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STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS *SEN 03908*
ON
THE VETERANS ADMINISTRATION'S

OUTREACH EFFORTS FOR INCARCERATED VETERANS

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, your
January 19, 1979, letter requested that we follow up on our
December 30, 1974, report 1/ on the Veterans Administration's
(VA) outreach efforts for incarcerated veterans. We are
pleased to be here today to discuss the results of that follow
up contained in our report dated June 29, 1979. 2/

1/ "Need For Improved Outreach Efforts For Veterans in Prisons
or on Parole" (MWD-75-48, Dec. 30, 1974).

2/ Letter report to the Chairman, Senate Committee on Veterans'
Affairs (HRD-79-97, Jun. 29, 1979).

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VETERANS ADMINISTRATION
OUTREACH PROGRAM FOR INCARCERATED VETERANS

VA is responsible for actively seeking out veterans eligible for benefits, providing them with information, and helping them in applying for benefits. Most veterans with other than dishonorable discharges are entitled to certain VA benefits. Although eligibility may depend on such factors as disability or income, the fact that some veterans are, or have been, in prison does not alter their eligibility for and receipt of benefits. For example, veterans can collect VA educational and training assistance benefits while in prison. The benefits provide monetary assistance to veterans enrolled in courses approved for VA benefits, including basic education, high school equivalency, college, apprenticeship programs, and on-the-job training.

In our follow up review, we performed work at the VA central office and at VA regional offices in New York City, Atlanta, and Los Angeles. We interviewed prison officials and 207 incarcerated veterans at three Federal, three State, and four local prisons. Also, we met with Federal and State probation and parole officers, 50 veterans on probation or parole identified by these officers, and officials of various State agencies and veterans' service organizations.

December 1974 report

In December 1974, we reported that VA had no systematic effort to reach veterans in penal institutions and that such institutions were infrequently visited by VA representatives. Seventy-two (53 percent) of the 137 veterans we talked to at that time believed that they had lost their VA benefits due to incarceration. As a result of recommendations in that report, VA issued guidelines requiring that (1) semiannual visits be made to all Federal and State prisons where prison authorities believe it desirable and necessary to provide group briefings and individual counseling for veteran inmates, (2) annual briefings be given to prison officials on VA benefit programs, (3) information be disseminated to incarcerated veterans to acquaint them with VA services available by mail and by its special toll-free Wide Area Telephone Service, and (4) literature on VA benefit programs be revised and made available to prison officials to hand out to inmates.

Current outreach efforts

There are about 4,000 Federal, State, and local penal institutions in the United States, with an estimated inmate population of about 460,000. Although estimates of veterans within this population vary, a VA official estimated that there are about 60,000 ^{veterans} in Federal and State penal institutions. However, no information is available on how many of these veterans are still entitled to receive VA educational assistance benefits.

VA records show that 7,059 incarcerated veterans were counseled in group briefings and 17,125 in individual sessions in fiscal year 1978. However, some veterans may be counted two or more times in these figures, depending on the number of counseling sessions each attended.

We asked VA to provide us with information on all penal institutions visited in calendar year 1978 and the frequency of visits and the reasons that any Federal or State institution was not visited semiannually, as VA guidelines required. VA replied that some Federal and State facilities were not visited in 1978 because they were believed to have few veterans; because no requests were made from institutions served on an on-call basis and because of other reasons. Records examined for one State substantiated that some prisons had few veterans, but two cases showed prisons to have 100 or more veterans.

In each of the three VA regions we visited there was little evidence to substantiate the number of prisons visited, the frequency of visits, or the basis for not visiting certain prisons as reported by VA.

We noted that the extent of VA's outreach efforts varied in these regions. VA had visited all three Federal penitentiaries to counsel inmates, but the number of State prisons visited varied.

Increased awareness and use of
benefits by incarcerated veterans

Compared to the situation we found in 1974, *Although* incarcerated veterans we spoke with during this review were more

aware of their benefits and were using them more. However,
the increased awareness and use varied widely among prisons.

Of the 207 veterans we interviewed, 171 were aware of VA benefits and 36 were uncertain or uninformed of VA benefits. Of the 171 veterans, 98 said that they had requested information on VA benefits at one time or another from VA or other sources. Fifty-seven veterans were receiving VA benefits, of which 31 were receiving educational assistance. Forty-five others were taking either academic, apprenticeship or on-the-job training courses but were not receiving benefits. Some prison officials believed some veterans enroll in courses only for the money. Others said that, regardless of the veterans' motives, any training or education might benefit them.

We analyzed the sentences of the 31 veterans receiving educational assistance benefits to determine whether there was any potential for using the knowledge gained. One veteran had a life sentence; the others had average minimum sentences of 8 years. We asked these 31 veterans if they would be taking the courses without receiving VA benefits; 26 said they would.

VA had held counseling sessions at 6 of the 10 prisons we visited. Of the 154 veterans we spoke with in these six prisons, 68 said they had been counseled. More than half of the veterans who had not been counseled were unaware that

counseling sessions were held. The remaining veterans were either not interested or were unable to attend.

Increased awareness and use of benefits
by veterans on probation or on parole

We interviewed 24 veterans who were on probation and 26 who were on parole. Of these 50, 29 had been in prison, but only 7 said that they had been contacted by a VA counselor while incarcerated. Twenty-five veterans said that they had been in either a Federal or a State prison. Although we did not verify how long or during what period these individuals had been incarcerated, this indicates that VA may not be reaching some eligible veterans.

Of the 50 veterans, 36 believed they were eligible for VA benefits, 12 were uncertain, and two believed they were ineligible. Forty of the 50 had applied for VA benefits, 27 of them before imprisonment, probation or parole; five had received VA educational assistance while incarcerated; and 16 were currently receiving VA educational or other VA benefits.

Factors that might affect
awareness and use of VA benefits

We identified the prisons where veterans were aware of and used VA benefits and prisons where veterans were least aware. We analyzed factors that might have contributed to

these differences. We are not certain whether a positive attitude on the part of prison officials caused VA to visit more often, or vice versa, but these two factors seem to affect the program.

Veterans incarcerated at the Federal Correctional Institution at Terminal Island, California, were more aware of and used their benefits to a greater extent than those at any of the other institutions we visited. During admission and orientation sessions at this prison discussions were generally held on VA educational assistance benefits. Inmates signing up for courses were asked about their veteran status. The education officer and various prison instructors were aware of VA benefits. Further, the prison's inmate handbook mentioned VA educational assistance benefits. Inmates were notified of VA counselors' impending visits over the loudspeaker system, and signup sheets were provided for those who wished to meet with them.

Four prisons--three local and one State--were ranked low by us in terms of inmates' awareness and use of benefits. Prison counselors at three of the prisons told us that they provided no counseling on VA benefits, although one said a nearby State veterans' affairs office offered counseling. At the fourth prison, a prison counselor and the Red Cross were available to counsel veterans on benefits. VA provided no counseling at these four facilities.

Prison officials at three of these four facilities were receptive to VA counseling inmates. The warden at the fourth prison was the only one we spoke to during this review who opposed VA counseling; he thought receipt of VA checks would be disruptive in that it would create bookkeeping problems.

OUTREACH PROGRAM NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

We believe that, generally, the outreach program has carried a low priority among VA programs. Several matters regarding program administration require VA action.

Compliance with and completeness of guidelines

VA guidelines require VA to make semiannual visits to all Federal and State prisons but do not require VA to visit local prisons. However, all three regions we visited found it necessary to visit one or more prisons more frequently than semiannually and to visit some local penal institutions as well.

Each region we visited was providing counseling in at least one local prison. VA believes that veterans generally stay in local prisons for short periods and therefore would not be able to use educational assistance benefits. However, we noted inmates could serve up to a life sentences in these institutions in one region we visited. Even though inmates might not be able to use educational assistance benefits when serving a short sentence, this might be a good time to remind them of available VA assistance.

A number of factors are involved in determining the most suitable frequency of visits to a particular prison. For example, more frequent visits might be needed if the prison has many veterans, if it has a work schedule that makes it difficult for incarcerated veterans to arrange an appointment, if the inmates' terms of imprisonment are relatively short, or if a number of programs approved for VA benefits are available. However, if a prison is small or has few veterans, if it has an active veterans club which is well informed and able to counsel others on veterans benefits, or if other groups are very active in counseling veterans there, VA might not have to visit twice a year.

Although VA's guidelines do not mention meetings with or briefings of probation and parole officers, in two regions we visited these officers were invited to briefings on VA benefits. In one region we visited only State officers were invited because the responsible VA official was unaware of the Federal probation system. Although only a few of the probation and parole officers we interviewed had any contact with VA, many of them were aware of VA benefits because they are veterans themselves or they learned about them from clients. Most admitted that because they were not well informed about VA programs, they referred all questions on VA benefits to VA.

In 1976, VA sent an informational package on VA benefits to probation and parole officers and invited them to contact

VA if they had any questions. According to VA officials, this drew little response and VA never followed up with any more information. One of the probation officers we interviewed had received this package and found it helpful.

Although information on military status was available to probation and parole officers, many did not know which of their clients were veterans until we asked them to provide us with names of some of the veterans to interview. Unless they are aware of the assistance VA can offer veterans, many probation and parole officers will continue to often overlook VA as a resource for aid and benefits.

Regarding the Wide Area Telephone Service system, some prisons we visited are close enough to a VA office to reach it with a local call. Some education officers at these prisons said they would place a call to VA for a veteran, but that unless a veteran is already taking courses, he may not contact the education office or be reluctant to involve a third party in his dealings with VA.

Of the 10 prisons we visited, no VA literature was available for distribution at 7. At the remaining three, all in the same region, literature was limited--at one, the education officer had a booklet on all VA benefits, at another, the booklet was available in the prison library. At the third prison, the education officer told us the VA counselor brings literature when visiting, but does not leave any. He said that he had

been unsuccessful in obtaining a supply of this literature for sometime. Since our recent visits to prisons, VA has published a pamphlet specifically directed toward incarcerated veterans.

Staffing, supervising, and reporting
of outreach activities

According to VA, the number of personnel involved in its outreach program has increased slightly over the past few years despite a decline in the number of veterans representatives on campus. Vet-Rep is the group that has been the most active in providing counseling to incarcerated veterans.

In two of the three regions we visited, the supervisors of VA personnel making prison visits said that they do not get involved in the prison outreach effort. We found no instance in which a counselor had been observed by a supervisor in conducting an in-prison counseling session. Further, some VA personnel apparently believe this counseling is concerned only with education benefits.

Although VA counselors visiting prisons are required to fill out visitation forms, the forms generally show only the name of the prison, the number of people counseled in group sessions and individually, and the number of briefings for prison officials and number of officials briefed. Few contain any comments. Officials in two of the three regions we visited said that the only reason this information was collected was that VA central office required it.

The regions we visited did not analyze these reports to determine which prisons are visited, or how often.

Outreach efforts vary

Despite VA directives targeting incarcerated veterans for special attention, the outreach program has not been consistently emphasized within VA. Although the regions we visited had identified the prisons in their area, none had been able to identify the number of incarcerated veterans. However, we obtained this information from the three Federal prisons and from the States for all the State prisons in two of the three regions.

The lack of emphasis on the outreach effort was particularly evident in one region which planned to virtually phase out this program by June 1979. At that time, officials planned to be visiting only the one Federal prison in its territory.

Although this region plans to visit only one Federal prison, we estimate that almost 1,300 (58 percent) of the State's incarcerated veterans are within a 2-hour drive of the regional office. Further, officials of the State's correction system and some prisons indicated a willingness to have VA counsel in the prisons. In fact, a State corrections official told us that he had sought VA's assistance to provide orientation on VA benefits, but had been unable to get cooperation from VA over the past 15 months. A State official told us that VA was dealing with prison officials at the wrong levels

and that VA should have gone through channels to develop an effective outreach program.

According to a VA official in another region, there is little emphasis on serving incarcerated veterans. Many veterans, such as the disabled, require VA assistance and are accorded a higher priority than incarcerated veterans. The official stated that, on one day in November 1978, over 950 veterans visited the veterans' assistance center at the regional office. Because of ~~this~~ large demand, VA efforts to serve incarcerated veterans may become more limited with any future cuts in the Vet-Rep program.

In contrast, in the third region we visited, all Federal and State prisons had been visited frequently. Some of the Vet-Reps, or other outreach counselors in this region, acted as advocates to convince and help prison officials to get their courses approved for VA benefits. However, attention was focused primarily on educational benefits, and contacts were generally with the education officers at the prisons, possibly leaving non-education-oriented veterans without VA counseling.

Coordination of outreach efforts

Some incarcerated veterans we interviewed said that, in addition to VA, they had received information on benefits from prison officials, veterans' service organizations, State

and local officials, and other organizations. Because there is little coordination among these groups, they may be duplicating each other's work or giving conflicting information.

Of the 10 prisons we visited, 4 were visited by State or private groups to counsel veterans. Each of the three States had a veterans' affairs department but they were not equally active. Also, some prisons in regions we did not visit apparently have very active veterans' groups and incarcerated veterans on work-study programs that provide information on VA benefits.

Having various groups visiting prisons and attempting to assist veterans has led to confusion,^① according to one prison official. He stated that some veteran inmates see a different person each time they are counseled. Consequently, in some cases duplicate services were provided and veterans' problems were not resolved. Another problem is that literature of some groups contains misleading statements. Specifically, we found some brochures which imply that only veterans with honorable discharges are eligible for VA benefits. Actually, as stated earlier, anyone with a discharge under other than dishonorable conditions may be eligible.

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In our report, we made several recommendations ^{were made} to the Administrator of Veterans Affairs which could improve the program.

This concludes my statement. We will be happy to respond to any questions you or other members of the Committee may have.