

## [Department of Corrections Teams up to Help Incarcerated Veterans](#)

### Local News

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Olympia, WA - The [Department of Corrections](#) has partnered with the [Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs](#) and the U.S. Department of Defense to better identify which offenders in Washington prisons or under community supervision are veterans. Teri Herold-Prayer, a research manager at DOC, became inspired to lead the project after she pulled existing numbers on the prison veteran population in 2010. "Our numbers were way below the national average, and when I saw that I knew that something had to be done to improve on this discrepancy," said Herold-Prayer. Veteran offenders receiving benefits must reduce their benefit amount with their first 60 days of incarceration. Failing to do so can result in an overpayment, meaning offenders could leave prison owing the federal Veterans Administration (VA) big dollars. "We've seen offenders leave prison owing as much as \$65,000 to the VA, once they have a debt, they are ineligible for any other benefits until that debt is paid back." - Teri Herold-Prayer. Seeing that DOC had a problem, Herold-Prayer partnered with the state Department of Veterans Affairs to make a video, educating offenders about the importance of self-identifying as a veteran and the options available to them while incarcerated and upon re-entry into the community.

Herold-Prayer also spearheaded DOC's new partnership allowing DOC to data match with the U.S. Department of Defense. The data-matching partnership reveals which DOC offenders may be receiving overpayment benefits from the VA. In addition to showing offenders the educational video at reception, Herold-Prayer has been meeting with veteran offenders and their dedicated counselors at all prisons. Many veterans do not identify themselves when they arrive in prison either because they don't believe or know they are a veteran, they are ashamed of their veteran status, or because they worry their families will no longer receive veteran benefits because of their incarceration. More than half of DOC's incarcerated veterans received honorable discharges from service. Offenders learn that up to 90 percent of their benefits can be apportioned to their dependent families during the time they are incarcerated, if they fill out the [proper form](#) and are approved by the VA. Counselors are encouraging offenders to contact their families and fill out the apportionment paperwork. It is an easy process that can save big headaches down the road. "Many facilities are starting veterans groups, led by outside volunteers, to help these veterans get the support they need," said Herold-Prayer. And the need for support is growing, says Mary Forbes, Assistant Director, Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs. "These veterans typically aren't career criminals," said Forbes. "They may have been exposed to situations during their military career that triggers an episode of post-traumatic stress disorder, and cause them to do something stupid. These people need help." Upon release, veterans may get help in many areas, including health care, housing, chemical dependency treatment, job training or placement. The rise in their needs is the big push for the partnership. And the effort is paying off. In 2010, when Herold-Prayer first pulled the number of veteran offender, DOC data showed just 4 percent of the offender population. With the educational outreach and data-matching with the Department of Defense, DOC has already raised that number to 8 percent. Herold-Prayer expects that number to rise closer to the national average of 10 percent. "We are really just beginning this effort," says Herold-Prayer. "My hope is that those who

haven't identified will come forward to get assistance. I also hope some relief can be given to families while their loved one is incarcerated." **By Selena Davis, Media Relations Specialist**