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## **New Program Restores Hope and Pride for Incarcerated Veterans**

When an Iraq War veteran approached functional unit manager Amanda Lake at Moberly Correctional Center, he had tears in his eyes. The offender wanted to join the new 66-bed veterans dorm pilot program at the facility, but Lake and her colleagues were on the fence. He had recent conduct violations, and the staff hadn't yet established criteria for placement with the veterans dorms. He begged to be considered. "He said, 'I want to be there; I want to change my life,'" Lake recalls. "I have this black cloud with me all the time."

That offender is now the quarter master in the six-month-old MCC veterans dorm, in which a multigenerational group of 48 incarcerated U.S. military veterans has established a platoon system, transforming a prison wing into housing unit that feels like a barracks. Together the veterans participate in PTSD treatment, substance abuse treatment, anger management, group therapy, peer-led courses and mentoring programs. They earn privileges to hold card tournaments, softball games and movie nights. They schedule training and maintenance and observe traditional military rituals, such as raising and lowering a U.S. flag daily.

The watch commander isn't the only participant with an imperfect record.

"We don't take just guys who are doing really, really well; we take guys who have had struggles. We've had guys who have struggled with substance abuse issues and mental health issues," says Lake. Case manager Rusty Ratliff, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, works with and motivates the veteran offenders, cementing relationships through a shared history, language and knowledge of military culture. Since the program was implemented, staff have seen a boost in positive behavior and a drop in negative incidents. "They are doing phenomenally well here," Lake says. "They have all found a way to live together and make it work."

The Missouri Department of Corrections houses more than 1,860 offenders — about 5.6 percent of the statewide prison population -- who self-identify as U.S. military veterans. At MCC, about 133 of the facility's 1,800 offenders initially revealed their veteran status, and Lake says about 10 more have come forward since the program started. Participation in veterans programs is encouraged but optional.

The population comes with special needs. Substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues are widespread among war veterans. The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs estimates that 20 percent of veterans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan and 30 percent of Vietnam War veterans are affected by PTSD. Until recently, the particular needs of veterans weren't directly addressed in Missouri DOC facilities. Then in early 2016, Corizon Health licensed clinical social worker Trish Cahill, the institutional chief of mental health services at MCC, piloted a PTSD treatment group just for veterans. It was eye-opening.

"We had never in the prisons — in terms of housing, reentry, therapy — done anything specifically for veterans," Cahill says. "We piloted this PTSD group, and then we realized how big it was. It exploded."

Cahill saw changes in the participants immediately. Compounding the transformation, a few weeks into the program, President Barack Obama issued a commendation to Vietnam War veterans, and representatives from the Department of Veteran Affairs visited MCC and presented commendations to 26 offenders and six staff members. Seeing the sense of pride the ceremony instilled and the sense of belonging the PTSD group inspired, staff quickly realized a therapy group wasn't enough.

Working with Alan Earls, deputy director of the Division of Adult Institutions, corrections staff reached out to wardens to explore the possibility of establishing a veterans dorm that would serve as a model for multiple institutions, ultimately selecting Moberly for the pilot. Six months later, building on MCC's success, veteran dorms have been established at Potosi Correctional Center, Algoa Correctional Center and Boonville Correctional Center.

Cahill says it's the right thing to do.

"They deserve it," Cahill says. "They have served their country. Yes, they've committed crimes, but that does not negate their service."

While veteran offenders face specific problems, Cahill says, they're also wired for solutions. "They're very strong, and they have a regimented way of living. They like structure. They want to be told what to do, how to do it and when to get it done," Cahill says. That mentality works well in a prison environment — especially when veterans can be housed with like-minded people. "These are leaders; they have strong leadership skills. If you can redirect them and treat the real hurt, the real pain — they're going to go back out into the community and do really wonderful things."

"They're also very mission-driven," Lake adds. "If we can make it their mission to reenter successfully and not come back to prison and really get a vested buy-in in that, I think you'll see a reduction in recidivism."

As for the Iraq war veteran who became a quarter master, "He does amazing work. He has taken on a leadership role," Lake says. Recently he and Lake visited an offender in a segregation unit to talk to him about the program. The quarter master told the fellow veteran, "I've been where you're at. But living here, I see color for the first time," Lake reports. "I had to turn around to wipe tears off my face," she says. "It was beautiful."

*The Moberly Correctional Center will hold a Veterans Day ceremony at 1:45 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 8, in the MCC gym, 5201 S. Morley, Moberly, Missouri 65270. The annual Veterans Day event is sponsored by Pay It Forward, a program started at MCC in 2013 to develop and foster altruism and compassion within the correctional setting.*

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