

## Media Release

---



***Secretary Dan Pacholke***

Jeremy Barclay  
Communications Director  
(360) 515-6661  
jeremy.barclay@doc.wa.gov  
<http://www.doc.wa.gov/>



***Director Lourdes E. Alvarado-Ramos***

Heidi Audette  
Communications Director  
(360) 725-2154 – office  
(360) 791-8966 – cell  
heidia@dva.wa.gov  
<http://www.dva.wa.gov>

### **For Immediate Release**

**Date: Feb. 23, 2016**

### **Washington State recognized for innovation in serving incarcerated veterans. *Partnership focuses on successful release and reintegration into communities.***

OLYMPIA — For the third consecutive year, Washington State has been recognized as a Pillar of Excellence by the [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs](#) (VA). The award was received for an Innovative State Program for Incarcerated Veterans and was presented by VA Secretary Robert McDonald to the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA) and the [Washington State Department of Corrections](#) (DOC) for their collaborative work serving incarcerated veterans.

"The Incarcerated Veterans Initiative provides veteran offenders with information, and most importantly access, to wrap-around services upon release such as mental health, health care, transportation, housing and disability compensation or pension," said Alvarado-Ramos. "Our focus is on strong community partnerships and providing opportunities for each veteran to succeed once reintegrated back into our communities."

Approximately nine percent of the state's prison population are veterans and of those 65% have honorable or general under honorable discharges, making them potentially eligible for federal VA benefits. Twelve percent of the incarcerated veteran population entering prison are receiving disability or pension benefits and need to file paperwork with the federal VA to adjust these benefits during incarceration. WDVA and DOC have partnered since 2010 to help incarcerated veterans understand the importance of self-identifying their veteran status to prevent overpayment of federal VA benefits, and in some cases to allow for a portion of their disability compensation to go to their family during incarceration.

### **Best practices implemented through the Incarcerated Veterans Initiative:**

- **Intake Video, Brochure and Poster** - Shown to all offenders entering prison to highlight the importance of self-identifying veteran status. A [DOC website](#) is also available for family members with information and VA forms.
- **Veteran Pods** - Units within several Washington State prisons that house only veterans who have earned the ability to be there. The State has dedicated veteran units at Stafford Creek Corrections Center, Coyote Ridge Corrections Center, and the Walla Walla Penitentiary.
- **Veterans Reentry Mission Planning and Community Support Team** - Partnership with WestCare to assist veterans in creating a focused reentry plan to reduce recidivism and promote healthier communities.
- **Service Dogs** - Stafford Creek Corrections Center Veteran Unit allows veteran offenders to train service dogs for veterans. A partnership with Brigadoon Dogs has made this program possible and it has resulted in nine service trained dogs.
- **Veteran Service Centers** – Stafford Creek Corrections Center provides a monthly services clinic, coordinated by WDVA and DOC, which brings community providers to the prison to help veterans get connected with benefits prior to release.
- **Community and Professional Partners** - Organizations such as [WestCare](#), [Northwest Justice Project](#), Goodwill Industries, Community Veteran Centers, and the Centers for Excellence provide individualized assistance to veterans once they enter the community.

"When our service members take their oath, they make a commitment to protect our freedom and democracy," said Corrections Secretary Dan Pacholke. "The veterans who come to the Department of Corrections often reflect upon their oath, and the reasons for their current incarceration. By housing veterans together, it builds a community that enhances well-being through pro-social interactions and increases their potential for a successful reentry back into society."

### **Future Initiatives:**

While much work has been done, WDVA and DOC continue pursuing changes that will ensure veterans, who are in receipt of federal VA disability compensation or pension, do not end up with large overpayments of benefits while they are incarcerated. Veterans who are in receipt of VA benefits should be in a far better position to succeed as they exit the justice system; however, when their benefits aren't turned off during incarceration, veterans can be left with tens of thousands of dollars in overpaid benefits. This puts veterans at serious risk for homelessness at a time when their VA benefits should be there to help get them back on their feet. WDVA and DOC will continue working with our partners at the federal VA and our state and local justice systems to identify veterans and help file the required documents to suspend benefits during incarceration.

### **About the Pillars of Excellence:**

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs worked together to establish the Pillars of Excellence Awards to identify and formally recognize outstanding state programs that support or exemplify VA's strategic goals and priorities.

WDVA has previously received Pillars of Excellence for:

- 2015 - Innovative State Programs: Washington State Transition Model
- 2014 - Increasing Access to VA Benefits and Services: WDVA/HCA Benefits Enhancement Program
- 2014 - Eliminating Veteran Homelessness by the end of 2015: Ending Veterans Homelessness in Washington State Program

[Link to 2016 Award Documentation](#)

###