



# IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **MDOC Announces New Program for Incarcerated Veterans**

JACKSON - Incarcerated veterans in Mississippi are getting help before and after their release from prison under a new faith-based program offered in a special unit at the Central Mississippi Correctional Facility in Rankin County.

The Mississippi Statewide Incarcerated Veterans Program, also known as Soldier On, is a collaborative project of the Soldier On nonprofit organization, Voice of Calvary Ministries, and the Mississippi Department of Corrections. Other organizations, including the Mississippi Department of Employment Security and the G.V. “Sonny” Montgomery VA Medical Center, also are involved.

Funding comes from a \$2 million Supportive Services for Veterans and Families grant and a \$200,000 Department of Labor Homeless Veterans’ Reintegration Program/Incarcerated Veterans Transition Program grant.

The Mississippi Department of Corrections is extremely pleased to partner with the Soldier On and Voice of Calvary Ministries to provide this type of program for veterans, Commissioner Pelicia E. Hall said.

“Programs like this are going to save the state money because we’ll have fewer people in prison and more rehabilitated people getting on the right track and improving their lives, their family and their community,” Hall said. “This is a workforce development program that changes the direction of people who may have gone down the wrong road. This turns them into tax payers rather than tax burdens.”

“The commitment to the program from the Mississippi Department of Corrections is exceptional,” said Soldier On Chief Executive Officer/President Jack Downing. “Commissioner Pelicia Hall’s leadership has been instrumental in the program gaining support statewide. CMCF Superintendent Ron King works directly with

our Homeless Veterans Reentry/Incarcerated Veteran Transition Programs Manager B.R. Hawkins in facilitating the direction and inevitable growth of the program. The partnership is unprecedented.”

The Mississippi program launched May 9, 2016. A total of 59 inmates have been enrolled. Current enrollment is 32. Participants must meet certain criteria other than having served in active duty and received an honorable discharge. They also must be within 18 months of release and are minimum or medium custody.

Upon release, offenders can obtain services including homeless veteran assistance, employment assistance, and transportation.

“The Statewide Incarcerated Veterans Program addresses some of the most persistent problems among incarcerated veterans - recidivism, homelessness, substance abuse, anger management, and physical and mental health - and helps veterans to achieve self-respect and trust so they can successfully transition into the community,” said Phil Reed, president and CEO of Voice of Calvary Ministries in Jackson.

The statewide program is patterned after Soldier On's successful Incarcerated Veterans Program, which began in October 2014 at the Albany County Correctional Facility in Albany, N.Y. The recidivism rate for those veterans served by Soldier On at Albany County Jail has dropped to about 3 percent, according to that program.

“They’re in their third year,” Reed said of the New York program. “We know we’re reproducing a model that works.”

Twenty-three inmates who participated in the Mississippi program have been released back to their community. Of that number, 15 ex-offenders, or 54 percent, have found employment with companies, including Ingalls Shipbuilding in Pascagoula and East Mississippi Lumber Co. in Starkville, and four have employment pending.

Former participants Bruce Ramsey, who was released in October, and Carlos Sharif McGee, who was released in December, both said they were skeptical of what the program could do for them. Employed and doing well now, both are now among Soldier On’s biggest advocates.

“I really appreciate all they did for me,” said Ramsey, 64, who was sentenced to 14 years for non-residential burglary in Perry County. “I mean they prepared everything from ‘A’ to ‘Z,’ everything they could to get us prepared to enter back into society. Voice of Calvary and Soldier On, I give them a thumbs up because they kept their promise to do everything that they promised us.”

McGee, who served 10 years and three months for drug convictions in Forrest County, said, “Everything they told me, they showed me. They taught me. They picked the right people. I used to sit back and watch. They always stayed professional. They care. I saw it in each and every one of them.”

McGee credits the program with helping him to see the big picture. “I didn’t have that focus,” he said. “I didn’t even have any goals. But going through that program, having all of the facilitators and staff, just everybody embraced and treated me like a human being instead of a number. It made so much of a difference to me. They were just there every step of the way. It helped me more than I can put into words.”

McGee, 47, is now working again as a welder. “But I have other skills and other ambition,” said McGee, who served in the Marine Corps. “Soldier On has helped plant that seed in me.”

Ramsey said he especially liked the MRT (Moral Reconciliation Therapy). “I think the MRT brought the best out of me,” he said. “(There) was a time that I couldn’t really just stand before a crowd and speak. There was times I couldn’t say things that I wanted say. Things that were balled up in me, kept me hindered, kept me bogged down in life. MRT just brought it all out of me and made me a better man than I was before I went to the penitentiary.”

Inmate April Williams, who served in the U.S. Air Force, is among the program’s current participants. A repeat offender, she is hoping it helps her stay out of prison.

“I didn’t know that there was any kind of help or services for veterans to get into a program like this,” said Williams, who is serving two years for shoplifting.

The program has 11 full-time volunteers and three part-time volunteers in addition to eight correctional officers and one case manager. Each week, veterans receive 20 hours of intensive instruction which includes meditation, life skills, marriage and family, budgeting, wills and estates, resume writing, and dealing with consequences.

"Soldier On is a 'heart' program," Hawkins said. "We tell them it's not what you did, it's what you do next that's going to matter. We reinforce that."

King, CMCF's superintendent, said the pilot program has proven that it should be continued and expanded.

"I think it's important because the veterans, obviously, have done something for their country," King said. "Of course they made a mistake and ended up incarcerated, but I think we have an obligation to give them what they need to be successful upon their release."

Soldier On, headquartered in Pittsfield, Mass., is the largest provider of housing and services to homeless veterans east of the Mississippi, and is the largest provider of supportive services for veteran families in the country.

Voice of Calvary Ministries, located in west Jackson, is a faith-based community development organization with more than 40 years of experience in rebuilding lives and communities through the Gospel.

"One of the Soldier On/Voice of Calvary Ministries' most ambitious and innovative undertaking is its Incarcerated Veterans Program," Reed said. "The incarcerated veterans program demonstrates the resolve Soldier On/Voice of Calvary Ministries has made in reaching at-risk veterans who have served our country and provide them with the assistance and support they deserve."