

‘We Can Be Better Than Our Mistakes’

VFW opens first-ever Post inside a prison, and its members hope to serve as a model for other prisons throughout the country.

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Last October, the Platte River VFW Post 12226 was instituted in Sterling, Colo. What sets this Post apart from other newly established Posts is that it is located inside the Sterling Correctional Facility. The Post hopes to serve as an example for other prisons across the country, which could create a boon for VFW membership.

“We are the pilot program setting the model for all future Posts formed inside any other prison around the country,” said Post Commander Tom Stewart, a Navy vet who served aboard the USS Tripoli during Operation Vigilant Warrior in the mid-1990s.

The decision to grant the Post’s charter was not without controversy.

“Some have a hard time seeing incarcerated people as veterans,” said Stewart, who has been incarcerated for 19 years. “We must change that paradigm. We must show we can be better than our mistakes.”

Then-VFW Department of Colorado Commander John Keene presided over the institution of VFW Post 12226.

“Our motto is ‘No One Does More for Veterans,’” Keene said. “There are no qualifiers in that. It just says vets. In my mind, a veteran is a veteran.”

Keene is one of several VFW officials who supported the decision to open the Post. Carol Thomas, a captain with the Colorado Department of Corrections was instrumental in getting approval for the Post from the VFW. Thomas, a 36-year Navy veteran and now the VFW Department of Colorado commander, worked closely with Stewart and other incarcerated veterans to build the framework for the Post.

During the VFW’s 124th National Convention last July, Thomas was able to secure approval

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for the Post charter.

“[Thomas] was a strong advocate, along with many other Department officers, to advocate for us at the VFW National Convention,” Stewart said. “She was the outside force giving voice to the inside force.”

Then-VFW Department of Colorado Chief of Staff Jim Sheridan worked to prepare new members and serves as a mentor for the new Post.

“We’re stepping into a new era,” said Sheridan, a 32-year veteran of the Navy and Army. “I saw I had fellow brothers in here who deserved a chance to show themselves.”

Keene, Thomas and Sheridan are not alone. Former VFW Department of Colorado Commander Geri Rimpley was an early supporter of efforts to start VFW Post 12226. Michael Stevens, past Colorado District 4 commander, is a corrections officer at Sterling. Thomas and Stevens also will serve as Post mentors during the first year.

Also lending support are past VFW Department of Colorado Auxiliary President Phil Reinpold and past VFW Department of Colorado Auxiliary Chief of Staff Linda Reinpold, who will help mentor Auxiliary Post 12226.

“We value every veteran,” Phil said. “If we believe the purpose of prison is rehabilitation, then this helps with the rehabilitation of our veterans. Anything we can do for vets and their families, to support them in all they do, will make an impact in our communities.”

‘A NEW ERA’

VFW Post 12226 offers members a chance to give back to their communities through outreach and fundraising.

Some see the Post as an opportunity to call attention to issues incarcerated veterans face.

“It would be nice if we could do something to make a change, not just for veterans who are incarcerated, but for veterans as a whole,” said former Army Ranger, Purple Heart recipient and new Post 12226 member Chuck Garlick. “There is a clear connection between PTSD, substance abuse and criminal behavior in a lot of cases. It would be great to be able to shed some light on that.”

Garlick, who has been incarcerated for 14 years, said he understands the concerns some people may have about the Post.

“The stigma of being a convicted felon is going to be a challenge,” said Garlick, who served two tours to Iraq — once in Ramadi and the other in Fallujah. “A lot of people think because we are criminals, we are no longer veterans.”

VFW Post 12226 Junior Vice Commander Richard “Sarge” Moreau, an Army veteran who served in Vietnam, has been incarcerated for 14 years. He sees another benefit offered to VFW members.

“This is a really neat situation for a guy in prison to be a part of this brotherhood,” Moreau said. “We are able to hang on to a form of honor that is not normally accessible in prison. It is something to feel good about.”

The success or failure of VFW Post 12226 will likely determine whether VFW moves forward with future Posts in correctional facilities around the country. Phil Reinbold and Sheridan both say raising awareness will be key.

“We have to show people outside we do have true heroes in correctional facilities no matter what they have done in the past,” Sheridan said. “This is a new era, and I am very proud to be a part of it.”

This article is featured in the 2024 August issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Ryan J. Krueger. Krueger is an Army veteran who has been incarcerated at the Sterling Correctional Facility since 2006.