

RELEASE



*A student news collaborative focusing on
the impact of incarceration in Connecticut*

[FOCUS ON]
veterans



Brought to you by students at Central Connecticut State University,
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welcome to **RELEASE**

Welcome to Release, a publication devoted to collecting stories about citizens with criminal histories and the organizations that serve them. Produced by the Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy (IMRP) and created by students from Central Connecticut State University, the newsletter provides profiles, general features, interviews, videos, informative graphs and more. Our goal: to empower ex-offenders and to educate the larger Connecticut community on what it can do to stem recidivism. Release covers employment, housing, education, children of incarcerated parents and other subject areas that relate to building a productive life with a criminal history. For your free subscription to Release, which will be distributed online on a monthly basis and also published in print on a quarterly basis, please register at www.releasenews.org.

Reaching OUT

*Keeping America's Veterans
Out of Prison*

By Dave Baker



THE STEPS OF THE STATE OF CONNECTICUT SUPERIOR COURT IN WATERBURY

Susan Gibbs has no complaints about her cramped, tight workspace in the Waterbury Superior Courthouse. No matter how compact it may be, it is a major upgrade from her former office with the Connecticut Jail Diversion program: her car and a brief case. “Judge [Richard] Damiani actually asked that I be placed here. He’s very pro-veteran,” Gibbs explained. Along with colleague Jessica Marshal, Gibbs is a caseworker for Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO), a federal jail diversion program sponsored by the US Department of Veterans Affairs.

Formed with the intent of offering alternative sentencing and treatment to veterans entering the criminal justice system, VJO operates in every state, with Connecticut employing two specialists and the addition of a third expected within the year. Gibbs and Marshal work closely with existing jail diversion programs and identify veterans who may qualify for their program and VA benefits. The VA employs strict guidelines, stating that veterans who enlisted after 1980 must have served 24 consecutive months and been honorably discharged. Any

servicemen in the National Guard must have been deployed – a necessary measure given the US military’s recent level of involvement in the Middle East.

VJO is not a rehabilitation or treatment program; they act as treatment brokers. Working within the courts and prisons, Gibbs and Marshal meet with potential clients in lock up and present possible treatment plans to judges. “The veterans now know us. Many referrals come from word of mouth, but the majority still come from other court providers, other clinical teams within the VA, as well as when we run the arraignment list each morning,” Marshal said. After identifying veterans who are eligible for VA benefits, clients are released with a promise to appear and directed to the VA or other state service providers to receive the aid they need, whether it be housing, healthcare, or substance abuse counseling.

Throughout her career in jail diversion programs, Gibbs has dealt with any offender society has to offer, ranging from those suffering from crippling, prolonged mental illnesses, to habitual DUI or assault cases. Working with veteran offenders, however, presents entirely new challenges. They cannot be lumped in with the general

incarcerated population simply because they often present with specific issues. They are a unique, distinguished group facing the same hardship and adversity many offenders do, coupled with the sometimes-jarring transition back into mainstream society. In a recession America where a job hunt can spiral into a personal crusade, the thousands of veterans returning from the Middle East and flooding the job market are having as difficult a time as any finding work. In 2011, unemployment among veterans age 20-24 averaged 30 percent, more than double nonveterans in that demographic. The situation appears even bleaker, as an estimated one million veterans will enter the work force over the next five years.

The harsh realities facing many returning veterans are not being

Veterans [HCHV]. "Funding is not an issue right now because there is a big push to provide services for homeless veterans. We work closely the HCHV program. There are a lot of initiatives to end homelessness among veterans." Working in a jail diversion program, Gibbs and Marshal have encountered a litany of mental health and substance abuse disorders. The stress of military service paired with readjusting to civilian life can trap veterans in a vicious cycle of anxiety, depression, self-medication, all signs of Post-traumatic stress disorder. Gibbs and Marshal observe, especially with returning Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans, the difficulty in rotating back to a less structured life; one that may not include steady employment or a home. "What's really hard for them is when they're deployed and serving overseas, they are competent, they

As a whole, they represent a highly disciplined and relatively educated population. Of the 140,000 veterans currently serving sentences in state or federal prisons an overwhelming 91 percent are reported to have a high school diploma or equivalent. However, some judges remain hesitant to release them, finding their extensive military training and, in some cases, instability to be potentially dangerous. While the overall mission of VJO is avoiding the incarceration of their clients, Marshal pointed to VJO's essential role as educators, advocating for the silent plight of America's veterans.

"We need to treat them with respect. Giving them hope for the future is one of our main objectives, looking at the human side of things. People can change and they do."



"We need to treat them with respect. Giving them hope for the future is one of our main objectives, looking at the human side of things. People can change and they do."



acknowledged by the criminal justice system or the American public. Homelessness is rampant among veterans, accounting for 16 percent of the nation's homeless population – less than eight percent of all Americans have veteran status. With housing being such a critical issue, Gibbs remains optimistic that homelessness can be combated through programs such as the VA's Healthcare for Homeless

have a purpose – especially the guys from Iraq. They're damaged in a way by the incredible stress they're under. Then they come back and it's a hard adjustment. They don't have people they can relate to – they feel isolated," Gibbs said.

Veteran offenders present challenges to those within the criminal justice system on how best to handle them.

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On the Front Line OF REENTRY

A Q&A with former Lead Outreach
Worker of Kentucky's Incarcerated
Veterans Transitional Program

By Casey Coughlin



Gerry Stribling was former Lead Outreach Worker for the Kentucky branch of the Incarcerated Veterans Transitional Program which was founded by the Department of Labor and operated as a pilot program from 2004-2007. The program featured extensive holistic case management and aided veterans make a successful transition from prison. Out of the seven locations throughout the country that hosted the program only three were deemed successful, Kentucky seeing a drop in their veterans' recidivism rate to a mere 15%. Stribling, a former Marine himself, has gone onto working with an agency for the homeless and is currently starting up a life coaching business. He is author of two books, "Buddhism for Dudes" and "Confessions of a Buddhist Gunslinger." His blog can be found at www.buddhismfordudes.blog.com.

COUGHLIN: Tell our readership a little about the Incarcerated Veterans Transitional Program and what factors differentiated Kentucky's program from the others?

STRIBLING: There were seven Incarcerated Veterans Transitional Programs (IVTP) across the country; here in Kentucky was one of the most successful ones. But other IVTP's ran into a variety of problems. We found that the difference here in Kentucky was we had our prison systems working with us from the design phase on. The staff from the 12 Kentucky prisons were pretty much told 'these guys are in here to do some good, co-operate with them in any manner that you can.' That was really critical in the success of the program.

COUGHLIN: What were the challenges that other programs faced?

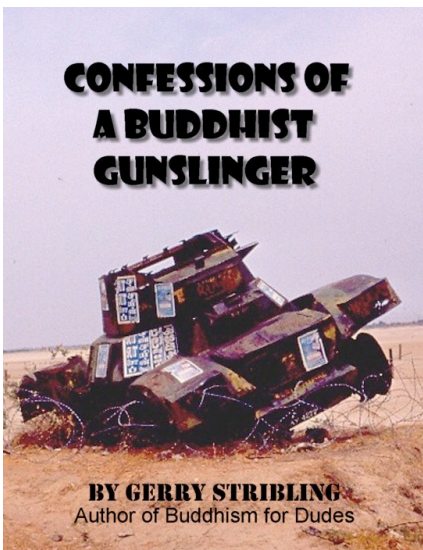
STRIBLING: Three of these (programs) were in California, and there was just no cooperation between the entities that were working out there and the systems that they were trying to serve. We met up a couple of times in Denver for conferences and somebody working for California asked me if I could help them. We have been able to develop those

relationships locally, but I don't know if I can help you in California or not. But basically it functioned as a real model of a state prison working with an outside system entity.

COUGHLIN: What specifically made your program so effective?

STRIBLING: As Veterans, we knew that we had a shared culture to tap into. So we were in these prisons, talking to these folks on a real regular basis, we were in and out all the time, recruiting participants and counseling participants and we were able to anticipate their releases. For example about 150 veterans came out of the Kentucky Prison System a year while we were working with them. About 100 of them were at risk for homelessness. So those are the folks that we keyed in on. Initially we just tried our best to eliminate the fear factor. If they were at risk for homelessness we made sure they weren't homeless when they came out. We established a level of trust with them really early on. 'You're a vet, I'm a vet, you know what I am capable of, and I know what you're capable of. Let's just work together and work this stuff out.' Granted that a pretty significant piece of our success is the fact that we weren't anticipating serving about a 40% population of

people 50 and over. Those guys are very unlikely to recommit. It also told us something really illuminating: that there are a lot of Vietnam Vets in prison. It is the most incarcerated group of veterans in the history of the American Military. Anybody that thinks the War in Vietnam is over has never been in a prison.



GERRY'S SECOND PUBLICATION, *CONFESSIONS OF A BUDDHIST GUNSLINGER*

COUGHLIN: Do you think your programs use of privet sessions verses group sessions is something that is more beneficial to your clients?

STRIBLING: We did both actually, we met with the bigger groups and informed them about the program, what we were trying to accomplish, who would be eligible. Then the first meeting would always be in a group. Half the prisons already had veteran clubs so that is how we would approach a lot of them. After that we would have brief meetings for groups

of people but then we would meet one on one with the folks that were coming out. We tried to meet at least three times with someone that was scheduled for release and try and get to know them well. Do an assessment as to what their needs are and then do our best to make those needs were met and lined up prior to their release.

STRIBLING: Because five out of the seven IVTP's failed and they rechanneled the money back into its original purposes.

COUGHLIN: Has your program been a model to other parts of the country?

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"It was culturally acceptable for them to slaughter and maim and mutilate and act horrible, it was an expected and rewarded behavior. So you have to keep in mind what we were trained to do on behalf of this country."

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COUGHLIN: Is there a correlation between when someone is discharged from the service and when they are offending?

STRIBLING: We didn't see a lot of that but you have to remember too that it started in 2004, which is just a year after the Iraq War started, so we haven't seen a lot of that. We heard about the guys that committed crimes subsequent to discharge are still in the middle of everything and are no where close to being released. We heard interesting stories like a sergeant from Campbellsville, who went out and actually went out and robbed a bank then turned himself in order to not have to go back to Iraq.

COUGHLIN: The program ended in 2007 and it was obviously a tremendous success so why was it not continued?

STRIBLING: Not that I am aware of. In Kentucky the money was rechanneled and I went ahead and left the program at that time.

COUGHLIN: I also noticed in your report that a huge part of humanizing these men was as soon as they set their foot out of the prison door their case manager shakes their hand and thanks them for their service. What is the impact of acknowledging that?

STRIBLING: That was a piece of it, it was formalized. If they served in country during a time of war, particularly if they are combat and had an honorable discharge, we wanted to acknowledge that. Right at the prison gate, after we had been working with them for a little while seemed like the perfect time to do it. We had a shared culture so we exploited that culture.

The comradery that people develop as a result of being in the military has a lot to do with it. The fact that we are all different in the beginning but in the end we are all the same once we are trained and properly motivated. Bonding was important, relationship was everything.

COUGHLIN: Are there any services that you are aware of that are helping people reentering from active duty that you are aware of to help with adjustment and coping?

STRIBLING: That has been a conundrum for our country since the very first wars. You can't take the Marine out of somebody, you have instilled it and it's there and now you got to live with it. Now the reality is that the vast majority of military veterans do well. For example only 15% of combat veterans suffer from post traumatic stress disorder.

●●●●
***“You can't take
the Marine out of
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to live with it.”***

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COUGHLIN: When people approach you about this subject what is one thing they always seem to forget about when it comes to veterans and reentry?

STRIBLING: There are certain aspects of being in the military that sort of predisposes people to maybe not behave as they should. An example being a guy who spent over 24 years in prison in various states mostly for armed robbery, he was a commercial painter by trade and had jobs all over the country. He had this thing inside of him that needed to be satisfied and that was the thrill of potentially being under fire. He kind of got addicted to the violence of Vietnam and he couldn't put that behind him when he got back. He wasn't a drug addict or a womanizer; he would just do armed robberies just for the thrill of it.

It's the same thing when you hear about the Marines who were urinating on the Taliban fighters; I understand that, you have to dehumanize your foe to be able to kill them. You can't look at them as people, you have to look at them as less than people or you can't pull the trigger. That's something folks don't realize. So we are different in certain ways I guess. It was culturally acceptable for them to slaughter and maim and mutilate and act horrible, it was an expected and rewarded behavior. So you have to keep in mind what we were trained to do on behalf of this country.

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By Veterans, FOR VETERANS

How former servicemen in the Department of Labor are helping Connecticut's vets get solid footing in the job market

By Dave Baker

The former Commissioners of the Connecticut Department of Labor fixed a collective gaze on me from behind antiquated picture frames. Adorning the main lobby of the CT Department of Labor building, their portraits comprise a wall of fame, or shame, depending on the state of the current job market. After checking in with the security guard at the front desk, he called up to the Director of Veterans Workforce Development Terry Brennan to verify my appointment and politely asked me to wait.

"Sorry, but Terry's not in today. They're sending someone else down for you."

"Great. Thanks."

Terry, a lean-figured man with a noticeable limp and grizzled voice surprisingly came down to the lobby and brought me up to his office on the fourth floor. "We get real busy up there – can't meet with everyone coming through," Brennan said of his initial absence. His office pays homage to the United States Military. Recruitment posters, memorabilia, and numerous plaques and certificates earned over the course of a 27-year career in the United States Navy leave little doubt that the man helping today's veterans navigate



FLAGS FLY OUTSIDE THE CT STATE LABOR DEPARTMENT; LOWER READS: "POW, MIA - YOU ARE NOT FORGOTTEN"

the worst economy since the Great Depression is one of their own. Staffed entirely by former servicemen, VWD is a federally funded program, acting independently within the CT Dept. of Labor. Rooted in former President Franklin D. Roosevelt's legislation that established the G.I. Bill of Rights and Title 38, VWD is one of only five such programs nationwide, intent on providing veterans with employment and education following their service.

Through one-on-one assessment, VWD employees work with veterans to identify fields they are best suited for, based on the capacity they served in the military. Potential employers update the VWD on job openings and listings, which VWD staff in turn inform their clients of. The anticipated downsizing of the US military has Washington and veterans service providers across the nation bracing for relatively younger veterans, well

versed in military training but may be lacking in practical application, to enter a cutthroat and competitive job market. “We’ve been involved over there [Iraq and Afghanistan] for ten years, some 4.2 million veterans have served. Congress has been fairly good with funding these programs. How long that will last? I don’t know. We’re expecting a large number of veterans to be coming out of the military and needing civilian work,” Brennan said. Despite the attention given to the concerns over future employment for returning servicemen, a route Brennan points many clients towards is education. Through the G.I. Bill, veterans are allotted nearly \$75,000 in educational benefits, a fact that bodes especially well for younger vets. Rampant unemployment among veterans between the ages of 18-24 is, as Brennan believes, a skewed figure due to the number of veterans attending universities, community colleges, or vocational schools. “When I talk to them, I tell them: You have \$75,000 in one of the worst economies we’ve ever had. Go to school. When the economy picks up, you’ll have the skills, you’ll have the education to go get a job.”

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***“There’s a motto
among veterans: we
leave no one behind.”***

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Working with the VWD hardly constitutes a “desk job.” Staff members are constantly moving across the state,

visiting college campuses, VA hospitals, veteran’s homeless shelters and state correctional institutions. “Wherever the veterans are we try to go. Getting back from deployment, you really don’t want to go sit in a government office, hang around and wait for an appointment.” Among the services available to veterans, whether through state, federal, or nonprofit programs, assistance for veterans being released from prison is seldom in short supply. VWD staff meets with clients prior to their release, direct them to homeless shelters with available space if need be, and works closely with the Bridgeport-based Incarcerated Veterans Transition Program. Thirty days prior to a veteran ex-offender’s release, an IVTP representative arranges for a place to stay and lays the groundwork for helping clients find employment.

The state of Connecticut boasts a veteran population of nearly 10 percent, a relatively high number for a smaller state, coupled with a tight-knit, effective network of state and non-profit organizations working to ease the transition many veterans face from the structure of military life, to the drudgeries of society. Brennan feels Connecticut is an ideal state for readjustment. “We’re lucky in Connecticut. We have a coalition, the O.E.F/O.I.F [Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom] Coalition, made up of veteran service providers. We meet every month to discuss the needs of the veterans.” Regardless of the long hours spent in the office or on the road, the fulfillment Brennan feels from working with



THE CONNECTICUT STATE LABOR DEPARTMENT BUILDING IN WETHERSFIELD, CONNECTICUT

Connecticut’s veterans stems from a sense of duty and obligation only understood by a military man. “There’s a motto among veterans: we leave no one behind.”

***Next issue,
April 2012:
FOCUS ON
MENTAL
ILLNESS***

Veterans of PRISON

Facing the Challenges of Coming Home

By Jesse Duthrie



THE REVEREND DOCTOR JAMES COOK IN HIS OFFICE

Reverend Doctor James Cook, a Incarcerated Reintegration Specialist at Career Resources in Bridgeport, helps veterans coming home from prison find work, housing, and other services.

Cook served as a Marine from 1959 to 1963. Though not involved in actual combat, his experiences with the Corps allowed him to understand the mentality of the men he services today. After his four years with the Marine Corps, Dr. Cook hit the books hard. He holds six higher education degrees: an associate, two bachelors, two masters, and a doctorate in religious studies.

“What inspires me is my faith. I’m a Baptist pastor. I’ve had training. All this plays a part in shaping who you are. My doctorate is on hands-on

ministry. Having grown up in insular Bridgeport, everybody was a Baptist. I began with the love of people and the care of people.”

Though his degrees are centered on religious studies and sociology, it was his Masters of Business Administration that taught Dr. Cook about the true inequality in America. He says, “I went [for my MBA] to try to help in community development, to find out how I could help the community. I also discovered that there are two Americas. There are those who are trained to become captains of industry and those who are trained to work for those captains.

“I began to see the two Americas and the disparity that was there. When I

heard words like, ‘Your loyalty is not to your employee, not to your supplier. Your loyalty is to your stockholder,’ I was like, ‘Wow, they don’t care.’ And you see that kind of stuff playing out now, at least through the prism of which I see the world through.”

Once he finished his PhD, Dr. Cook moved on to become the Head Chaplain of Religious Affairs for the Department of Corrections in the state of Connecticut. Overseeing 21 different correctional facilities, he was tasked with overseeing 60 to 70 chaplains and providing services for the 19,000 men and women incarcerated in the state. This was no small feat; in the years that Dr. Cook served as the head chaplain of religious affairs, Connecticut’s incarceration rates skyrocketed to the highest in state history.

As the numbers rose, Dr. Cook began to see a pattern.

“A disproportionate number of veterans were coming into the correctional facilities,” he says, “and a large part of those were Vietnam veterans. It all came from the fact that as they came home, there were no ticker tape parades. There were also drugs that were readily available

in Vietnam. So they came back and they had a lot of problems that they had to deal with. There wasn't a lot of support for them."

After his career with the Department of Corrections, he began his work with Career Resources on 350 Fairfield Avenue in downtown Bridgeport. If the address sounds familiar, that's because it should. 350 Fairfield Avenue is the workplace for reentry employees like Stephanie Miller Urdang and Scott Widermann, people RELEASE frequently covers.

When I entered his office on an unusually warm day in early February, a tall, solid man was sitting square in a chair awaiting Dr. Cook. He looked forward, a thousand yard stare in his eyes, and when Dr. Cook entered the room he stood formally as he shook his hand. There was no doubt he was a military man.

Dr. Cook later explained to me that this man was a Marine Corps veteran who had been released from prison only a few weeks earlier. Now that this man was back from prison, he was facing a litany of issues. He couldn't find work, affordable housing was near impossible to locate, and getting on his feet was a problem that he and any ex-offender, veteran or not, had to face.

Though they only exchanged a number of words, Dr. Cook was cool and calm. When the man left, he seemed pleased with what Dr. Cook had told him. When I asked how he helped, Dr. Cook told me that the man needed

resources. In particular, the man needed to get his DD 2-14, a form that proves his military service. Outside of veterans with dishonorable discharges, Dr. Cook can work with any veteran to find the resources needed.

Once the man had gotten his DD-214, Dr. Cook explained how this man needed to apply for a VASH voucher, a special veterans housing voucher that helps veterans find and pay for subsidized housing.

He wasn't getting passed by; he was being directed to the resources. Dr. Cook says, "We work with V.A. The V.A. has great resources. My job is also to try to connect the veterans with the resources that are available in the community."

There's nothing about this kind of work that indicates it's streamlined. Veterans move from one office to the next to fill out paperwork or talk to somebody who directs them to another office where they may be passed around again. It's a process, I deduce, of paperwork from both the V.A. and other government agencies that is both tedious and plentiful.

Today, men are returning from prison from the Vietnam era all the way up to the current war in the Middle East. I was surprised to learn a large number of veterans returning from prison aren't from the modern war era. Most of the men served during the 1960s through the 1990s. Their long jail sentences and isolation from a rapidly changing society makes their

challenges in finding suitable living even harder.

"When I was 67 I went out and decided I was going to look for a job, just to see if I could get one. I went down to IKEA. I got myself ready for the job, I told myself I needed to go talk to some of the HR people and shake their hands and look them in the eye. I went to IKEA and asked if I could talk to their HR person and they said there is no HR person. I asked what do you do to look for a job? They told me to put it into the computer by the front of the store."

These are the subtle differences all ex-offenders face after a long jail sentence. But there's an added element of difficulty for men with a military mind frame that often learned skills suited for a battlefield, not an office. It's Dr. Cook's task to break through to them. He must teach them how to interact back with society after time spent in combat and jail.

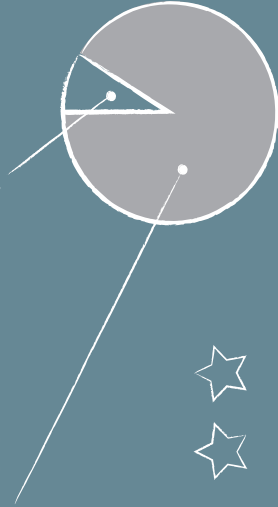
On March 31 the Connecticut Veterans Project will be hosting a remembrance event for all Connecticut Vietnam veterans. In the crowd will be hundreds of Veterans, all of whom experienced their own challenges coming home from a violent and unpopular war. Some of these men may have a history of incarceration. It's important that as we remember Connecticut's veterans, we remember not only the service these men and women provided to us during war time but also the challenges they faced coming home.

Veterans and PRISON

Total Inmates: 140,000

State: 127,500

Federal: 12,500



Veterans Are
HALF AS LIKELY
As Other Citizens To Be Held in Prison

There Is

NO RELATIONSHIP

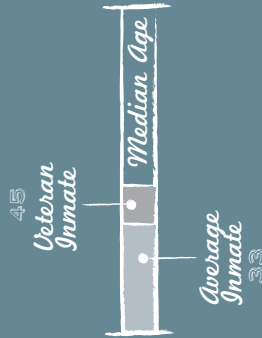
Between Veteran Inmate Status and
Mental Health or Alcohol Abuse



Demographic:

99% Male

Median Age: 45



Offenses:

1 IN 4 are Sex Offenders

Over 1/3 Have Sentences More Than 20 Years

On Average, Veterans Have

SHORTER Criminal Histories Yet Serve

LONGER Sentences Regardless of Offense

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