

**WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL
RESOURCES DIVISION OF LAW ENFORCEMENT
VETERANS ADMINISTRATION ON-THE-JOB
TRAINING BENEFITS**

Captain Charles U. Costilow

Undoubtedly, one of the greatest deterring factors experienced by many natural resource law enforcement administrators in their efforts to establish and maintain a thoroughly trained and experienced force of officers is an excessive rate of personnel turnover during the early years of employment.

All too often much time, effort, and money is applied to the development of a proficient officer only to lose him after he has acquired the knowledge and skill to be a real asset to his department.

Throughout the history of the West Virginia Department of Natural Resources, the Division of Law Enforcement has been plagued with that problem. In 1970, Colonel Eye initiated a study to determine the cause of the high rate of turnover, of relatively new employees, with a view to instigating remedial action.

Transition from normal civilian life to law enforcement imposes many adjustments upon both the recruit and his family. West Virginia Law Enforcement Division policy prohibits the assignment of a recruit to the county in which he is living at the time of employment for at least two years and requires him to move his family to the assigned county. The expense of the initial move is borne by the recruit and thereafter the Department bears the expense of moves occasioned by transfer, promotion, etc.

The facts that the hours are quite often long and irregular, that he is constantly on call, and that transfers are at the will and pleasure of the Department are explained to the recruit, and if married, to his wife prior to his enlistment.

The study revealed that financial problems created by moving expenses and maintaining a respectable standard of living during the transition period, when expenses are highest and pay is lowest, often placed the recruit in a financial position from which he could not recover in a year or two and ultimately led to his leaving to accept employment which offered immediate higher pay even though he preferred law enforcement work and the long-range benefits provided by his new employer might not be as attractive.

The solution to the problem was obvious. A means had to be found to provide additional compensation during the first year of employment in order to avoid placing new officers in an undesirable financial position from which they might well be years recovering.

Exploration for means of providing such compensation led to consultation with the Adult Education Division of the West Virginia Department of Education. It was discovered that they were the approving agency for on-the-job veterans training benefits and would look with favor upon our application for approval as a veteran's training agency.

While it was recognized that the financial benefits provided by this program would not be available to recruits who had no military experience, consideration was also given to the facts that those recruits had enjoyed an opportunity to be more gainfully employed than the veteran during his service in the military and that non-veterans comprise a very small percentage of the recruits enlisted.

Application was made for approval of the Division as a veteran training agency effective October 1, 1970. The application was approved by the State agency and forwarded by them to the U.S. Veterans Administration. Anticipating V.A. approval, individual applications for veterans educational eligibility certificates were completed by all veterans employed on or after Oc-

tober 1, 1970, forwarded to the V.A. and the certificates were issued. By February 1, 1971, all the details were completed and we were prepared to affect the program as soon as final approval was received but the program was destined to suffer a severe and disappointing setback. During that month, we received notification from the V.A. that our application had been rejected and that we were ineligible for approval as a training agency but no explanation with regard to the facts and/or circumstances on which that determination was based was offered.

In May of 1971, Chief Eye directed the writer to endeavor to find out the reason for the ineligibility, determine whether or not there existed any possibility of reconsideration of the decision by the V.A., and if so, take the necessary action to obtain the desired result.

Several contacts with local V.A. Service Officers revealed that they knew of no federal law, regulation, or policy which would render our organization ineligible and that in their opinion the approval being sought could be granted or refused at the discretion of the regional adjudication officer for the V.A.

The approving officer for the Department of Education was contacted and he advised that he would make some inquiries and contacts in an effort to get the approval and that we should submit an application to him requesting the approval to be effective August 1, 1971, which he would forward to the V.A. Regional Office at the appropriate time. Subsequently, approval was granted effective August 1, 1971.

After all those officers who had been enlisted August 1, 1971, and thereafter had been enrolled in the program and received their first payments, correspondence was directed to the V.A. asking for a waiver of the effective date of the approval and justifying the request by pointing out that all veterans employed between October 1, 1970 and August 1, 1971, had applied for and been denied the benefits and had received the same training for which they had not been compensated only because the V.A. had made an incorrect determination with regard to our eligibility for training agency status. The approval date waiver request was granted and all veterans employed since October 1, 1970, have received or are receiving V.A. benefits.

To date, forty recruits have been enrolled in the program. Thirty-five are still working. Four failed to perform in an acceptable manner during their probation. Only one desirable employee enrolled in the program has been lost; he was enlisted by the West Virginia State Police, February 1, this year. Since that date, no employee with three years or less service has left the Division.

We do not contend that the V.A. on-the-job training program is solely responsible for the sharp decline in the annual rate of turnover we have experienced in recent years, as there are many contributing factors to creating working conditions conducive to retaining personnel. While we concur in the generally accepted opinion that pay is not a motivating influence, we also believe that it has an unsurpassed, quick-setting, adhesive quality for glueing people to their chosen profession until the other job satisfaction ingredients can be applied and a permanent bond formed.

Unlike most federally funded programs, the reporting and recording procedure is relatively simple and requires very little administrative expenditure. On the date of employment, about fifteen minutes are spent by the secretary completing the necessary forms and about thirty minutes are required to thoroughly explain the reporting and recording procedures. Thereafter, the recruit spends no more than thirty minutes additional time per month and only five minutes of the training officer's and secretary's time are required monthly to do the necessary chores of reporting and recording. Hence, with twelve men enrolled in the program only one hour of the training officer's and secretary's time is required to perform the administrative work each month.

In summarization, it can be said that the V.A. on-the-job training program has been a great contributing factor to a drastic reduction of the turnover rate of recruits whose performances warrant their attaining permanent employee status upon completion of their probationary service.

Each loss of a desirable employee during the first through the third year of employment represents a wasted expenditure of several thousand dollars to train, equip and develop him to the point he can perform at maximum efficiency.

Surely, failure to take advantage of a program which contributed so substantially to retaining desirable personnel while requiring so little administrative expenditure would be contrary to the dictates of reason.

Gentlemen, originally this paper was concluded at the period preceding this statement but as late as last Friday, one week ago, it came to our attention that the interest of our Department might best be served by revising our training agreements and switching from a Veterans On-the-Job Training Program to a Veterans Apprentice Training Program.

Such a revision will permit the trainee to be compensated in accordance with the scale shown in the attached pamphlet for all of his eligibility up to thirty-six months instead of the present limitation of thirteen months.

During the past week consultations have been held with Mr. Robert Siler, Director, Veterans Education and Training, West Virginia Department of Education and Secretary-Treasurer of the National Association of State Approving Agencies and with Mr. Jessie James, State Supervisor, Bureau of Apprentice and Training, U.S. Department of Labor and it now appears that no obstacles will be encountered in affecting such a revision of our program.

We are hopeful that the approval date will permit those who have been compensated for 13 months to receive an additional 23 months that the necessary paper work can be completed and the revised program put into effect no later than November 1, 1973.