

## **“In control of our future”: Pilot program benefits veterans in prison**

By Emily Kummerfeld and Betsy Smith

Riding motorcycles was Gerome Cummins' way to relieve stress.

"You can be stressed out, have a terrible day, but soon as you kick your leg over it and turn the key, everything just melts away," he said.

But it will be some time until he can ride the open road again. Cummins is an inmate at the Moberly Correctional Center. He said a case of mistaken identity led to a confrontation and an assault conviction that landed him in prison with an 18-year sentence.

This past Monday, however, Cummins was promoted to third platoon leader.

The 44-year-old Navy veteran is one of 52 inmates in the Missouri Veterans Project at the Moberly Correctional Center. The Missouri Department of Corrections started this new pilot program by setting up a separate wing of the prison like a company in the military. There are three platoons, and each has its own platoon leader in addition to squad leaders.

The military barracks-like organization is much different than the rest of the prison.

"Out in the general population you're kind of in automatic, and you don't really have any control over the gears that are selected for you," Cummins said. "In the veterans' wing, whenever we go to it, we manually shift gears. We are the ones that are in control of ourselves and in control of our future."

Their assigned responsibilities include raising and lowering the flag, dorm cleanup and yard maintenance. But unlike regular inmates, veterans choose the daily programming for themselves, and they are held accountable if they do not attend.

"We hold them to a higher standard," said Rusty Ratliff, the case manager at the correctional center who oversees the program.

Perhaps more critical to the program is the common ground between the veterans. Although the veteran inmates may all be convicted felons, they know what it feels like to have honor, pride and self-respect, said Ratliff, himself a veteran of the Marine Corps.

"Some of those things are uncommon to a lot of guys in the prison system, but to veterans it's a common thing," Ratliff said.

The close camaraderie is an essential foundation in the treatment of common issues that affect veterans like post-traumatic stress disorder, substance abuse and anger management, Cummins said.

Zachary Osborn, a clinical manager for behavioral health at the Truman Veterans' Hospital, says the behavioral issues veterans face can lead to social isolation, which hinders recovery. To combat this, he emphasized the importance of social networks "to not only support somebody and to help through those times, but to provide an alternative point of view on what's going on around them."

Osborn also said that although PTSD is most often associated with the military, depression is the most common mental health problem for returning veterans.

Kelli Canada, an assistant professor of social work, said getting adequate resources for mental health care can be especially difficult for veterans in rural areas.

"For those communities, we as a state and we as a nation really need to think about how we can offer high-quality care," she said. "I think really having an investment in making those high-quality services available is really the only way that we can be successful with these programs."

The Moberly pilot program for treating veterans with PTSD revealed the need to better address the issues of incarcerated veterans as a whole. The success of the program in Moberly led the Department of Corrections to establish veteran dorms at the correctional facilities in Potosi and Boonville and at the Algoa Correctional Center in Jefferson City.

Still, many veterans in mid-Missouri are left without adequate services or special prison programs. The Veterans Justice Outreach program connects veterans with health, legal and employment services, among other things. Two Veteran Justice Outreach specialists serve veterans in 43 counties in central and northeastern Missouri. The scarcity of resources in rural counties can land veterans in correctional facilities or leave them struggling with mental illnesses.

The need for services for justice-involved veterans also exists nationwide. A Bureau of Justice Statistics study from 2012 noted that about half of all veterans in prison were told they had a mental disorder, 60 percent of them had seen combat. Studies suggest

that incarcerated veterans are more prone to suicide, which can be exacerbated in a prison environment.

Veteran programs are also growing across the country, from Washington state to Florida. Since the programs are so new, changes in recidivism rates are hard to find. But so far reports from officials are promising. At a similar program in Albany, New York, only 10 of the 195 veterans released have returned to prison, according to the Albany county sheriff. The local recidivism rate at the Albany County Correctional Facility is 47 percent.

Cummins also believes the program will lead to more success for his fellow veterans once released.

"Being around guys who are like-minded, we can get back to what and who we truly are," he said. "That helps us naturally realign ourselves with what we should be doing, and who we are on the streets."

In a few years, Cummins will be released. An open road awaits him, but with the help of his veteran compatriots, he will be better prepared for where it leads.