



ROLL CALL

the DAJD
monthly
newsletter

SERVING THOSE WHO SERVED *from Inside Jail to the Outside World*

*Military veteran inmates find hope
for the future by reclaiming
their past service to their country*



Photo by JBLM Public Affairs Office, June 17, 2015

Honor. Courage. Commitment. Many of the branches of the U.S. military list these as their core values, and these are the values our men and women in uniform are supposed to embody in everything they do. But what happens when our veterans lose their way once their military service comes to an end?

Those who have served their country but now find themselves serving time in jail at the MRJC in Kent have the chance to reconnect with those core values through a special program designed specifically for those who are military veterans. By reaffirming the lessons learned during their service, they're able to chart a path forward and successfully re-enter the community.

According to Nancy Garcia, who manages inmate programs and the Inmate Welfare Fund for DAJD, leaders and service providers throughout county government began to notice a troubling trend—a new generation of post-9/11 military veterans who had served in the Middle East were increasingly finding themselves unemployed, homeless, or



on the wrong side of the law. “We knew that today’s military and the trauma that veterans were experiencing was different. And one of the things we started seeing was that the number of incarcerated veterans was going up.”

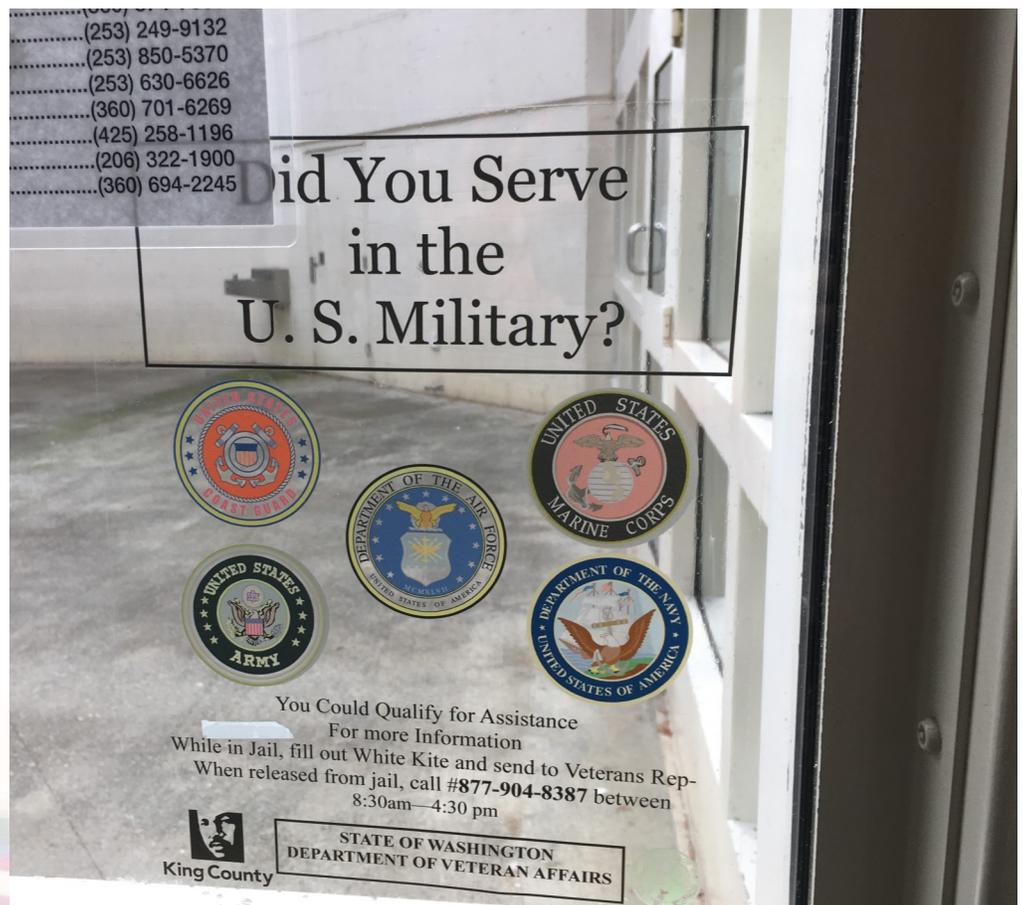
But before DAJD’s veterans’ program launched in June 2015, a lot of research and planning was done to figure out exactly what kinds of classes and services would be most helpful to veterans, and what staff needed as well. As the full picture started coming together, it was clear that partnerships, both inside and outside the county, would be the key to unlocking the full potential of a program designed for incarcerated veterans.

“When we started that process, we incorporated everybody across the entire criminal justice

spectrum—people from booking, outreach workers, vets organizations in the community, local veteran volunteers, staff from the prosecutor’s office, from the Department of Public Defense—everyone you could possibly think of in the criminal justice system, throw them in there!” said Garcia. “And we asked, what can we do to help our veterans who are incarcerated so that they can transition back into the community and connect with services in the community? How can we help them be more successful and stable, and, of course, not return to our custody?”

The first challenge the team identified was the issue of verifying an inmate’s status as a military veteran. “Luckily, we already had a partner in the mix—the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs, and they had the ability to verify anyone’s veteran status,” said Garcia. “So what we did was, if they did verify that, yes, an inmate was in fact a veteran, we would go ahead and have them do a preliminary assessment for that veteran, and get that person going with our programming right away.”

Another challenge discovered early on was a gap in training for officers and staff on how to handle veterans who may be experiencing PTSD or traumatic brain injuries inside a detention setting. “It turned out we really didn’t have much by way of training. We had some classes and training around trauma in terms of mental health, but we didn’t really do anything that was specifically around trauma from military service,” said Garcia. “So we worked with other jurisdictions and agencies in the state to develop a curriculum that is specific for veterans and specific to the detention environment.”



Finally, there was the challenge of putting together a robust program that would meet the specific needs of veterans, and also create an environment where the learning and healing could take place. “We visited a number of prison programs for veterans during our research, and [the inmates] talked about stress relief, yoga, therapeutic writing, and things that really just got them out of their heads. Those were things that they said were really important for them to be able to take the next steps, so that was an area that we knew we wanted to focus on,” said Garcia. “But they also spoke a lot about the comradery that they developed when they all shared one unit. Veterans often spoke about how they felt alone and isolated and that other people didn’t understand what was going on with them. It’s often a really

trying time and depressing for them, where they feel like, ‘Oh my gosh, I had the courage to serve my country, but now I’ve ended up in jail.’ So having other veterans in the unit who can understand where they’re coming from, I think that’s one of the great things about that comradery aspect of the program and having them [housed] together.”



Photo by Marine Sgt. Tisha L. Carter-Valrie, Apr. 3, 2003—Southern Iraq

Encouraging comradery and alliances amongst inmates is certainly not typical in a detention facility, where relationships like gang affiliations can cause myriad problems for both inmates and staff. But in this particular program, one that’s highly structured and centered on service, building that comradery has been beneficial for everyone. “You know, something that was really interesting,” said Garcia, “was that the staff really watched this group closely, and they really saw a positive impact and positive change in behavior from the participants. And they saw real leadership from certain people in the unit, and how the veterans were even impacting others in the unit who were not veterans in a positive way. And the staff actually really appreciated this and saw how it positively impacted maintaining safety and order in the unit.”

Capt. Jerry Hardy is one member of staff who has kept close tabs on the program, and can attest to the positive impact it’s had on the participants. As an Army veteran himself, he knows firsthand that the transition out of the uniform can be challenging, but that the spirit of comradery they have with their fellow veterans can be the just the boost they need to get back on their feet.

“In military service, you become a brotherhood, a sisterhood. And with that, it’s where you can count on the people next to you—you know they have your back, and you have theirs,” said Hardy. “I think on the whole, the program does a good job of enabling them to find themselves and to assist each other.”



Capt. Hardy is just one of many staff members who served in the military themselves and who have cultivated a special relationship with the program, according to Garcia. She said, “We had a number of veteran officers who were interested in trying to help out the veteran inmates who obviously didn’t make it onto a good path, because they knew how hard it can be sometimes to find that path forward. You know, having that shared military experience, just the language and jargon that they use, and knowing what’s expected of you and your behavior—there is that commonality and understanding.”

“Some people can adapt to society better than others, and with these

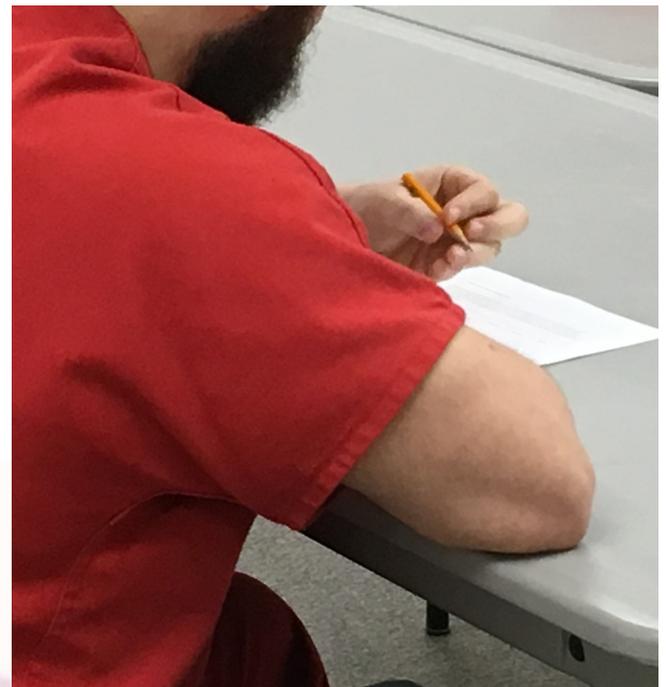
guys, they went on the other side of the fence after getting out [of the military]. When they come out, the job skills that they have may or may not work in society. Mine didn’t,” said Capt. Hardy with the slightest chuckle, betraying his steely gaze and stoic demeanor for just a split second. “Look, there are a lot of different ways they could go, and unfortunately, the guys here chose a different way.”

Hardy continued, saying, “I think that respect, honor, professionalism, leadership—those are all things you learn in the military, and those are things that the programs really works on with them.”

“A lot of these guys got into drugs because they’re not confident in themselves. A lot of these guys got into different types of crime because they felt that they couldn’t do something else. So to be able to build that type of respect for yourself is a way to build and move forward in a positive way for these guys. There’s still hope. You can make positive decisions. It’s not as hopeless as it may seem,” said Hardy. “That’s why I think this veterans’ program is such a good idea for anybody who came out of the military.”

And it’s not just staff members who see the benefits of comradery amongst those who served. The inmates themselves often express their appreciation for an environment that speaks to their unique experience in the military.

“To be able to have a CO [corrections officer] like we have right now, who’s a retired military person, and having him in this unit... it helps a lot,” said Aaron, one of the veteran inmates participating in the program. “Even though we’re inmates and he’s our guard or officer, we see eye-to-eye on a lot of things just due to our military core values. And, man, I don’t know if there’s a day that hasn’t gone by when he hasn’t brought up something he experienced during his time, and then we say, ‘Yep, shared stories.’ We have that brotherhood, and even though we weren’t in the same era of the military, we were still a part of that group together. And that goes a long way.”



Aaron has a surprisingly soft voice, warm smile, and somewhat round cheeks that scrunch up his glistening eyes, but it all belies the bittersweet story of his time in the Navy, and his struggles with trying to salvage family and work relationships once he came ashore for good—a story too often repeated with thousands of veterans who find the hardships and sacrifices of military service weigh heavily on them as they try to navigate civilian life.

Aaron was in the Navy for about six years, but roughly four of those years were spent at sea, away from his young children. He said he enjoyed his job, being at sea, and the exotic ports of call, and he wanted to make a career of it. But the months away from his wife and kids were too much for them to bear, and he soon found he had to make a choice between his career and his family.



“On my first deployment, I had to leave exactly one month and two days after my daughter was born, and then when I got back, she wanted nothing to do with me at all. She wouldn’t let me hold her without screaming,” Aaron recalled.

His marriage eventually broke under the pressure. “We separated, actually while I was in the service. They couldn’t take it anymore,” he said. “I re-enlisted, did two more years, and then I just... I wanted to try to get my family back together. I was raised on a childcare facility myself, and I said to myself, ‘I’m not gonna do this to my family.’”

“But it was too late, it didn’t happen, so...,” he said, his voice trailing off.

While his family stayed in Washington, Aaron found it difficult to hold down a job for very long, and he eventually ended up working in the booming oil fields in North Dakota. But even now, years later and hundreds of miles away from his kids, Aaron admits that he tends to jump from one job to another because issues with trust and accountability have made it hard for him to maintain good relationships, both professionally and personally. “Even making friends is really hard, because in the military, they won’t stick around long. You’re gonna have to say bye, and that creates a lot of trust issues for me. And I grew up this way because I grew up in a childcare facility where kids my age would come and go all the time,” he said. “That’s really been following me my whole life. It’s hard.”

Aaron admits that he’s been adrift since leaving the Navy, and now he finds himself run aground and behind bars at the MRJC. But he’s fully embraced the veterans’ program and has found the kind of focus, purpose, and coping skills that he’s been missing for so long. “Knowing I could go out and talk to any of the military veterans, or even the COs who are veterans,... it means I could focus on my case, I could focus on problems back home during the phone calls, or writing letters, or whatever, and not really worry about these thoughts of, ‘I need to talk to someone,’ or ‘I gotta keep this all bottled in.’ Because I know I could go and talk to them and get that out,” Aaron said. “We tend to look out for each other... We can rely on each other.”

He continued, saying, “You know, I’m very grateful for this program. I’ve been collecting all the papers ever since I first started this program, and I want to try to do the same thing we’re doing here back where I live in North Dakota. I live in a town that has a huge Air Force base nearby, so we have a lot of veterans in town, and I can only imagine how many veterans are in the jail systems there. So to have a program like this over there, I think would be very beneficial.”



Aaron's been hard at work in the program for almost a year, but that can be a long slog for even the most motivated participants. To help build the veterans' confidence and stoke their motivation, program staff and volunteers make sure they celebrate the small successes along the way.

"We do have our celebrations every six weeks or so and give them a certificate to remind them, you know, you're doing something pretty awesome here," said Garcia. "And the fact that so many people from our operations side are willing to show up and thank them for their effort and say something, that's really important, too. And that's not only for the vets themselves, but for everyone in the organization to see that it's valued and that we support what these guys are doing."

Capt. Hardy is often one of those people from the operations side who will drop in with a few words of encouragement. "It's amazing what a word of acknowledgment can do for someone who's incarcerated. This place has a great way of dehumanizing people, but to actually acknowledge someone as a person, it means something to that person. And really, that goes for people everywhere—just a simple acknowledgement."

"These guys don't change overnight," Hardy said, "but you do get to see the gradual change, and that's a cool thing."

That change is the real reward for everyone connected to the program, staff and inmates alike.

"Working downtown especially, I'll run into graduates on the street, and they say, 'hey, I just left my appointment at this provider,' or 'I'm still sticking with that program,' and we can see that it's working. And hopefully they're able to keep from coming back to jail," said Garcia. "They often thank us for just even reaching out to them in the first place. Just reaching out to them was huge. That's always really nice to hear."

"They really can help set you up for success here, you just gotta reach out and take it," said Aaron. "I've often told people this is gonna be my 'reset' button—like the "Easy" button in those Staples commercials. But this is gonna be my 'reset' button where I just really need to focus on the big picture of my life, and what direction I'm going to take, and what tweaks I need to make to get back on track."

Honor. Courage. Commitment. ...And now, hope..



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*story and
uncredited photos,*

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