about how to optimize their education and/or employment benefits and (2) prepare them for successful long term career outcomes.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should support and advocate for an expanded timeframe for transitioning servicemembers remaining in Texas to receive counseling on Texas specific veteran programs and services that mirror the four DoD Transition Tracks (Employment, Education, Career Technical Training, and Entrepreneurship). The timeframe should be extended from 90 days to 180 days prior to the servicemembers separation date.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans need improved job matching services.

Background and Services

To improve the transition from military service to employment it is crucial to recognize servicemembers' military occupational specialty (MOS). Recognition of prior military training assists career advisors in their effort to transition veterans into civilian employment.

Improvements in transition resources promote better career outcomes for veterans, better employment outcomes for employers, and better contributions by all to the Texas economy.

The *Reality Check Budget Calculator* is a web program that is a service provided by the Texas Workforce Commission and the Texas Education Agency. The purpose of the service is to demonstrate the real and actual costs associated with day-to-day life and common expenses such as buying a house or car. The web program generates a unique experience for each user and allows participants to see what level of salary would be required to achieve or obtain their stated goals.

The *Reality Check Budget Calculator* in its current form is an excellent tool for college-aged men and women to understand the reality of modern day costs of living. With minor updates and reformatting, the current Budget Calculator could be converted into an application directed at recently separated military veterans or transitioning servicemembers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- In conjunction with applicable TCCVS partners, the Texas Legislature should support an annual report that:
 - Conducts a gap analysis between common military training and experience and the training requirements for civilian occupations to successfully pursue civilian employment opportunities.
 - Identifies the top five military occupations specialties (MOS) transitioning out of the military in order to focus counseling services on the largest need for services.
 - Identifies the top five occupations for which those top five MOS offer transferrable skills that meet the needs of employers.
 - Identifies industry-based certifications that align with the top five MOS.
 - Identifies other data and information that informs the College Credit for Heroes program to support veteran transition into targeted occupations.

- Veterans Success Initiative – The Texas Legislature should encourage the implementation of the promising practices from *Complete College America's Student Success Initiative* which include identifying the specific needs of veterans to produce more effective outcomes for veterans (e.g. increased awareness of Student Veterans Association representatives at Community and Technical Colleges).
- Investigate methods to raise employer awareness of the number of veterans with MOS that align with demand occupations to support retention of trained veterans in Texas.
- Duplicate and reconfigure the “Reality Check Budget Calculator” on Texas Workforce Commission’s *Labor Market and Career Information* website to have veteran theme with possible links to College Credit for Heroes (CC4H).
<http://www.texasrealitycheck.com/>

Higher Education Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Texas veterans would benefit from sustainment of the Hazlewood Exemption Act.

Background and Services

Texas' practice of granting educational benefits to wartime veterans extends back to 1923.¹ The 38th Texas Legislature, 1923, directed public educational institutions of the state to exempt from the payment of dues, fees, and charges those citizens of Texas who served as nurses or in the armed forces of the United States during the "Late War," now known as World War I. In 1929, veterans and nurses of the Spanish-American War were added to the exemption.

In 1943, Senators Grady Hazlewood from Amarillo and George Moffett from Chillicothe passed SB 81 which laid out a major set of amendments to the law. Members of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, Women's Auxiliary Volunteer Emergency Service, and veterans of the "present world war" (World War II) were included as beneficiaries of the tuition exemption. SB 81 also, for the first time, extended the waiver to the children of service members killed in action or deceased while performing service, and Senator Hazlewood's name became associated with the tuition exemption.

The 53rd Texas Legislature, 1953, added Korean War veterans to the benefit, and the 56th Texas Legislature, 1959, instituted the requirement that a veteran using the benefit must have been a "bona fide legal resident of this state at the time of entering such service." The 59th Texas Legislature, 1965, included children of the Texas National Guard and Texas Air National Guard killed since January 1, 1946, while on active duty, either in the service of Texas or the United States.

The members of the next (60th) regular session, in 1967, made Hazlewood applicable to a person who served on active duty, other than training, for more than 180 days during the Cold War, and to the child or children of a person killed in action or who died while in the service on active duty during the Cold War. This provision opened the Hazlewood benefit to Texas National Guard members and reservists who met the qualification of having served 180 days on active duty.

The Hazlewood Act was amended again in 1993, during the 73rd Texas Legislature, when a provision requiring persons seeking exemptions to demonstrate financial need was established. This provision was subsequently removed during the next session, 74th Texas Legislature, while veterans of military service in Vietnam, Grenada, Lebanon, Panama, the Persian Gulf, and any future national emergency were added to the benefit. Further amendments included capping the exemption at 150 hours and requiring veterans to exhaust their federal education benefits before utilizing Hazlewood.

¹ Background research is credited in part to the Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs and Military Installations Interim Report, 2004.

The 81st Texas Legislature, 2009, brought the most recent and substantive changes to the Hazlewood program. SB 93 clarified Hazlewood's eligibility requirements for veterans and their spouses by aligning residency requirements to the standards established by federal government's GI Bill program. Additionally, SB 93 established the "Legacy Act," which permits eligible veterans to assign their unused hours to their children as well as established the administrative rules governing the new provision.

In 2011, the 82nd Texas Legislature created the Hazlewood Trust fund to reimburse Texas Institutions of Higher Education for students utilizing the Legacy portion of the Hazlewood Exemption, as funding is available.

In January of 2015, a federal lawsuit challenged the sustainability of the Hazlewood Exemption when a U.S. District Judge ruled against the state's eligibility requirements for the program. However, that decision was overturned in June of 2016 by the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals which found that Texas is justified in limiting the exemption to veterans who enlisted in Texas or claim Texas as their home of record upon entering military service.

Texas remains the leader in recognizing the service and sacrifice of its brave soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, and coast guardsmen through legislative initiatives that acknowledge their selflessness.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should act to preserve the state's Hazlewood Exemption Act to ensure Texas veterans, their families and survivors are recognized for their service and sacrifice and allowed the opportunity to further their education.

Veteran Need #2

Student veterans and the State of Texas would benefit from the collection and evaluation of additional data on veterans enrolled at institutions of higher education in the state.

Background and Services

Currently, Texas does not have statewide policies in place for the collection and evaluation of data on student veterans utilizing state or federal veteran benefits. While schools do report information related to Hazlewood usage and associated exempted tuition amounts to the Texas Veterans Commission, schools are not required to report any information to a state agency about students utilizing federal veteran benefits.

Individual institutions of higher education in Texas collect some information on application forms and retain records on student performance during the attendance period. However, there is not a standardized set of data required to be collected on those who are utilizing earned education benefits (e.g. Post 9/11 G.I. Bill or the Hazlewood exemption).

Examples of data elements that could be used to assist the Texas Veterans Commission and the Veterans Education Program would be non-identifying demographic information, character of service, grade point average, course enrollment data, and graduation rates. The purpose of collecting such data would be to evaluate academic outcomes for veterans and to identify opportunities to improve educational opportunities for student veterans in Texas.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board currently has processes in place to allow for the collection and retention of similar data, but does not currently collect such data on veterans utilizing benefits.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should provide clear and consistent instructions through legislation identifying what data institutions of higher education shall collect and report on students utilizing veteran benefits. Legislation should also identify what agency should be the repository for the reported data.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans need post-secondary credit for military training.

Background and Services

The Texas Workforce Commission-College Credit for Heroes program enables veterans to obtain recommendations for course (program) credit for military training and/or job experience to be applied when the veteran seeks certification/licensing within Texas, or when applying for Institutions of Higher Education admission/placement. Regional Accreditation Standards has limited the acceptance of post-secondary credit for military training.

SB 1736, passed by the 82nd Texas Legislature in 2011, authorized the College Credit for Heroes program to identify, develop, and support methods to maximize college credit awarded to veterans and military service members for their military experience, education, and training. In 2015, further legislation changed the program's status from a demonstration program to a permanent one. SB 806, passed by the 84th Texas Legislature, also requires the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), in consultation with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), to annually report to the legislature and the governor on program-related results, best practices, and additional measures needed.

The College Credit for Heroes initiative seeks to maximize college credit awarded to veterans and service members for their military experience in order to expedite their transition into the Texas workforce. The program's goal is to eliminate obstacles to attaining licensing, certification and accreditation, and degree awards at state and national levels so that veterans transition more quickly from college classrooms to the workforce.

Since 2011, College Credit for Heroes has focused on three primary aspects of the program: the online web portal, network of partner schools, and accelerated curriculum.

In April 2012, Central Texas College launched www.CollegeCreditforHeroes.org, an online application and database through which veterans and service members can receive an official evaluation of credit to be used at colleges and universities throughout the state. As of July 1, 2015, the website has received over 70,000 visits, with 50,000 veteran and servicemember account holders who have requested more than 10,000 evaluations for college credit. Results from the first three years show that Texas veterans and servicemembers have been recommended an average of 25 credit hours per evaluation issued through the College Credit for Heroes website.

Since the award of academic credit is contingent upon approval of the receiving Texas college or university, increasing awareness and encouraging participation is imperative. Schools sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to review College Credit for Heroes evaluations and make a commitment to award as many credits as possible and as applicable. To date, the number of College Credit for Heroes partner institutions has grown from 7 to 42.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Texas institutions of higher education should develop articulation agreements/memoranda of understanding with the clearinghouse for College Credit for Heroes transcripts (Central Texas College) to enable academic credit to be granted for completed and documented military training.
- The Texas Legislature should enable and direct the College Credit for Heroes program to annually report the number of credit hours awarded under College Credit for Heroes that were applied towards a degree or certification program at Texas institutions of higher education.

Criminal Justice Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

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 Community Justice Assistance Division of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) administers community supervision (adult probation) in Texas. Approximately 415,000 offenders enrolled in community supervision across Texas serve their sentences as members of the general public rather than in prison, and local community supervision and corrections departments (CSCDs) supervise the offenders.

Some CSCDs have voluntarily created programs specially designed for veterans. For example, Bell County has created a one-of-a-kind substance abuse/posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) program to assist probationers who have served in a combat zone to help them manage their PTSD symptoms and reduce their reliance on drugs and alcohol as a means of coping. As an added benefit, this program is available to any former service member on probation regardless of discharge status. In addition to PTSD and substance abuse counseling, participants receive acupuncture treatments designed to reduce stress and anxiety.

Bell County also facilitates services through the VA for probationers struggling with PTSD symptoms. The program is offered at the Vet Center in Harker Heights, Texas and 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 discharge status.

Justice involved veterans suffering from behavioral health issues (e.g. traumatic brain injury, posttraumatic stress disorder, military sexual trauma, and/or moral injury) should have access to services that address the underlying issues that led to their involvement in the criminal justice system. Active and effective treatment of these conditions benefit the veteran, the veteran's family and the surrounding community. The unique needs of justice involved veterans are best met by services and support systems tailored specifically to veterans¹.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- As previously recommended in the 2014 TCCVS Report, the Texas Legislature should provide additional resources to the Community Justice Assistance Division of Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) to support programs specifically designed for veterans.

¹ Bisson JI, Roberts NP, Andrew M, Cooper R, Lewis C. Psychological therapies for chronic post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in adults. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2013, Issue 12. Art. No.: CD003388.

- The Texas Veterans Commission should consider entering into a memorandum of agreement with the TDCJ to (1) identify state resources for justice involved veterans, (2) coordinate efforts to serve veterans on probation or parole, (3) expand training opportunities for probation and parole officers, and when appropriate, (4) provide probation and parole officials technical assistance to enhance the supervision of veterans.
- The Texas Legislature should encourage CSCDs to utilize existing veteran peer-to-peer support programs offered through the Texas Veterans Commission.

Veteran Need #2

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) should continue to expand the use of information it has about incarcerated veterans.

Background and Services

Increased identification of veteran parolees may indicate the need for creating veteran specific caseloads. Veterans on parole and those with a short sentence left may benefit from the development of effective programming, increased access to veteran’s benefit counselors, and links to vendors and community services, veterans have specific needs that are not always recognizable, and can benefit from specialized therapeutic, residential, and resource programs.

TDCJ currently provides the following benefits and services to veterans who are enrolled in reentry planning services while incarcerated:

- Ordering the offender’s military separation document (DD-214), if needed;
- Ordering the offender’s certified birth certificate and a replacement social security card if the offender meets established eligibility criteria;
- Ordering a Texas State ID card for those eligible; and
- Assisting offenders with Compensation and Pension (C&P) applications.

The services listed above are critical to providing justice involved veterans reentry services which research suggests may lead to reduced recidivism and increased community safety². Expansion of services or additional programming for veterans may require increased staffing and enhanced expertise in veteran specific resources.

² Blodgett, J. C., Fun, I. L., Maisel, N. C., & Middle, A. M.. A Structured Evidence Review to Identify Treatment Needs of Justice-Involved Veterans and Associated Psychological Interventions. Veterans Health Administration Homeless Programs Veterans Justice Programs. http://ndcrc.org/sites/default/files/justice-involved_veterans_structured_evidence_review_final.pdf

HB 875 (84th Legislature, 2015) requires sheriffs of each county to utilize the Veterans Reentry Search Service (VRSS) to verify the veteran status of prisoners under their jurisdiction. Implementation of this legislation provides TVC, TDCJ, and certain VA personnel valuable data on incarcerated veterans. The data is used to ensure justice involved veterans in Texas are aware of services available through state and federal programs such as Veteran Treatment Courts. Recent advances in technology allow for the VRSS to be seamlessly integrated into software commonly used by jails for the initial processing of new prisoners. This integration allows for the immediate cross-checking of veteran status and will assist veteran support personnel in their mission of connecting justice involved veterans to state and federal services.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- As previously recommended in the 2014 TCCVS Report, the Texas Legislature should consider providing resources for incarcerated veteran support within TDCJ, including:
 - Dedicated Texas Veterans Commission counselors to complete and submit compensation and pension applications for incarcerated veterans to supplement the efforts of TDCJ Reentry Case Managers.
 - Four statewide Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN) staff to support the volunteers needed for a program to connect incarcerated veterans with MVPN volunteers during incarceration and after release for community reentry activities.
- The Texas Legislature should set a reasonable timeframe for sheriffs in Texas to integrate the Veterans Reentry Search Service (VRSS) into a jail's central tracking system so that veteran status is automatically verified.

Veteran Need #3

Veteran Treatment Courts (VTCs) should be encouraged to expand training, programming, post court services, and the use of mentors and peer support.

Background and Services

Veterans Treatment Courts³ are successful in part because the veteran has easy access to resources. Expanding the court to include more extensive post court training and resources for the veteran may increase successful outcomes. A Study from the Community Mental Health Journal⁴ tracked 86 veterans involved with Veterans Treatment Court, all of whom were diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The study found that 89.5% remained arrest-free during their time in the program and concluded that the veterans participating in Veterans Treatment Court experienced significant improvement with depression, PTSD, substance abuse as well as with critical social issues including housing, emotional well-being,

³ See Appendix B for listing of Veteran Treatment Court program in Texas.

⁴ Knudsen, K. J., & Wingenfeld, S. (2016). A Specialized Treatment Court for Veterans with Trauma Exposure: Implications for the Field. *Community Mental Health Journal*, (2), 127.

relationships, and overall functioning.

Veterans who receive mentoring not only experience better clinical outcomes but they also reported feeling more socially connected. The study further concludes:

When provided programs and services that fostered recovery, veterans improved markedly on all study measures. Veterans particularly improved when provided a combination of trauma-specific treatment, peer mentor services, and medication. The importance of trauma-specific therapy and positive peer role models may be important for veterans with combat exposure who have re-integrated into a society unfamiliar with the struggles associated with combat experience... [Additionally,] mentoring and peer support services result in greater clinical improvement in PTSD symptom severity, depression, supportive relationships, and self-harm. (Knudsen and Wingenfeld, 2016, p 132-133)

Veterans Treatment Court programs link veterans and service members to a rigorous and intensive program to ensure they receive the services needed to address the underlying conditions that led to involvement in the justice system (e.g. traumatic brain injury, mental illness, or mental disorder). However, due to the fact that there are fewer than 30 Veterans Treatment Court programs in Texas, a majority of veterans will not be able to access a Veterans Treatment Court program. Furthermore, the counties with a Veterans Treatment Court program are limited in the number of veterans they can serve.

- Training for County Commissioners, Prosecutors, Judges and District Attorneys, may increase interest in creating Veterans Treatment Courts.
- Regional Veterans Treatment Courts may assist in overcoming barriers of population, community support and financial burden and increase the numbers of Veteran Treatment Courts in Texas.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should support the integration of services related to Veteran Treatment Courts including:
 - Education for defense attorneys on VTCs;
 - Dedication of prosecutors to a VTC; and
 - Identification and utilization of non-VA community resources in VTC programs.
- The Texas Legislature should support amendments to the VTC framework which mandate the inclusion of post-court transition plans based on available community resources and individual veteran's needs.

- The Texas Legislature should encourage counties with 5,000 or more veterans to have a Veterans Treatment Court program and consider mechanisms to provide funding to support the operation and expansion of VTC programs.

Veterans Need #4

Explore ways the State of Texas can coordinate with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to assist incarcerated veterans in receiving Compensation & Pension (C&P) exams from VA funded doctors.

Background and Services

Compensation & Pension (C&P) exams are required for all VA disability claims that need direct substantiation. If incarcerated veterans can have a VA funded physician complete a C&P exam prior to release there may be a reduction in wait time for veterans to receive services and benefits upon reentry to the community. According to the VA the average time to evaluate a claim is 277 days, and North Texas has one of the longest wait times in the country at over a year. According to the National Center for PTSD, approximately one half of all male combat veterans will be arrested one or more times, and studies also show that more than half of those arrested who would qualify for VA services are not enrolled.⁵

Providing the opportunity for veterans to receive a C&P exam in prison and enrolling veterans in the VA system could result in the awarding of earned benefits. It should be noted however that the veteran will only receive 10% of their benefits while incarcerated (if awarded over 10% disability), however the veteran's dependents may be able to receive a portion of the accrued benefits. Currently, TDCJ has limits on their ability to transport veterans to VA facilities for C&P exams due to security risks and staffing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Initiate a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the VA to allow for VA funded doctors to complete C&P exams in facilities operated by TDCJ.⁶
- Create an MOU with the VA to allow for VA funded doctors to complete C&P exams via telemedicine in facilities operated by TDCJ.⁷

⁵ CMHS National GAINS Center. (2008). *Responding to the needs of justice-involved combat veterans with service-related trauma and mental health conditions: A consensus report of the CMHS National GAINS Center's Forum on Combat Veterans, Trauma, and the Justice System*. Delmar, NY.

⁶ Precedent established in the states of Washington and Nevada.

⁷ Precedent established in Oregon.

Housing Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Veterans need greater access to safe and affordable housing.

Background and Services

In 2015, Texas had the fourth highest homeless veteran population (2,393) compared to other states. This statistic is from the annual point-in-time count, which is a federally-required count of unsheltered and sheltered persons experiencing homelessness during the last 10 days of January. While Texas had a high number of veterans experiencing homelessness, the 2015 point-in-time count also showed that Texas had the fourth largest decline in veteran homelessness between 2009 and 2015, with a 56.4% decrease.

The decrease in veteran homelessness may be attributed to local and national initiatives to end veteran homelessness. For example, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) released *Opening Doors: Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness in 2010*. The first goal outlined in *Opening Doors* was to “prevent and end homelessness among veterans in 2015.”¹ In June of 2014, First Lady Michelle Obama announced the USICH initiative of a Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness. Eleven Texas cities took up the challenge, including Abilene, Arlington, Austin, Crystal City, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston, Laredo, Plano, San Antonio, and Waco.

After a three-year effort, Houston was the first city in Texas to announce it had effectively ended veteran homelessness in June 2015. The term “effectively ending veteran homelessness” means that there is a system of homeless services coordination between service providers and housing providers to provide shelter or housing within a specified period of time, such as 30 days after identification of the veteran experiencing homelessness. Thirty-five agencies in Houston collaborated to house more than 3,650 veterans.² Seven other Texas cities also aimed to effectively end veteran homelessness by the end of 2015, with varying degrees of success. The City of San Antonio and the City of Austin met the federal benchmarks to effectively end veteran homelessness in May, 2016, and August, 2016, respectively. Also, while not part of the Mayors’ challenge, many local initiatives exist throughout Texas to address the high number of veterans experiencing homelessness.

During the 83rd Legislative Session, SB 1580, authored by Senator Sylvia Garcia, required the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA), in conjunction with the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) and the Texas Interagency Council for the Homeless (TICH), to conduct a Study on Homelessness among veterans. The Study on Homelessness among veterans is due to the Texas Legislature on December 1, 2016. Per SB 1580, the study will result in recommendations to the State’s approach and changes to State law to address veteran homelessness.

¹ United States Interagency Council for the Homeless. (2015).

² Reyes, Anavid. (2015, June 1).

The Study on Homelessness among veterans' preliminary research found that, upon discharge, veterans may have certain challenges which attribute to homelessness. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) released a research brief in 2013 showing that veterans who were deployed had a 34% higher hazard of becoming homeless, and that 72% of homeless veterans came from the lowest pay grades in the military before discharge.³ Nationwide, approximately half of veterans experiencing homelessness have serious mental illness and 70% have substance use problems. This combination can lead to a veteran's involvement in the criminal justice system. It should be noted that approximately half of veterans experiencing homelessness have a criminal record after being discharged from the military.⁴ While there has been a marked decrease in veteran homelessness in some areas of Texas, homelessness remains an issue that still affects many Texas veterans.

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

The Texas Housing Trust Fund had offered a Texas Veterans Housing Support Program from 2007 through 2009. During the 82nd Legislative Session, the legislature transferred the Veterans Housing Program from the TDHCA to TVC in order to increase the number of veterans served. TDHCA is required to transfer 10% of its annual allocation of Housing Trust Funds to TVC for a Veteran's Housing Assistance Program. TVC will receive \$1,179,250 in Housing Trust Funds for FY 2016 & 2017. The legislature determined that the Fund for Veterans' Assistance would administer the program as of September 1, 2011. With a total of \$3 million for the program, the Veterans Housing Program was designated Homes for Texas Heroes (H4TXH) Program by Gov. Rick Perry. The H4TXH program was established in 2012, and through it, TVC awards grants to organizations that provide veterans with permanent and temporary housing.

The 81st Legislative Session established the Homeless Housing and Services Program (HHSP), which was codified in statute by the 82nd Legislature. TDHCA administers HHSP funds to assist major urban areas identified in statute in providing housing and services to homeless individuals and families, as well as provide local programs to prevent and eliminate homelessness. The 84th Legislature appropriated \$10 million in General Revenue funds for the 2016-2017 biennium. Allocation is based on percentage of persons in poverty, veteran population, persons with disabilities, and point-in-time count of homeless persons.

³ Metraux, S. (2013, November).

⁴ United States Interagency Council for the Homeless. (2015).

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The legislature should increase the commitment to the Housing4TexasHeroes (H4TXH) program through additional funding to the Housing Trust Fund.
- Study the feasibility of funding and implementing a state-wide risk mitigation fund that would reduce the liability for property owners who offer housing to at-risk veterans.

Veteran Need #2 *(Cross-workgroup: Women Veterans)*

Homeless and low-income veterans, especially those with children, need access to affordable housing.

Background and Services

State support of non-profit organizations who wish to assist low-income veterans and veterans with children is crucial in the fight against homelessness. To assist veterans with difficulty finding safe and affordable housing, non-profit organizations can buy and refurbish run-down buildings or apartment complexes for the purpose of providing affordable housing. These properties typically have low property taxes upon purchase but once reappraised, the taxes can increase between 20%-250%. Additionally, the cost of refurbishing and remodeling can cost charitable organizations up to millions of dollars. The increase in property taxes along with the burden of the remodeling is putting a strain on the non-profit organizations and limiting their ability to serve veterans and their children.

HB 2914, introduced in the 84th legislative session (2015) by Representative Alvarado, would provide exemption from ad valorem taxation of properties owned by certain charitable organizations that offer affordable housing to low-income veterans and their dependents. A requirement in this bill is that the tax exempt properties are 100% occupied by veterans and their dependents.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should find ways to offer tax relief incentives to non-profit organizations attempting to provide housing to veterans with children.

Veteran Need #3

Disabled veterans in Texas would benefit from revisions to the disabled veteran tax exemption schedule.

Background and Services

Many Texas veterans, especially those on a fixed income, cite the precipitous rise in home values as a cause for concern due to the associated increase in property taxes. While homeowners in major metropolitan areas and adjacent communities are on the forefront of the property value boom, other more rural parts of the state have seen home values remain relatively stable.

Disabled veterans who are currently living in Texas and have a VA disability rating may meet the eligibility requirements for property tax reduction. Disabled veterans who meet the qualifications outlined in the Texas Tax Code § 11.22 may receive an exemption of up to \$12,000 off the value of one piece of property they own for taxing purposes.

The following schedule, as outlined in Tax Code § 11.22(b), is used to determine a disabled veteran’s exemption:

For an exemption of up to:	for a disability rating of at least:	but less than:
\$5,000 of the assessed value.....	10%	30%
7,500.....	30	50
10,000.....	50	70
12,000.....	70 and over	

Therefore, a disabled veteran living in Texas who owns a home and is rated by the VA at 60% service-connected disability would be eligible to receive \$10,000 off the value of her home for property tax purposes. The dollar amounts used in the above schedule were set by HB 2812 (77th Legislature, 2001) and have since not been adjusted.

Legislation introduced in the 84th Legislature, 2015, by Representative Sheets (HB 683) sought to amend § 11.22(b) of the Tax Code. The proposed change sought to move the exemption schedule away from a fixed dollar amount and instead calculate the veteran’s property tax exemption by using a percentage formula based on the veteran’s disability rating. For example:

For an exemption of up to:	for a disability rating of at least:	but less than:
7.91% of the assessed value.....	10%	30%
11.86 %	30	50
15.82 %	50	70
18.98 %	70 and over	

Therefore, a disabled veteran living in Texas who owns a \$150,000 home and is rated by the VA at 60% service-connected disability would be eligible to receive \$23,730 off the value of her home for property tax purposes, assuming the veteran does not qualify for any other exemptions.

It should be noted that Texas Tax Code § 11.131 provides full property tax relief for Texas veterans who are qualified by the VA for 100 percent disability compensation due to a service-connected disability and have received a rating of 100 percent disabled. Recognizing that cities with high veteran populations incur a disproportional loss of property tax revenue due to this statute, Senator Frasier introduced legislation (SB 1368, 84th Legislature) to “Serve the state purpose of ensuring that the cost of providing ad valorem tax relief to disabled veterans is shared equitably among the residents of [Texas].” SB 1368 would have provided compensatory state funds to local governments who report a 2% or greater loss of property tax revenue as a result of § 11.131 of the Tax Code.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should consider amending the tax exemption for disabled veterans living in Texas by transitioning the current exemption schedule from a fixed dollar amount exemption to a percentage of the home’s assessed value.

Women Veterans Workgroup

Veteran Need #1 (*Cross-workgroups: Housing*)

Homeless and low-income veterans, especially those with children, would benefit from affordable housing.

Background and Services

HB 2914, introduced in the 84th legislative session by Representative Alvarado, would provide exemption from ad valorem taxation of properties owned by certain charitable organizations that offer affordable housing to low-income veterans and their dependents. A requirement in this bill is that the tax exempt properties are 100% occupied by veterans and their dependents.

Non-profit organizations can buy and refurbish run-down buildings or apartment complexes for the purpose of providing affordable housing. These properties typically have low property taxes upon purchase but once reappraised, the taxes can increase between 20%-250%. Additionally, the cost of refurbishing and remodeling can cost charitable organizations up to millions of dollars. The increase in property taxes along with the burden of the remodeling is putting a strain on the non-profit organizations and limiting their ability to serve veterans and their children.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should find ways to offer tax relief incentives to non-profit organizations attempting to provide housing to veterans with children.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans in Texas would benefit from a program that recognizes child care training and licensing from military installations.

Background and Services

Those who provide services to veterans often hear from both female and male veterans who have difficulty affording the cost of childcare. These issues are compounded when the veteran also has difficulty finding gainful employment, struggling with under-employment, medical issues, or other problematic situations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) should explore ways to support veterans who wish to become day care providers.
- DFPS should recognize and award training credit to those veterans who were previously licensed through the Department of Defense Family Child Care (FCC) program.

Veteran Need #3

Women veterans would benefit from additional medical providers, especially those who have military competency and familiarity with Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and mental health services for veterans.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should promote outreach efforts to the Texas Medical Association (TMA) to encourage VA CHOICE program education and military competency training, with the goal of encouraging additional fee-based medical providers to participate in the VA CHOICE program.

Veteran Need #4

Veterans who have acute financial needs would benefit from local programs that provides short-term assistance.

Background and Services

Veteran County Service Officers (VCSOs) are the primary point of contact for many veterans in their community in need of assistance. While the state of Texas requires each county with a population of more than 200,000 to employ a VCSO, the state does not provide any funding to counties to correspond with this mandate. One option to support counties with VCSOs could be a reimbursement grant program that is currently in place in Wisconsin.

Section 45.82¹ of the Wisconsin statute allows counties which employ a VCSO (either full-time or part-time) and have their budgets approved by county officials to apply for a reimbursement grant. The Wisconsin law fixes the amount of the reimbursement based on county population and stipulates the type of expenses that are allowable under the program. Providing funds to counties in this manner may allow Veteran County Service Offices to fund short-term assistance programs.

The Texas Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) is a financial assistance program administered by the Texas Health and Human Services Commission. Veterans with children may be eligible to receive assistance under this program, however the income requirements of the program may prohibit some veterans from receiving needed assistance.

Some Texas counties have independent financial aid offices that provide assistance to their residents in times of needs. A limited number of counties with VCSOs have applied for and received grant funding from the Texas Veterans Commission's Fund for Veteran Assistance (FVA) program to establish a veteran centric financial assistance program in conjunction with

¹ <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/statutes/statutes/45/VIII/85/1>

their county financial aid office. The awarding of such grants is contingent upon the availability of General Assistance funds at the FVA and the quality of the grant application.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should consider developing a specific grant fund and/or a reimbursement framework to support Veteran County Service Offices.

Transportation Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Disabled Veterans need equitable relief from toll road fees across the state.

Background and Services

In 2009 the Texas Legislature passed HB 3139 (81st Regular Session) by Rep. Herrero and Sen. Van de Putte, authorizing toll entities in Texas to establish a discount program for qualified disabled veterans. In late 2012, the Texas Transportation Commission passed Minute Order 113247, establishing the Veteran Toll Waiver Program on Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) toll roads.

Currently, the TxDOT program¹ allows for exemption of toll road fees for eligible veterans with disabled veteran, Purple Heart, and Legion of Valor license plates. To receive the exemption, a vehicle must be actively registered with the State of Texas and display a disabled veteran, Purple Heart, or Legion of Valor specialty license plate.

Veterans can apply for the qualified specialty license plate with the Texas Department of Motor Vehicles (TxDMV). TxDOT's program applies only to TxDOT toll roads.

In central Texas, eligible veterans may drive without charge on TxDOT toll roads:

- Loop 1, State Highway 45 North;
- State Highway 45 Southeast; and
- State Highway 130 (Segments 1-4) from I-35, north of Georgetown to US 183 south of Austin (Central Texas Turnpike System).

TxDOT toll roads in other regions of the state that eligible veterans may travel free of charge are:

- the Camino Colombia toll road, State Highway 255 near Laredo;
- DFW Connector; and
- certain segments of the Grand Parkway near Houston.

Most private toll authorities in Texas did not include provisions to exempt certain veterans from toll fees in their original bond covenants. Article I, Section 16 of the Texas Constitution presents legal barriers for requiring private toll authorities to do so ex post facto. While it is possible for private toll authorities to exempt certain veterans from toll charges (ex. North Texas Tollway Authority exemption of Legion of Valor recipients through a partnership with Volvo of Dallas), of the six major toll authorities in Texas, about half still charge disabled veterans. Toll authorities that charge disabled veterans include the North Texas Tollway Authority, the Camino Real Regional Mobility Authority, and the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority (CTRMA) in Austin.

House Bill 894 by Rick Miller (84th Legislature, 2015) attempted to address the current patchwork system by requiring rather than authorizing a toll project entity to establish a waiver

¹ For detailed information on the Veteran Discount Program - https://www.txtag.org/en/about/faq_veteran.shtml

program that provides free use of the entity's toll project by an Eligible Veteran. The bill was left pending in the House Committee on Defense and Veterans' Affairs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should reexamine the toll exemption program for veterans and consider ways to provide funding to toll entities including but not limited to:
 - Voluntary donation options on toll road billing statements to support exemptions for disabled veterans;
 - Utilizing proceeds from the sale of excess/surplus property from state agencies;
 - The Texas Legislature should consider requiring toll entities that do not exempt disabled veterans toll fees to display road markers designating non-exempt toll roads;
 - Toll authorities should provide exemption information to veterans when applying for a tag; and
 - State agencies may increase outreach efforts to veterans in order to clarify various exemption programs. These efforts can include easily readable maps and listings of exempt and nonexempt tolls.

Veteran Need #2

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 1.7 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. 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 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 veteran's 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.

Higher utilization of technological innovation in the forms of tele-mental health care (counseling) and telemedicine (psychiatry) could greatly reduce or eliminate those barriers to care. (Author notes: Our discussions revealed the preexisting relationship between Texas LMHA's and the VA in terms of Telemedicine. The task of the workgroup now is to identify what locations are currently able to handle Telemedicine appointments and what the barriers are to expanding to other locations (internet capacity, cost of technology hardware, administrative/contractual issues, etc.).

Conclusions and Recommendations

- VA medical facilities and regional transit providers should establish formal relationships for communication and coordination to increase access to transportation, 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.

- Address gaps in mental health services to veterans, including rural veterans, through further development and improvement in state telemedicine programs. (*Cross workgroups – Mental Health*)
- Encourage Municipal Transit Agencies to create more routes that include Veterans Health Administration facilities.
- Encourage ride sharing companies to offer discounted fares to disabled veterans who are traveling to medical and employment appointments.

Veteran Need #3

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.

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 veterans 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.
- Provide grant writing assistance to organizations interested in applying for transportation grants.

Veteran Need #4

The state should better assess the transportation barriers faced by veterans.

Background and Services

According to a recent study by the Center for a New American Security, Regional transportation shortfalls were listed as an access barrier for veterans seeking health care, benefits, and employment in nearly all interviews and working groups. Compounding these transportation issues are the distances from outlying counties to VA resources – in some cases, VA patients must travel more than 80 miles to VA facilities in Texas.

A recent needs assessment commissioned by the Texas Veterans Commission also indicated that transportation needs are largely unmet and have a large impact on veterans' quality of life.

Conclusions and Recommendations

TXDOT established the regional service planning projects within the Public Transportation Division in 2005 and requires that each of the 24 planning regions in the state submit a regional transportation coordination plan to the division. Planning grants were awarded to lead agencies to support this requirement and stakeholders were identified and organized to begin the planning process. This plan represents a Federal Transit Administration mandated update to the Regional Coordinated Public Transportation plan.

- The state should assess and implement recommendations for improving transportation services to veterans made in the regional coordinated public transportation plan.
- The state should use this information as the basis for a broader and more thorough assessment of the transportation needs of veterans.

Communication and Outreach Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Texas veterans would benefit from coordinated efforts to increase public awareness of veteran related services provided by the state.

Background and Services

In addition to applicable agency websites, information about services and programs for Texas veterans is available through the following informational resources:

- Veterans Call Center: 1-800-252-VETS
- 2-1-1
- TexVet
- The Veterans Portal
- The Texas Veterans App

Veterans Call Center

The Veterans Call Center (1-800-252-VETS (8387)) works closely with the Texas Veterans Commission to provide veterans with benefits information and assistance services through a statewide call service center. The call center is currently promoted by VLB in the media and on promotional items through the VLB and TVC. The call center received 42,657 calls for FY 2015 with an abandoned rate of 2.3%. Approximately 7,000 additional outbound calls will be made to veterans who have requested information via benefit fairs or who have applied for VLB loans.

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

The Texas Information and Referral Network (2-1-1 or TIRN) is the single point of coordination for statewide health and human services information in Texas. Following its inception in 1997, the Texas Legislature has periodically expanded the scope of 2-1-1. Senate Bill 1058 (80th Session, 2007) required 2-1-1 to provide information and referrals for reintegration services to military service members and their families. Since 2008, 2-1-1 has participated in several initiatives to benefit military members and their families, including *Partners Across Texas* which aims to enhance support for Texas Army and Air National Guard Service and family members.

Recent changes to the 2-1-1 website have improved accessibility for veterans, military service members and their families, and revised call center procedures have improved identification veterans and military members. However, 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; a lengthy process that can take precious time 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)

TexVet is an online information and referral website that compiles and indexes community organizations, resources, and events pertinent to Texas military members, veterans, and family members. The TexVet Initiative originated as a collaborative effort between the United States Department of Defense, Veterans Health Administration, Texas Military Forces, Texas A&M University System Health Science Center (TAMHSC), and the Texas 2-1-1 Information and Referral Network.

TexVet provides a forum for collaboration between government agencies, non-profits and businesses that serve and support the military, their families and 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 TAMHSC to develop and operate the Texas Veterans Resource Connection Program to enhance the TexVet website. TAMHSC improved the TexVet system 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)

Responding to actions by the 78th Texas Legislature, the Texas Department of Information Resources (DIR) created a web portal designed specifically 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 provides information about local, state and national resources available to Texas military Veterans.

The app, which can be downloaded from both Google Play and the App Store, works on most iPhones and Android mobile phones. 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; and
- 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.

The state has made significant investments in the above resources and veterans should have greater awareness of their existence. Additionally, no matter how veterans access information on state services, the information should be consistent, accurate, and current across all resource platforms. Finally, state agencies in Texas should strive to maintain a “no wrong door” philosophy to ensure veterans and their family members are efficiently connected to the benefits and services earned through military service.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should grant state agencies that provide direct services to veterans the statutory authority to contract for marketing and outreach services in order to grow veteran engagement.
- State agencies and programs that have veteran services should develop, formalize, and support a cohesive and consistent strategy to outreach and inform veterans, their families, and survivors.
- All state agencies should have knowledge of and access to direct points of contact for veteran services provided by the state. In addition, all state agencies not included in TCCVS should have the voluntary option of designating a Veteran Liaison that would operate and function as designed in Rider 17.06.

Veteran Need #2

Veteran services and initiatives provided by state agencies should be uniformly highlighted and structured in order to provide Texas veterans and their local communities a consistent message and easier access to their benefits.

Background and Services

Texas Veterans Portal Advisory Committee

The newly redesigned Texas Veterans Portal provides information about veteran benefits provided by state agencies via a single platform. An advisory committee consisting of members from the Department of Information Resources, Texas Veterans Commission, Texas Workforce Commission, Health and Human Services Commission, and NIC have provided information and guidance on what the Veterans Portal includes and how it should function.

The Veterans Portal (www.Texas.gov/veterans) is restricted by the format of the customer agreement between the Texas Veterans Commission and the Department of Information Resources. The agreement allows only the TVC to update the site. Often, the latest information, such as updated field office locations, is not available to TVC personnel and there is no clearly defined reporting chain or process for other agencies to provide information vital to the portal.

Texas Veteran Benefit Cards

Passed in the 84th Legislature, Senate Bill 1308 required the Texas Veterans Commission and the Texas Department of Public Safety to provide informational cards about veterans' services provided by Texas to veterans when they receive driver's licenses and personal identification certificates. While information cards have been distributed to veterans at DMV locations across Texas as of July 2016, additional efforts are needed to continue to outreach veterans.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Each TCCVS member agency should contribute office locations and contact information in an Open Data Format to the Veterans Portal (via DIR and the Open Data Portal) in order to increase visibility and access to state services.
- The Texas Legislature should encourage the development of informational material for community veteran advocates, specifically the faith-based leadership, to assist them in connecting veterans to services.

Mental Health Workgroup

Veteran Need #1

Veterans need local mental health resources to assess and treat behavioral health issues prior to the onset of a crisis.

Background and Services

When veterans, or their families, identify the need for clinical behavioral health care it is imperative that the care be appropriate and timely. In order to better meet the needs of veterans, the community resources need to be bolstered. Additionally, VA is attempting to refer veterans out for mental health care through the CHOICE program, however there are not enough Licensed Mental Health Professionals (LMHPs) certified in Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) for PTSD enrolled as CHOICE providers. Texas needs to encourage and support LMHPs in achieving CPT certification, learning and demonstrating Military Cultural Competency, and enrolling as CHOICE providers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should continue to support existing programs that provide training and certification for Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) and Military Cultural Competency.
- The Texas Legislature should support programs to catalogue and index providers who meet VHA requirements to provide behavioral health treatment.
- The Texas Legislature should support programs to encourage providers to enroll in TriWest.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans need communities in which they live to provide and promote opportunities for peer engagement to prevent the onset of a crisis and/or prevent crisis escalation.

Background and Services

Since 2009, the State has supported community based peer support efforts across Texas. Currently, under the Mental Health Program for Veterans, the Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN) provides peer support and community engagement activities through the thirty-seven Local Mental Health Authority based MVPN Peer Service Coordinators and their volunteers. Success has been shown in reaching veterans that otherwise would have remained isolated through trust building engagements, providing peer support and making referrals to clinical mental health services. This nationally recognized and unique approach has led to extensive community collaboration, broader understanding of the issues veterans face and greater awareness of effective and available resources.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should continue supporting mental health programs for veterans including the Military Veteran Peer Network.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans would benefit from the expanded availability of telemedicine services.

Background and Services

When engaging with clinical mental health services, frequent and regular appointments are critical to achieving beneficial clinical outcomes. Geographical facility locations (clinics hours away from the veterans), transportation issues (cost of travel and unreliable or non-existent personal vehicles) and the necessary frequency of treatment (time off from work), among other things, often pose insurmountable obstacles for veterans receiving needed care. Higher utilization of technological innovation in the form of tele-mental health care (counseling) and telemedicine (psychiatry) could greatly reduce or eliminate those barriers to care.

Conclusion and Recommendation

- The Texas Legislature should address gaps in mental health services to veterans, including rural veterans, through further development and improvement in state telemedicine (TM) programs.

Appendices

Appendix A: Actions Taken from Second Report

Health Workgroup

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- H.B. 906, by Rep. Paddie, adds spouses of retired veterans who served at least 20 years on active duty to the list of individuals eligible to serve as Veterans County Service Officers, which will permit counties to better serve their veterans by enabling them to find and retain qualified Veterans County Service Officers.
- H.B. 19, by Rep. S. King, codifies the collaboration between the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) and the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) to train peers who connect veterans and their families to resources. H.B. 19 directs DSHS and TVC to:
 - Coordinate to administer a mental health intervention program for veterans; and
 - Include in the existing mental health program an initiative to encourage local communities to conduct cross-sector collaboration to coordinate local resources.
- S.B. 1304 by Sen. Menendez, adds a women veterans initiative to the requirements for the DSHS mental health intervention program for veterans.
- S.B. 1305 by Sen. Menéndez adds a rural veterans initiative to the requirements for the DSHS mental health intervention program for veterans.
- H.B. 3404, by Rep. Thompson, directs HHSC to conduct a study to assess the benefits of providing integrated care to veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and to involve family members in the treatments. HHSC may coordinate with a university with expertise in behavioral health or post-traumatic stress disorder. A report describing the results was published December 1, 2016.
- S.B. 55, by Sen. Nelson, requires HHSC to establish a grant program to support community

mental health programs providing services and treatment to veterans and their families. Rider 68 of the 2016-2017 General Appropriations Act appropriated \$10 million in general revenue to HHSC in each fiscal year of the biennium to implement S.B. 55.

- House Bill 1762, by Rep. Otto, codifies the current efforts of the Texas Health Care Strike Force Team within TVC and create a permanent health care advocacy program for veterans. In partnership with the VA, the health care advocacy program will strategically place liaisons in VA medical facilities throughout the state and work directly with VA staff to resolve access issues involving health care related services such as Doctors' appointments, health care related testing and/or lab testing, pharmacy assistance, and attaining outside referrals for health related issues.
- House Bill 3404, by Rep. S. Thompson, was signed by the governor and directs the Health and Human Services Commission to conduct a study on the benefits of providing integrated care to veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The study would evaluate the benefits of using a standardized comprehensive trauma and PTSD assessment to identify and target evidence-based treatment services to provide integrated care for veterans diagnosed with PTSD. It also would evaluate benefits of involving family members in the treatment of a veteran diagnosed with PTSD.

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- H.B. 19, by S. King, codifies the collaboration between the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) and the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) to train peers who connect veterans and their families to resources. H.B. 19 directs DSHS and TVC to:
 - Coordinate to administer a mental health intervention program for veterans; and
 - Include in the existing mental health program an initiative to encourage local communities to conduct cross-sector collaboration to coordinate local resources.

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

84th Legislative Session Update

- HHSC is coordinating with the Texas Veterans Commission's new Faith and Community-based Liaison, Craig Combs, a retired National Guard Chaplain, to enhance veteran and family member support throughout Texas.

Employment Workgroup

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- S.B. 805, by Sen. Campbell was signed by the governor and allows direct hiring of veterans by agencies through the Texas Workforce Commission's automated job matching system, requires agencies to interview veterans, and ensures agencies with more than 500 FTEs (full-time equivalents) designate a veteran's liaison.
- TVC now conducts primer events for state agencies.
- TVC now employs a Veterans' Employment Liaison to work with state agencies to hire veterans.

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- S.B. 389, by Sen. Rodriguez, was signed by the governor and requires job information forms to include a space for state agencies to include the related military occupation specialty code, if applicable, on all forms and notices relating to state agency employment openings. Military occupational specialty codes are nine-character codes utilized by the United States military to identify a specific job.
- Senate Bill 1307 by Sen. Menendez, ensures that every military spouse, veteran, and servicemember gets credit for their skills and have their occupational licenses expedited.

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- S.B. 807, by Sen. Campbell, was signed by the governor and expedites the employment of skilled veterans by waiving examination and fee requirements for occupational licenses issued by state agencies.
- S.B. 660, by Rodriguez, was signed by the governor and will establish regional program coordinators within TVC's Veteran Entrepreneur Program in major centers of economic growth across the state. These coordinators will provide comprehensive training to prospective veteran entrepreneurs, then transition the participants to actual veteran business owners.
- House Bill 2014 by Rep. Kenneth Sheets allows veterans with qualified military service to obtain a certification to teach career and technology education classes in public schools.

Higher Education Workgroup

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- H.B. 1160, by Rep Farias would have included veterans and their dependents in the CBM system of reports provided to the state by public, private nonprofit, private for profit, community, technical and state colleges.
- H.B. 1160 was filed on February 5, 2015 and referred to the House Committee on Higher Education on March 3, 2015. The bill did not receive a hearing date and died in committee.

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

The 84th Legislature appropriated \$390,000 per year to TVC to fund the administration of the Hazlewood program and authorized 7 FTEs.

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- S.B. 806, by Sen. Campbell, was signed by the governor and amends the Labor Code to require the Texas Workforce Commission, not later than November 1 of each year and after consultation with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, to report to the legislature and the governor on the results of any grants awarded under the College Credit for Heroes program on the best practices for veterans and military servicemembers to achieve maximum academic or workforce education credit at institutions of higher education for military experience, education, and training obtained during military service.

Criminal Justice Workgroup

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 Veteran Treatment Courts, 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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- The Texas Legislature acknowledged that funding should be expanded for Veterans Treatment Courts by establishing a Veterans Treatment Court grant program to be administered by the Fund for Veterans Assistance (FVA) at the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC).
- \$3 million will be available for grant awards each biennium (\$1.5 million each fiscal year).
- Legislation authored by Rep. Cesar Blanco and signed by Governor Abbott (H.B. 3996) authorized counties to include Veterans Treatment Courts as a program to which jurors may donate all or a portion of the juror’s daily reimbursement.
- S.B. 1474 by Sen. Garcia, signed by the Governor, expanded the eligibility criteria for veterans to participate in a Veterans Treatment Court. S.B. 1474 also authorizes Veterans Treatment Courts to transfer responsibility for supervising a defendant’s participation to another program located in the County in which the defendant works or resides.

- H.B. 1048 by Rep. Joe Farias would have made several other improvements to Veterans Treatment Courts but the bill failed to pass this legislative session.
- H.B. 1958 and H.B. 1960 by Rep. Canales made similar changes to S.B. 1474 and H.B. 1048 but failed to pass.

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- The Texas Legislature passed H.B. 875 by Rep. Farias, which was signed by Governor Abbott. H.B. 875 implemented Veteran Need #2 by revising the process used by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to verify the veteran status of each inmate for purposes of assisting inmates who are veterans in applying for federal benefits or compensation and imposed a similar verification process on the Commission on Jail

Standards with respect to inmates who are veterans.

- County jails should continue to expand their use of the self-reported military service information. (H.B. 875 removes self-reporting and replaces with VRSS)
- 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. (H.B. 875 implementation will provide post cards to all identified veterans in county jails so they can contact TVC/MVPN for additional information gathering and services)
- County jails should provide the list of all inmates self-reporting prior military service to the VA Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists (VJO). (This is done through 875. VRSS sends an automatic email to the VJO when a positive hit is made)

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

•The Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) is assisting with the implementation of H.B. 875 by developing post cards to be distributed through the Texas Commission on Jail Standards to each county jail. The card will contain information how to contact MVPN and a centralized toll free number as well as information on contacting TVC benefits and claims department and Veterans Crisis Line.

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

- o veterans' caseloads.
 - o 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.
 - o 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.
 - o Add funding in the discretionary funding (DP) line item to create specialized caseloads for veterans on community supervision.
- This case load should be no more than 50 to 60 veterans and preferably the supervising 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, and 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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- H.B. 3726 by Rep. Joe Farias failed to pass this legislative session. However, the bill would have established a Veterans Service Coordinator for the TDCJ to coordinate responses to the needs of veterans under the supervision of the department, including veterans who are released on parole or mandatory supervision.

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:
 - o 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).

84th Legislative Session Update

- H.B. 1338 by Rep. Elliott Naishtat, signed by Governor Abbott, requires the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement, in collaboration with the Texas Veterans Commission, to establish and maintain a training program for peace officers that provides information on veterans with certain specified trauma-related injuries.

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.

84th Legislative Session Update:

- H.B. 3726 by Rep. Joe Farias failed to pass this legislative session. However, the bill would have established a voluntary rehabilitation and transition program “Veterans Dorm” for veterans confined in state jail facilities.

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.

84th Legislative Session Update:

- HCR 46 by Rep. Joe Farias, signed by the Governor, urges Congress to request the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to provide VA services to incarcerated veterans detained in state hospitals and to 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.

84th Legislative Session Update

No applicable legislation

Housing Workgroup

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- The 84th Legislature funded the Housing Trust Fund at levels similar to the 82nd Legislature.
- Senate Bill 1580, by Sen. Garcia directs the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs and the Texas Interagency Council for Homeless to conduct a study and prepare a report on homeless veterans to provide for a more accurate depiction of the challenges that veterans experiencing homelessness face and provide for a more viable solution for homeless veterans.

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

H.B. 992 (enabling legislation) and H.J.R. 75, by Rep. Bonnen, were both passed by the legislature and signed by the governor. H.J.R. proposes a constitutional amendment authorizing the legislature to provide for an exemption from ad valorem taxation of all or part of the market value of the residence homestead of the surviving spouse of a 100 percent or totally disabled veteran who died before the law authorizing a residence homestead exemption for such a veteran took effect.

H.J.R. 75 was placed on the ballot as Proposition 2 on the November 3, 2015 election date and was passed into law.

Woman 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).

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- S.B. 1304 by Sen. Menendez adds a women's veteran initiative to the requirements for the DSHS mental health intervention program for veterans.

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- H.B. 2914, by Rep. Alvarado, aimed to exempt eligible organizations from ad valorem taxation of property owned by certain charitable organizations that provide affordable housing to low-income veterans and their dependents. H.B. 2914 was referred to Ways & Means on March 16, 2015 and left pending in committee.

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- H.B. 1521, by Rep. Farrar, would give state agencies the authority to establish child-care subsidy programs to assist their low-income employees with child-care costs. Multiple agencies in a multitenant building may establish a joint program and share costs.

State employees who qualify as a low-income employee under a state agency's child-care subsidy program are eligible to receive a child-care subsidy for the care of each child under age 13, or a child with a disability under age 18.

The bill would not require a state agency to develop a child-care subsidy program. The bill would allow each state agency to determine qualifications for program participation and level of subsidy.

H.B. 1521 was heard in the House Committee on State Affairs on March 25, 2015. TVC was a resource witness for the bill. H.B. 1521 was left pending in committee.

Transportation Workgroup

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- TVC received grant funding to aid rural counties in providing more transportation options for veterans.
- The free transportation is made possible through VA’s Highly Rural Transportation Grants program.
- The program enables State Veterans Service Agencies and Veteran Service Organizations to use innovative approaches to provide transportation services that help to expand access to VA health care for veterans.
- VA awarded eleven grants to organizations including TVC that will receive up to \$50,000 per highly-rural area to help operate or contract for free transportation services for veterans to-and- from VA medical facilities and when authorized to non-VA facilities.
- TVC-FVA has executed 7 grant agreements to date. The grants will assist an estimated 2,000 veterans in Kent, Briscoe, Cochran, Hansford, Jim Hogg, McMullen, and Menard counties.

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- No applicable legislation

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- Numerous pieces of legislation were passed which will allow DMV to issue specialty license plates honoring veterans who fit into specific types of service categories.
- The Legislature expanded opportunities for the public to donate to the Fund for Veterans’ Assistance (FVA) to help Texas veterans in need. House Bill 3710, by Rep. Cesar Blanco allows Texans to make donations to the FVA when applying for a concealed handgun license; and House Bill 1584, by Rep. Farias, extends the same option for Texans applying for a hunting or fishing license.

Similar pieces of legislation have been passed in previous Legislative Sessions, and they have generated over \$600,000 in donations to the FVA. It is anticipated that these two new revenue sources will yield similar results.

Communication and Outreach

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.

84TH Legislative Session Update

- The budget conference committee approved Rider 17.06 in Article IX-76 of the 2016-2017 G.A.A.:
- Sec. 17.06. Veterans Services at Other State Agencies. Out of funds appropriated elsewhere in this Act, any state agency or institution of higher education, including the Veterans Commission, Department of State Health Service, Texas Military Department, Texas Workforce Commission, General Land Office, or any other state agency or institution that receives funding in this Act and provides specific services to veterans, shall provide information to veterans seeking assistance from that state agency or institution of other state agencies or institutions that provide additional veteran specific services, as identified by the Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services.

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.

84th Legislative Session Update

- To better inform veterans about the services offered in Texas, the Texas Legislature passed S.B. 1308, by Sen. Menendez which was signed by Gov. Abbott. S.B. 1308 requires the Texas Department of Public Safety to provide veterans who receive driver's licenses and personal identification certificates one-page informational papers about veterans services

provided by Texas.

- The Texas Legislature passed H.B. 875 by Rep. Farias, which was signed by Governor Abbott. 875 addressed Veteran Need #2 by revising the process used by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to verify the veteran status of each inmate for purposes of assisting inmates who are veterans in applying for federal benefits or compensation and imposed a similar verification process on the Commission on Jail Standards with respect to inmates who are veterans.

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; targeted specifically to first responders, judges, educators, and mental health/substance abuse providers (e.g. Veteran Tactical Response).

84th Legislative Session Update

- In March 2014, HHSC launched a free mobile application for Texas Veterans, active duty personnel, military families, and service providers.
- The Veteran Phone app offers access to the following: Veterans Crisis Line, Hotline for Women Veterans, Connect with Texas Veterans, Texas Veterans Hotline (managed by the VLB), and the Texas Veterans Portal (managed by TVC).

***Appendix B:
TCCVS Agency
Information and
Services***

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>

Texas Veterans Land Board

Since 1946, the Texas Veterans Land Board (VLB) has provided benefits and services for Texas Veterans, military members and their families. Today, they include: low interest land, home, and home improvement loans; long term skilled nursing home care in eight state Veterans homes; burial and interment services in four state Veterans cemeteries; Voices of Veterans Oral History Program; and Veterans benefit information and assistance services through the joint VLB/ TVC, and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Statewide Veterans Call Service Center.

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

Texas Military Department

The Texas Military Department (TMD) is the executive portion of the Texas Military and consists of all staff directorates and component headquarters exercising control of military forces, facilities, installations, activities and functions under the supervision of The Adjutant General. The Adjutant General is the governing officer, policy maker, head of the department and Commander of the Texas Military Forces. TMD is the state agency charged with administrative activities in support of the Texas Military Forces.

The Texas Military Forces consist of the Texas Army National Guard, Texas Air National Guard, the Texas State Guard, the Domestic Operations Task Force, and any other military force organized under state law.

Through the Family Support Services Office, the TMD 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.

<https://tmd.texas.gov/>

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 Service Division 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>

The Health and Human Services Commission, **Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs)** are a key point of access for person-centered long-term services and supports (LTSS) specialized information, referral, and assistance. ADRCs promote linkages to existing military and veteran services programs and benefits, as well as other local and state level LTSS. Programs and services available vary by region and may include: transportation, benefits and system navigation assistance, care coordination, benefits application assistance, and veteran-directed home and community-based services. The local ADRC may be contacted by calling 855-YES-ADRC (855-937-2372). For more information, visit:

<https://hhs.texas.gov/services/health/clinics-health-organizations-and-resource-centers/aging-and-disability-resource-center>.

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, Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs) are a key point of access for person-centered long-term services and supports (LTSS) specialized information, referral, and assistance. ADRCs promote linkages to existing military and veteran services programs and benefits, as well as other local and state level LTSS. Programs and services available vary by region and may include: transportation, benefits and system navigation assistance, care coordination, benefits application assistance, and veteran-directed home and community-based services. The local ADRC may be contacted by calling 855-YES-ADRC (855-937-2372). For more information, visit:

<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, 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>

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>

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
- Operation Welcome Home
- Military Family Support Pilot Program

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.thecb.state.tx.us/>

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 the recently approved *Texas Workforce System Strategic Plan FY 2016–FY 2023*. 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 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.

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

- TDLR provides expedited licensing for military spouses and veterans transitioning to civilian occupations regulated by TDLR.
- Veterans are allowed to credit verified military experience, training, or education toward fulfilling licensing requirements. Currently, six TDLR programs have a corresponding MOS allowing for this credit.
- TDLR license application fees are waived for veterans if the applicant's military service, training, or education substantially meets all of the requirements of the license.

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 utilize the Department of Veteran Affairs' Veteran Reentry Search Service (VRSS) to identify veterans. The VRSS provides real-time identification of veterans to county corrections officers. After 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 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 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>

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>

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>

Office of Public Utility Counsel

The Office of Public Utility Counsel (OPUC) was created in 1983 in response to legislative and consumer groups concerns that residential and small commercial utility consumers were not adequately represented in utility proceedings. OPUC is charged with representing residential and small commercial consumers, as a class, in proceedings affecting utility rates and services. OPUC represents consumers' interests before the Public Utility Commission (PUC), the Texas Reliability Entity, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT), and state and federal courts.

The agency also provides information to servicemembers, veterans and their families and provides presentations, upon request, to military groups and organizations representing servicemembers and their families

<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.

veterans.portal.texas.gov

Veteran Treatment Court Programs in Texas

County	Judicial Circuit	State, City Zip
Bell	County Court at Law #3	Belton, Texas 76513
Bexar	County Court #6	San Antonio, Texas 78205
Cameron	444 District Court of Cameron County	Brownsville, Texas 78520
Collin	296 th District Court	McKinney, Texas 75071
Comal	County Court at Law #2	New Braunfels, Texas 78130
Dallas	Criminal District Ct #4	Dallas, Texas 75207
Denton	Denton County Criminal Court #3	Denton, Texas 76209
El Paso	County Court at Law #1	El Paso, Texas 79901
El Paso	346 th Judicial District	El Paso, Texas 79901
Ft. Bend	County Court at Law #2	Richmond, Texas 77469
Galveston	Galveston County	Galveston, Texas 77550
Guadalupe	County Court at Law	Seguin, Texas 78155
Harris	228 th District Court	Houston, Texas 77002
Harris	County Criminal Court at Law No. 2	Houston, Texas 77002
Hays	County Court at Law #2	San Marcos, Texas 78666
Hidalgo	430 th District Court	Edinburg, Texas 78539
Midland	385 th District Court	Midland, TX 79701
Montgomery	359 th District Court	Conroe, Texas 77301
Nueces	148 th District Court	Corpus Christi, Texas 78401
Smith	County Court at Law #2	Tyler, Texas 75702
Tarrant	Tarrant County Criminal Court #9	Fort Worth, Texas 76196
Travis	County Court at Law #4	Austin, Texas 78701
Webb	406 th District Court	Laredo, Texas 78040
Webb	341 st District Court	Laredo, Texas 78040
Williamson	County Court at Law #2	Georgetown, Texas 78626
Fannin Collin Grayson Rockwall Kaufman	North Texas Regional Veterans Court	Varying Locations

