

OFFICIAL ENTRY FORM

Entrants must complete all sections for the entry to be considered complete. A copy of this official entry is available at <http://www.pacounties.org/ProgramServices/Pages/Criminal-Justice.aspx>

County Berks County
County Class 3rd
Address 1287 County Welfare Rd.
City, State, Zip Code Leesport, PA 19533
Primary Contact/Title Janine L. Quigley, Warden/ Christa Parish, Treatment Supervisor
Contact Phone 610-208-4800 ext. 4007

PROJECT INFORMATION

Title Veteran's Initiative & Support Services

Project Start Date May 2018

NARRATIVE

Enter program narrative that addresses each of the following subject areas, and does so in the order presented below. Entries must be submitting using this form. All sections must be complete. Entries submitted without the required information may be disqualified.

Problem Discussion - Enter comments on the identified need and the background including what programs were in place before the current project, if any, and how it led to this effort. This section is worth 10 points.

Berks County has discussed the need for identifying veterans, living in the community, who are disconnected from support and assistance through the Veterans Administration and other veteran-related programs. Landing in the Criminal Justice System magnifies the need to be connected to various services including housing, therapeutic interventions such as drug and alcohol, mental health, etc. in order to reintegrate back into the community. Incarceration further disconnects them from the support and assistance they need. In previous years, the Jail System has had an unstructured approach to identification, assistance, and reentry targeted toward the specific needs of veterans. Discussions with our local Veterans Treatment Court Program Liaison highlighted the gaps in our system and acted as a spring board into our current initiative.

Background – Enter history of the project, including any evidenced-based approaches to divert individuals from further penetration into the juvenile or adult justice system, community involvement strategies, formation of stakeholder groups, county- wide planning strategies, etc. This section is worth 20 points.

For many years, Berks County Jail Staff facilitated the occasional phone call from Adult Probation and Parole in order to assist in getting veterans placement in outside programming. That was the extent of our assistance with veterans in our facility. County Commissioner Christian Leinbach had asked us to look at other jails with Veteran Housing Programs. This led to a visit to York County Prison and research of programs in other facilities. While we realized that we didn't have enough veterans to fill a housing unit within in our operation, we were motivated to start brainstorming about other ways we could serve this segment of our population.

Under the guidance of Deputy Warden Stephanie Smith, the Jail Treatment Team (with support from the County Adult Probation and Parole staff) established contact with the stakeholders and set up a series of meetings to begin integrating support and strategies and enhancing services to incarcerated veterans. The Berks County Veterans Affairs Director, the Veterans Treatment Court Officer, the Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist at Lebanon VA Medical Center, and our Jail Management Team discussed the needs and resources and made a commitment to bridge the gap for our veteran inmates.

We started to recognize that asking one question in the booking process was not sufficient to ascertain whether or not an inmate had served in the military. We reflected on the fact that incarcerated veterans need the opportunity to receive support beyond the occasional placement in an outside program. In order to offer a holistic approach, we knew community involvement would be essential. We further determined that unified support could bring jail staff, volunteer veterans, county and federal staff together to maximize available resources during incarceration and facilitate successful reentry.

Soundness of approach – Enter a description of the ways the project conforms to either program themes or goals as established in the criteria. This section is worth 20 points

The goal of this program was to begin an initiative for veterans to access programs in the jail and to reenter the community with federal and local assistance in order to sustain mental and physical health needs, address housing issues and, in some cases, face the impact of their service. The average length of stay in the jail is currently around 89 days. We had to structure our program to provide support with reentry and connection to community benefits very quickly for short stays. For those who stay with us for longer periods of time, we offer structured in-jail programming and support groups, as well as benefit access and reentry connections. We strive to provide the inmates, in jail and once released, with practical means to attain and sustain management of the challenges relevant to their service in the Armed Forces.

We believe our approach is sound because we recognized a need and responded systematically with the support of outside resources. We enhanced our veteran identification process,

developed targeted topics for a group program, selected the most effective people to deliver the programs, and committed jail staff time to individual casework to ensure swift follow-up of jail and reentry needs. Finally, as is our hope with any programming, the work that is started here will lessen the chance that the reentrants recidivate. If an inmate is deemed eligible through government funding, he or she may be diverted directly from incarceration to rehabilitative treatment programs and housing, providing a necessary bridge to services outside the jail.

The established program directly falls within the 2020 themes of "Re-entry initiatives and local collaborations" and "programming" that has "targeted interventions" and a diversion component.

Program Elements – Enter a description of the elements of the project, utility, adaptability, strategies used, community and stakeholder involvement, evidence based approached. This section is worth 20 points.

Developed a Strategy to Encourage Self-Reporting and Identification of Veteran Inmates

When inmates are booked into the jail, a correctional officer asks them if they ever served in the military. Upon receiving an affirmative answer, the officer follows up to capture as much information as possible about branch, length of service and type of discharge. This information is entered in to a program that can be accessed by treatment staff. A safety net was added-- each weekday, the Booking Department Lieutenant will generate a report that will alert him if the question remains unanswered in the system or if any of the follow-up questions were unanswered. The Lt. will then visit the inmate and attempt to get the information that was potentially missed at booking. Additionally, during orientation, a treatment caseworker will repeat the questions and make further attempts to identify veteran inmates. We have found that by asking multiple times, with different staff members and styles, we are better able to identify our veterans. (Several inmates who slipped through all the early identification attempts have come forward after hearing positive comments about the programming from fellow inmate participants.) Many veterans have indicated that they signed up to serve, not be served; therefore, they simply do not identify and hesitate to accept assistance.

A list of inmates who self-report their status is sent to the Veterans Affairs Department for verification of service in the military and subsequent eligibility for benefits. Detailed monthly reports are generated from an electronic program listing all veteran inmates in the jail. It includes name, jail number, housing assignment, branch, service dates, type of discharge, and multiple notes about VA eligibility status. (Report sample not included in this submission due to the amount of redaction that would be necessary to protect the privacy of the inmates.) This is used to direct eligible veterans to available programs and outside services. In addition, this information is used to house veterans of the same classification in the same housing units.

Grouping them together in the same housing areas provides structure that allows for daily interactions and “emulates the familiarity of military cultural concepts such as unity, cohesion and comradery”, as stated by Ken Lebron, Berks County Veterans Affairs Director.

Established Stakeholders, Identified Available Resources and Established a Communication System

The jail’s treatment supervisor made a list of all points of contact and forged a relationship with each of the frontline employees from various organizations who were determined to have potential resources to contribute to this initiative. A plan was established and is being carried out. The Berks County Jail System Treatment Supervisor, Christa Parish, sends a monthly list of those identified to Andrew Shearer, Berks County Adult Probation and Parole Officer (the Veteran’s Court Liaison); Gelu Negrea, Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist at the Lebanon VA Medical Center; and to Director Ken Lebron, Berks County Veteran’s Affairs Office. The Monthly Report is used to prompt a discussion between Shearer and Negrea regarding Veteran’s Treatment Court eligibility for our justice-involved veterans. Negrea will then work with Parish and Shearer to contact inmates who may be eligible for Veteran’s Treatment Court or various other benefits. Parish works as a liaison with the Lebanon VA to access various programming for eligible veterans. Veterans are also connected with the Berks County Veterans Affairs Office which prompts an accredited Veteran Service Officer (VSO) to come in to the jail monthly to meet with the inmates and provide them with various Berks County resources. They also act as an advocate for those needing assistance with navigating benefit challenges with the Veterans Affairs at the federal, state and/or local levels. As information is being funneled between the dedicated agencies, jail treatment staff provide ongoing case management to ensure that each inmate is maximizing opportunities available to them. Jail staff provide swift follow up for short-term incarcerations and continue case management for long-term incarcerations.

Developed A Group Program with Focused Topics & Expanded to a Second Group Solely to Provide Support

In May of 2018, the identification process, stakeholder commitment and program development began to take shape. In November 2018, the first group meeting under the Berks County Jail Veteran’s Initiative was held. This program is offered to give individuals the opportunity to participate in a group with topics relevant to the challenges they face as incarcerated veterans. There are about 25 to 30 identified veterans in the jail at any given time and approximately half of them attend the program. Under the leadership of volunteer, Walter Gensemer, a Vietnam Combat War Veteran, and Berks County Veterans Affairs Director Lebron (a Post 9/11 Marine Veteran), they formed a group of volunteers to serve as group leaders and advocates to incarcerated veterans. Additionally, the volunteers provide resource information pertaining to VA benefits and community resources. The programming is provided to give them hope for a productive, positive and law-abiding future and supports the military promise of “no man/woman left behind.”

The following topics were covered with the inmates who attended the first group of the Jail

Initiative.

- Communication and Coping Skills
- Emotional Freedom Technique
- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Awareness and Crisis Intervention
- Dangers of Self-Medication/Recovery/Relapse Prevention
- Employment
- Community Resources that Support Release and Transition
- Veteran Benefits

All veteran inmates in the jail (participants and non-participants of the first group) were surveyed to ask what topics they thought would be most useful for future groups. The following responses were received:

- VA Services (Local Help, Family Benefits, Claims, Appeals, Legal Aid, Rights)
- PTSD, Coping, Dealing with Anxiety
- Support and Outreach Groups
- Housing Assistance
- Drug and Alcohol Services

The information solidified that much of the original content matched the need being expressed by the inmates. The support group component had been missing since specific topics were covered in each group session leaving little time for the inmates to discuss general concerns and issues. So, by participant request and through the willingness of the veteran volunteers, a "Support" group was formed and began to meet in November 2019. In this additional opportunity, our volunteers direct a group conversation which allows the inmates to share thoughts and experiences with peers and individuals who may have faced similar struggles and challenges. Our Berks County Veterans Affairs Director describes our veteran volunteers as "a huge resource of people who serve as advocates, guides and mentors to currently incarcerated veterans." We are absolutely thrilled with the energy and commitment of the volunteers. Their individual experiences while serving help them understand the issues raised at a level necessary for this to be impactful.

Expectations and Measurable Goals – Enter a description of the costs of the project, how it was funded, projected impact, number of inmates diverted or assisted, utilization of risk assessment, impact on recidivism. This section is worth 20 points

There is no financial cost to the jail. The treatment supervisor absorbed the work into her existing job duties. Group materials are supplied by the County Veteran's Affairs Office and the volunteers graciously give us their time. All other involved staff from the County Adult Probation and Parole Department to the Lebanon VA worked their time into existing positions.

Ten individuals are currently in Veteran's Treatment Court and they were assisted after incarceration. In the short time the program has been in place, approximately 115 veterans have been served in a variety of ways from group participation to referrals to outside programs.

We currently use the Ohio Risk Assessment System (ORAS) to determine area of need for our inmates. One inmate funneled into Veteran's Treatment Court had a moderate need for help in the areas of employment, family and social support, as well as drug and alcohol. He is currently in the Treatment Court (receiving support) and getting help with his identified issues. He has not come back to jail (discharged in December of 2018) and is doing great in the specialty court program.

According to Negrea's research, Veteran's Courts are offered in jurisdictions across the nation with a typical duration period of 18 to 24 months. He reports that while there is a 70% recidivism rate for justice involved veterans, those going through the Veteran Treatment Courts have a 5 to 10% recidivism rate. In 2010, Berks County was the second county in Pennsylvania to offer Veteran's Treatment Court. Since Negrea came on board in 2014, he has added six, veteran specific support/therapeutic groups to the program, in addition to drug and alcohol and mental health treatment.

Evaluation/Sustainability – Enter details describing the process for evaluating success including assessment methodologies, data reports, continuation, and determination of success. This section is worth 10 points

A system to monitor the groups and gather participant feedback was implemented. We recognized that the community volunteer veterans were the ideal individuals to lead our groups; however, we also recognized that they had not been trained to facilitate groups with inmates, so they were relieved to join forces with Treatment Supervisor Parish who has 17 years of experience delivering inmate programs and guiding and redirecting inmates during groups sessions. She has established trust among the inmates, yet she is firm and consistent with appropriate boundaries and group management. As a result, she has taken on the role of modeling sound group management practices during sessions and provides feedback to the volunteers after the sessions are completed. This has provided quality assurance. The input of group attendees is gathered and reviewed. In the beginning we had a low number of inmates reporting to group after the first session, so we had treatment counselors speak with each of the inmates to find out why they had not returned. We discovered that we could increase attendance by adjusting the start time of the groups since the earlier time had overlapped with a time period that inmates would have to choose between losing limited service time that they value in another area of the jail. The questionnaire previously discussed was issued. A separate evaluation is issued by the VA Director at the conclusion of each program module. Both are used to make adjustments to the program.

Negrea said that since the Jail Initiative started in 2018, Berks is one of the quickest in the State in terms of response and diversion because we have designated liaisons in each department.

This program is sustainable as long as all of the agencies involved continue their dedication and funding and as long as we have willing and trustworthy volunteer veterans from the community. Jails who wish to replicate this initiative should make contact with the Veterans Justice Outreach

Coordinator that covers their area. It's highly likely that more coordinators would be needed if all county jails linked in with them, since they seem to be spread across counties and have a heavy workload. The community volunteers are recruited by our local Veteran's Affairs staff and they have dedicated their time to find multiple volunteers so we can cross-train and provide succession should one of them need to discontinue their service. It is essential that the providers continue to be veteran peers. The inmates open up more freely with these fellow veterans most likely due to the fact that the military culture is centered around comradery and can be best understood by others who have walked the same path. Further, we bolster this concept with housing the veterans together as much as possible within appropriate classification guidelines.

Success is in the words of the inmate participants.

Summary of Written Communication May 2019:

Dear Warden. First, I want to tell you how much of an honor it was to meet you. Your support to veterans who unfortunately end up here is invaluable to us as we are continually fighting other battles on a daily basis. Second, I think our discussion speaks for itself. I really enjoyed the opportunity to meet with the veterans who volunteer their time every month to come into the jail and offer their camaraderie and share their knowledge with us. It give us hope that there is someone who understands and cares. By the time you receive this, I will be in treatment at the Lebanon VA Medical Center.

Summary of Written Communication February 2020 with identifying Information Removed:

I wanted to thank you for instituting the Veteran's Support Group. Too many times there is no feedback, positive or negative on policies and no one really knows if it's a success or a flop. This program is an overwhelming success. I was so worried for my (child in college out of State) because once I was jailed, I was unable to help her financially. The volunteers told me about a program that my dependent may qualify for and all the paperwork was filled out and submitted. My child received a shockingly wonderful benefit that I knew nothing about and only because of the VA program here was it brought to my attention. Thank you very much and please thank Ms. Parish for me, she is absolutely the best.

Statements made to the Warden at the conclusion of a recent group session:

"Treatment (Parish) threw me a life line and I didn't even want it, but she wouldn't allow me to let go."

"I moved to the County 3 weeks before being arrested and had no chance to link with benefits."

"I have PTSD and this gives me hope to stay sober – talking to them (the volunteers who suffer the same way I do) shows me I can do this and I'm not alone."

"I have PTSD and this gives me hope to stay sober – talking to them (the volunteers who suffer the same way I do) shows me I can do this and I'm not alone."

"I would not have asked for anything – I'm only here because someone came to me and told me to join."

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SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

Please include any supporting documentation to demonstrate the impact of the project in cost or population outcomes, or other data to demonstrate the considerations utilized in determining the scope or design of the project. Scoring will be based on factors including the entrant's description of the problem, the soundness of the approach, and success in meeting goals and objectives. Award submissions will receive consideration for outcomes or best practices supported by data. **SUPPORTING INFORMATION SHOULD BE COPIED AND PASTED DIRECTLY INTO THE FORM USING THE BOX BELOW**

Click here to enter text.

All forms must contain at least one signature. Signatures can be entered electronically, or submitted via fax using a separate form. To sign, right-click on the signature line, select "Signature Setup" from the drop down, and follow the prompts. If submitting signatures on a separate form, enter "FAXING" on the signature line.

X Ronald R. Serna, CAO

County Chief Executive Officer

X Ken Bonbrant

Vice-Chair of Board of Commissioners
in absence of Chairman

SUBMITTING YOUR ENTRY – To submit the entry, save a copy of this completed form after all information, including signatures and supporting materials have been added. When saving the form, please assure that the document name includes the county name, the type of project and the year – (i.e. FranklinJailAward2020). Address an email to bpenyak@pacounties.org and attach the award submission.