

Veteran Denied Help Dies

By T. A. Chase

A veteran died on a Tuesday. He did not die from combat related injuries. Nor did he die as one of the many thousands of veterans who commit suicide each year. This quiet, religious and honorably discharged veteran passed away because of his governments overt action to prevent him from obtaining the assistance he both needed and was due. He was a veteran incarcerated.

A disturbing and unknown statistic is that on average approximately 8% of any inmate population in any local, state or federal correctional facility are veterans of military service. Reasons for this are varied and include difficulty returning to civilian life following military service. The increase in the number of veterans entering into the criminal justice systems of the nation has caused concern and resulted in new approaches. In some states veteran courts have been established which provide specific assistance, diversion programs and other support. Unfortunately that same level of concern has not reached another important section of the justice system, the facilities where veterans are incarcerated.

In 2010 a veteran arrived at the low security federal facility in Petersburg, Virginia. The US Department Of Justice, Federal Bureau Of Prisons (BOP), has never had any focused veteran assistance programs, though there are congressionally funded drug and religiously based offerings. Seeing no assistance specifically for veterans this inmate started by establishing an Adult Continuing Education (ACE) class teaching veterans incarcerated about the benefits, programs and services available to them and their families both while they are incarcerated and after their release.

The veteran who died, Tony, attended the class, which received very positive comments from the many vets who attended. The Education Department stopped scheduling the class in the fall of 2012.

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In February of 2013, with the dedicated assistance of a Re-entry Affairs staff member, a Veterans Resource Center was opened. Located adjacent to the Psychology Department, the joint project provided a place where veterans incarcerated at the low security level compound could obtain information on the benefits, programs and services available to them. The center also provided an extensive variety of forms for applying for VA assistance along with help in completing forms and letters requesting benefits.

In addition, the center provided a place for veterans to come together, meet other vets and fellowship. As has been cited in many publications including the Washington Post, nobody knows a veteran, or how to help one, better the other veterans. The resource center also provided newspapers, magazines and books donated by other veterans. A selection of historical and educational DVD's were also available.

In July of 2014 Tony visited the center. His foremost concern, even fear, was that upon his release he would be homeless, a condition suffered by many veterans throughout the nation. Having seen that the center was able to assist another veteran in securing housing, counseling and employment through the VA prior to being released, Tony felt confident that he too would be able to make similar arrangements prior to his release which was scheduled for November of that year.

After the center opened in early 2013 difficulties caused by a BOP staff member resulted in the center being closed during posted operating hours. These on-going problems were intermittent. In an attempt to overcome them, the operating hours were adjusted, but to no avail. Interruptions in scheduled hours continued and veterans were repeatedly unable to avail themselves of the assistance provided through the center.

Finally, in August of 2014, due to the continued difficulties, Re-entry Affairs closed

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the center. It was hoped that the problems could be overcome and that the center would reopen with extended hours and improved service. Veterans hoped this would happen quickly. The center remains closed as of late February 2015. Veterans incarcerated have been unable to obtain the assistance provided through the resource center.

In November of 2014, on a cold morning, Tony was called to report for outprocessing. He was being released. With the help of another inmate Tony hauled three bags of property to R&D, stopping several times along the way to catch his breath. Tony had a history of heart problems including having stints put in several years earlier. Upon arriving at R&D Tony thanked his friend for helping and awaited processing.

But he had no where to go. No idea where he was going to live. No family able to provide housing. His worst fear, the very thing he had gone to the Veterans Resource Center to get help preventing, was now happening. All of the information, contacts, addresses and forms he needed remained locked in the files of the shuttered center.

Tony suffered a severe heart attack. Over 30 minutes of emergency actions were unable to revive this honorable discharged veteran. He died not in service to his country, but because of the disservice by the very government he so willingly and honorably served and sacrificed for. Tony left prison having never experienced his freedom.

While some government employees worked hard to try and revive Tony, others had already worked hard to keep the very center created to help him and other vets closed. Some will argue that responsibility for his death was Tony's alone. That they had no obligation to do anything specifically for him as a result of his being a veteran.

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This position is disgraceful. Veteran inmates saw a need for a way and a place to help other veterans who were incarcerated. Several caring BOP staff people agreed and together a center was created where none had existed before. A center which could be a model for all other BOP facilities. Hundreds of dedicated volunteer hours and effort were very willingly given to create a Veterans Resource Center in a prison system where there was none before. Then, without explanation, the center was closed.

At the federal facility in Petersburg, Virginia, there are three compounds. In early 2015 a veterans center was opened in the medium security level compound. One was also started in the camp level compound. Yet the veterans resource center that was opened in February of 2013, the center that had operated and helped many incarcerated veterans for sixteen months, the center that started it all and is still to this day fully equiped and ready to serve again, remains shuttered on the low security level compound.

The questions that need answers are these; How many more Tony's, and other veterans incarcerated, will be denied access to a center solely created to help them? How much longer will those who willingly served this country, putting themselves in harms way with many bearing the scars both physical and emotional as proof of their service, be denied the help they have earned and deserve?

And why have similar centers to assist veterans incarcerated not been created in the hundreds of other facilities throughout the federal, state and local prison systems?