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TDCJ recognizes, supports and recruits military veterans

The citizens of Texas are fortunate that so many dedicated men and women have made a career of public service through employment with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Every TDCJ employee, in whatever capacity they serve, makes an important contribution to public safety.

For some employees, their service with the agency is by no means the first time they have acted to protect and serve the public. At present, the agency has more than 6,000 employees who are veterans of the United States Armed Forces, and nearly 600 employees, including 88 on active duty, who have been or are members of the National Guard or Reserve.

Every citizen of the United States owes a special debt to the nation's armed forces personnel, both those in active service and veterans. In gratitude for their service and in recognition of their achievement, both the State of Texas and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice extend certain benefits to military veterans. TDCJ honors and supports veterans by granting them employment pref-

erences, and fully recognizes, honors, and enforces the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, a law which protects the civilian job rights and benefits of United States military service personnel. The agency also recognizes that active National Guard and Reserve personnel require special job accommodations so they can fulfill military obligations while retaining their employment status with the agency.

TDCJ has a history of successful recruiting at military bases and continues to actively recruit personnel who are about to be honorably discharged. Military veterans and staff have a great number of skills and quality training, along with experience handling a variety of responsibilities.

During the 1990's, the Department of Defense sponsored overseas job fairs for employees affected by the military downsizing. TDCJ was represented in Korea, Okinawa, Japan and Germany for almost a month. During this time, recruiting staff attended job fairs, testing and interviewing prospective applicants. High quality applicants who were judged likely to succeed were given of-

fers of employment and had a job when they returned to Texas, pending their background check.

Currently, agency recruiters are scheduled to attend Transition Assistance Program seminars and job fairs at military bases to promote employment opportunities to interested individuals. Plans are underway for a mass mail-out to military installations across the United States, designed to inform potential applicants about the benefits of a career with TDCJ and how to apply for a correctional officer position.

As defined by legislation, the Veteran's Employment Preference is preferential consideration in retaining employment given to a veteran who served at least 90 consecutive days of active duty in any branch of the United States Armed Forces, or in an auxiliary service or reserve component of one of the branches. Personnel discharged for an established service-connected disability, regardless of length of service, are also considered veterans. Further, to be defined as a veteran, applicants must have been honorably discharged.

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If the veteran meets the above criteria, employment preference is extended to a veteran's surviving spouse who has not remarried. Employment preference is also extended to an orphan of a veteran killed while on active duty, whether the death was service-connected or not.

In addition to employment preference, veterans working at TDCJ receive an accelerated career ladder pay scale. Newly-hired veterans with at least two years active military service and an honorable discharge are hired as Correctional Officer III, Level 3, with a beginning salary of \$2,598.05 per month. This salary continues for the first six months, before the acquisition of additional service time allows further advancement up the career ladder.

If a TDCJ employee is called to military duty, they receive a Veteran's Reinstatement Preference upon their return. If the employee's previous position was in an established career ladder, their months spent in the Uniformed Services will count as months of active satisfactory service accrued toward a career ladder adjustment. Also, the employee's time of service in the Uniformed Service is counted as state service when seeking career advancement. If the employee's pre-service position was not in an established career ladder, the employee will be reinstated in the employee's pre-service position with their seniority status restored.

TDCJ recognizes that fulfilling the demands of military service means additional stress, and this can sometimes lead to emotional, legal or financial problems. In order to help, all agency employees and their families have access to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) work benefit. The EAP is administered by a private, nonprofit agency separate from TDCJ, so communications are completely confidential and no information is shared with agency staff or co-workers. Through EAP, licensed and certified counselors are available 24 hours a day to help agency staff deal with issues like depression, anxiety, anger, grief, and basic legal and financial issues. By coordinating with health care providers and medical insurance associates, the EAP can help create an appropriate and effective treatment plan for those in need. EAP counselors can be reached by calling 1-886-832-5927.

In the state of Texas, it's not just TDCJ that recognizes the important contributions veterans have made and continue to make. The Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) is a state agency created by the Legislature and governor for the purpose of assisting veterans and their families with federal and state benefits and services. TVC is an independent agency, separate from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and serves as an advocate for Texas veterans, their families and survivors. TVC can help veterans file claims for VA compensation, pensions,

educational assistance, home loans, insurance and other benefits. To learn more about benefits available to veterans, spouses, and dependents, visit the TVC website at <http://www.tvc.state.tx.us/> or call the Veterans Hotline at 1-800-252-VETS (8387).

According to TDCJ Executive Director Brad Livingston, the veterans employed by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice make a great workforce even better.

"I deeply appreciate the public service of all TDCJ employees, and especially those who protect our national security while serving in the United States Armed Forces," said Livingston. "This agency will continue to actively recruit former members of the armed forces and support employees who are serving their state and country in the National Guard and Reserve. These efforts could be justified simply as partial compensation for the debt we owe them. Beyond this, however, their professionalism and discipline make them tremendous assets to any organization." ●