



# Correctional Newsfront



*The official newsletter of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, including the state prisons, reentry services, community corrections and parole supervision*



In honor of Veterans Day, enjoy this special edition of *Correctional Newsfront* containing all the DOC stories involving veterans in 2019.

## **Waymart Staff Deliver Pizza to Veterans Shelter**

SCI Waymart Superintendent Kevin Ransom, Deputy Bobbie Bassett, CHCA Desiree Hartman, Deputy Joseph Grillo, CCPM David Gorman and CSA Christine Altemier delivered "Little Caesars" pizza and visited St. Francis Commons Veterans Shelter for homeless veterans, in Scranton, February 27. Steve Nocilla, Director of Housing & Residential, was thrilled to give them a guided tour along with Ryan Pollock, Veteran Program Director. This program has been in



existence for 29 years and this is their third location, the new location is a brand-new construction. The shelter houses 30 veterans, one of which is female, and the veterans can have one emotional support pet. Currently three dogs have homes there with a veteran. This is an 18-month program that offers therapy, has recreational facilities and even has a garden where they grow their own vegetables. A spring visit will be planned for a cookout.

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## Eastern Region Staff Serve Veterans

On May 1, the Eastern Region Superintendents and staff met at St. Francis Commons to prepare a lunch meal for the veterans.

Saint Francis Commons is a transitional housing facility for homeless veterans, centrally located in downtown Scranton Pennsylvania. It is a 30-unit facility and there are approximately 20 veterans living in the fully furnished apartments at this time. All of the veterans come from different backgrounds and history, but the common theme is: being homeless brought them together.



Each veteran has his or her own bedroom and bathroom, while utilizing community kitchens, dining rooms, laundry rooms and TV lounges to encourage socialization and community.

The program provides up to 24 months of temporary housing, case management, food assistance, clothing assistance, on-site counseling, vocational assistance, transportation assistance, recreational opportunities, and referrals to a wide array of services. The facility is staffed 24 hours per day, 365 days per year. The staffing includes, but isn't limited, to case managers, psychology staff, maintenance staff and transportation staff.

Each veteran completes an individualized goal plan with their case manager to outline the goals they would like to accomplish and develop a housing plan to attain permanent and sustainable housing upon discharge. As well, daily transportation is provided to the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center for any Veteran needing to attend appointments.

We were grateful for the opportunity to give back to some who have already given so much for us.

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## Forest Honor Guard Marches in Memorial Day Parade

Members of SCI Forest's Honor Guard participated in Marienville's Memorial Day Parade and Service. The members that participated are: Lt. Dietrich; Lt. Cochran; Sgt. Snyder; Sgt. Harriger; Sgt. Montour; COI Niznik; and COI Clarke.

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## Veteran Court Graduation in Dauphin County

The Dauphin County Veterans Court, presided by Judge Tully, celebrated a graduation with Statewide Veterans Coordinator Ryan Yoder as the keynote speaker on May 17. Yoder took time to personally recognize and thank a World War II veteran who was present at the event and also sang the national anthem. The inspiring ceremony encouraged everyone to support these courts and our veterans. The purpose of the veteran court is to focus on the root of the issue, and help veterans get in a specific rehabilitation program to return to the community better than when they left it due to a misdemeanor. Bureau of Community Corrections Director Daniel McIntyre said, "[Yoder's] testimonial was impactful and very much appreciated by all in attendance. He was encouraging and open to all the Veterans Court participants, sharing his own personal journey through the adjustment back to civilian life."

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## **Dallas Holds Annual Memorial Day Service**

SCI Dallas held its annual Memorial Day service on May 24. The theme for this year's event was Posthumous Medal of Honor. There were more than 140 in attendance including incarcerated veterans, Inmate Veterans Organization/Veterans Service Unit Color Guard, SCI Dallas' Shiloh Singers and DOC personnel. Also in attendance were seven military service dogs, along with their respective handlers from the Hounds for Heroes Program.



**Pictured from left: Mary Ritsick, Rich Podguski, Eric Darling, Ryan Yoder, Frank DePiero and Justin Adams.**

The service included the reading of names of three national Posthumous Medal of Honor recipients—Capt. Carl L. Sitter (USMC), Lt. Michael Murphy (USMC) and Capt. Emmet Crawford (USAR)—as well as a patriotic medley, folding of the American Flag, Taps and the posting of the Remembrance Flag and Memorial Wreath. The wreath was donated to the Gino Merli Veterans Center in Scranton.

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## Laurel Highlands Staff Honor Memorial Day

Staff at SCI Laurel Highlands honored our veterans for Memorial Day on May 24. Various staff members represented the different branches of service by wearing their uniforms. The Honor Guard presented the colors, and a wreath was presented by Superintendent Melissa Hainsworth and a member of the Honor Guard to remember our fallen service members.



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## Correctional Industries Inmates Fill Orders for DMVA

The Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs includes the PA National Guard and serves all veterans in the state—including by operating six veterans homes throughout PA.

When Delaware Valley Veterans Home in Philadelphia needed furniture to renovate their "Main Street," DMVA hired the inmates in Pennsylvania Correctional Industries. Inmates in the wood shop at SCI Rockview produced the following furniture:



When all the items are completed by PCI, the home will hold a dedication ceremony to celebrate.

Inmates also created furniture for DMVA's headquarters at Fort Indiantown Gap.



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## **Phoenix, Trio of Employees Honored by ESGR**

On Sept. 27, SCI Phoenix Major Gina Clark, Unit Manager Jeffrey Baker and Superintendent Tammy Ferguson were presented with awards by Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR). The award recipients were nominated by Paul Jokiel, Captain (U.S. Army) and Corrections Counselor 2 (SCI Phoenix). Staff and veterans in the inmate population were invited to the ceremony.

ESGR is an office of the Department of Defense and promotes support for Guard and Reserve service by advocating relevant initiatives, recognizing outstanding support, increasing awareness of applicable laws, and resolving conflict between employers and service members. Former Adjutant General of the Pennsylvania National Guard and Pennsylvania Chairperson for ESGR, Major General (Retired) Wesley E. Craig, presented the awards and was the keynote speaker for this ceremony.

The ceremony was a collaborative effort of ESGR and the SCI Phoenix Activities, Chaplaincy, Culinary, and IT departments and the SCI Phoenix Honor Guard.

The award presented were:

Above and Beyond Award – SCI Phoenix

Seven Seals Award – Gina Clark, Major



Patriotic Supporter Award – Jeffrey Baker, Unit Manager



Patriotic Supporter Award – Tammy Ferguson, Superintendent



"I cannot think of a more humbling experience than being recognized for our support of the United States Armed Forces and the servicemen and servicewomen who continue to defend our freedoms," Ferguson said. "To be nominated and recognized for these awards by one of our own servicemen is truly an honor. As Capt. Jokiel makes his final preparations for his third deployment overseas, please keep him and his family in your thoughts and prayers."

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## **Mercer Begins New Dog Training Program to Benefit Veterans**

SCI Mercer hosted a media event announcing the partnership with the previously-mentioned Guardian Angel Medical Service Dogs, Inc. (GAMSD) in Sept. 2019. The event had many dignitaries in attendance, including DOC Secretary John Wetzel, Pennsylvania Senator Michele Brooks, Brigadier General Mark Schindler (Deputy Adjutant General – Army for the Pennsylvania National Guard), retired Pittsburgh Steelers star Rocky Bleier and representatives from both the Governor's office and local representatives.

**Training Pups for Vets**

Through Guardian Angels Medical Service Dogs, SCI Mercer's new dog program is ready to support Pennsylvania's veterans.

**First of Its Kind**

This is Guardian Angels' first program in a prison—and it will actually speed up training. Normal training requires more than 2 years, but training in the prison will only require 1 year.

**Saving Lives of PA Vets**

All dogs will be donated to Pennsylvania veterans with PTSD. To date, 300 veterans have received dogs through Guardian Angels—and thanks to the program the suicide rate of the 300 is zero.

**College Credit for Inmates**

In addition to the experience and opportunity to give back, inmates selected for the program could earn college credit through Slippery Rock University.

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DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

The media event welcomed both print and TV media and occurred on the VSU. Here, Veteran Corrections Counselor Aaron Diaz introduced the unit's honor guard with presenting the colors, followed by the introduction of Mercer Superintendent Melinda Adams. Supt. Adams thanked everyone for their presence and acknowledged Sen. Brooks for initiating this program into SCI Mercer's VSU. If it weren't for the collaboration between Sen. Brooks, Carol Borden, and Sec. Wetzel this program would have never come about. Borden shared with the assembly statistically what this program has done for struggling veterans. Twenty-two veterans commit suicide each day. Since the implementation of the Guardian Angel Dog Program, Carol has paired over 300 dogs and there have been zero suicides and only one divorce amongst the pairs.

Sen. Brooks, Brig. Gen. Schindler, Bleier and Sec. Wetzel all spoke to the group, and the assembly concluded with the retrieving of the flags by the unit' honor guard.

The dignitaries then mingled amongst the unit speaking with staff and inmates. Bleier, a retired Pittsburgh Steeler and veteran, even took time for photos with staff and autographs with inmates. During that time, the media went into a separate room with Guardian Angel Dog recipient Dustin Schneider. Schneider spoke of what his dog, Spangle, has done for him, and said, "When it's easy to doubt yourself and it's easy to get sucked into the nightmares and it's easy to get sucked into the depression, she just looks at me and I go, 'OK, I can change my comprehension.'"

Dustin suffers from severe PTSD and nightmares. At the onset of a nightmare, Spangle moves into action, waking Dustin and usually placing a ball in his hand, hovering atop him. The bond that the two of them share is immeasurable.

SCI Mercer is the company's first program to be initiated outside of their Florida training headquarter and the first program of its kind to be initiated specifically for veterans in a correctional facility. The currently-enrolled 12 inmates are military veterans who will train dogs specifically for use by veterans in Pennsylvania. GAMSD's motto is "Together, we can unleash the power to heal."

Carol Borden and the SCI Mercer staff are hoping that one of the dogs from the first training class will be placed locally so we will be able to have regular updated visits.

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## Albion, Mercer, Cambridge Springs Support Veterans with Ruck the Bay

On Oct. 13, C.O.V.E.R. teams from SCI Albion, SCI Mercer and SCI Cambridge Springs came together to support EUMA's Liberty House in Erie PA for the 2019 Ruck the Bay 10K. The EUMA Liberty House is the only transitional housing available for homeless veterans in Erie County. Each institution worked together to provide an amazing amount of suitable donations that were taken on a ruck to observe memorials of fallen military heroes and to help end veteran homelessness.



SCI Mercer Activities Manager April Harvey was one of two participants in the march that was a Comrade in Arms, which meant she donated a generous amount and was one of the leaders of the step-off to begin the march.



**Top left: SCI Albion Corrections Counselor 2 Paul Szallar**

**Top right: SCI Mercer Deputy Superintendent of Facility Management William Woods and Activities Manager April Harvey**

**Left: SCI Cambridge Springs Custodial Maintenance Repairman Kenneth Hulings**

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## **DOC Employee Serves in Blue Star Mothers Group**

Belinda Nester, who serves as executive assistant to Executive Deputy Secretary for Community Corrections and Reentry George Little, served with her fellow Blue Star Mothers of Central PA 10 by packing 42 boxes of supplies to send to service members currently deployed. The boxes contained a variety of snacks and meal items, hygiene products, magazines, playing cards, blankets, thank-you notes from first graders and a letter from the Blue Star Mothers.



Blue Star Mothers of Central PA 10 are mothers, stepmothers, grandmothers, foster mothers and female legal guardians who have children serving in the military or who are veterans. The group aims to support each other and their children while promoting patriotism.

Belinda (second from the right in the above photo) lost her youngest daughter, Aereyelle Dominique Dubois, three years ago. Elle, as everyone knew her by, joined the Army and was a staff sergeant with the 257 Engineering Company of Johnstown. Elle is described by Belinda as a beautiful, courageous, intelligent, kind, spunky soldier and nurse, who was a friend to everyone she met. She counseled victims of rape and abuse, having lived through those same horrors with her biological family. The Nesters took Elle in and raised her as their youngest daughter. Belinda said that going to these meetings and working with these other women helped ease her sorrow following Elle's death and has allowed her to know that they can still make a difference.

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## DOC Leadership Serves Central PA Communities, Including Veterans Centers

Being a good leader often means being a good servant, and the DOC leadership team proved just that.

In the midst of a three-day leadership summit at the DOC Training Academy, DOC leaders spread out in the local community and served.

Superintendents, executive staff and Sec. John Wetzel and his deputies all rolled up their sleeves to serve in Harrisburg, York and Hershey. They split up and focused on four projects:



Planting 51 trees at Harrisburg city parks, including 17 at Italian Lake

Winterizing Harrisburg's Allison Hill neighborhood, including removing trash, leaves and other litter

Stocking food and providing meals for children at Cocoa Packs in Hershey

Delivering donations, cleaning the facilities and preparing food at Mr. Sandy's Veteran's Helping Hands Center in York and Robert M. Jackson Veteran Center in Harrisburg

For the veterans centers, the plan was originally to support the York facility. Wernersville Community Corrections Center, York CCC, Pennsylvania Correctional Industries, DOC Central Office and the Riverfront Office Complex gathered and donated items to Veteran's Helping Hand, a non-profit founded by Vietnam veteran Sandy Walker. Walker created the center to provide emergency shelter, food, clothing and transportation to homeless and Veterans in need within York County.

Throughout October, the DOC facilities collected hats, gloves, scarves, non-perishable foods, toiletries and more for the center. They packed suitcases full of donations for the home and its patrons.

When all the items were gathered, it was apparent there was enough to support two facilities, so the decision was made to also support the Robert M. Jackson Veteran Center in Harrisburg. DOC leaders spent time at both facilities organizing the donations, cleaning the facilities and preparing food for Veteran residents.



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## Smithfield Honor Guard Marches in Parade

SCI Smithfield Honor Guard represented the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections in the annual Veteran's Day parade in the community of Huntingdon on Nov. 2.



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