

Should not be released outside the General
Accounting Office on the basis of specific approval
by the Office of Congressional Relations.

B-114857

090134

12-30-74



RELEASED



LM090134

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

Veterans Administration

**BY THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL
OF THE UNITED STATES**

MWD-75-48

Handwritten signature

090134

DEC. 30. 1974



COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

B-114859

The Honorable Charles B. Rangel *a + R*
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Rangel:

1-16
In response to your request of April 10, 1974, and a subsequent discussion with your office, we reviewed the Veterans Administration (VA) policies and practices in counseling veterans in prison and on parole regarding their rights to veterans benefits. Our review was made at the VA central office in Washington, D.C.; at the VA regional offices in New York and Philadelphia; and at the four prisons you suggested we visit.

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

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

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

VA POLICY ON COUNSELING VETERANS
IN PRISON AND ON PAROLE

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

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

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

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

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

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

PRISON OFFICIALS' EFFORTS TO
COUNSEL INCARCERATED VETERANS

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

RESULTS OF GAO INTERVIEWS WITH
VETERANS IN PRISON AND ON PAROLE

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

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

--87 veterans or 81.3 percent said they had not been advised of their entitlement to veterans benefits since being imprisoned.

--57 veterans or 53.3 percent believed they had lost their rights to benefits due to incarceration.

--70 veterans or 65.4 percent said they would like VA to contact them while in prison to advise them of their GI Bill benefits rights.

--50 veterans or 46.7 percent said they would contact VA while in prison.

--75 veterans or 70.1 percent said they intend to contact VA after their release from prison.

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

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

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

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

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

AGENCY COMMENTS

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