



Department of
Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration

Fact Sheet

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VA Services for Veterans Involved in the Justice System: VA's Veterans Justice Outreach Program

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Program provides outreach to Veterans involved with the local justice system. (i.e. police, jails, and courts) The goal of the program is to provide timely access to VA services for eligible Veterans, preventing homelessness and avoiding unnecessary criminalization, while providing routes to mental health and other clinical treatment aimed toward a lasting rehabilitation and independence for the involved Veterans.

Vital Statistics

Approximately 50 percent of homeless Veterans have histories of encounters with the legal system. The most recent data from the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) Survey of Inmates in Local Jails (2002) indicate that 9.3 percent of people incarcerated in jails are Veterans.¹ For 70 percent of Veterans in the jail population, the controlling offense was a non-violent crime. On average, these Veterans had five prior arrests, and 45 percent had served two or more state prison sentences. Three out of five of these Veterans had substance dependency problems, almost one in three had serious mental illness, and one in five was homeless, while 60 percent had a serious medical problem.

VJO Specialists

Each VA medical center has a VJO Specialist who serves as a liaison between VA and the local criminal justice system. Contact information for each Specialist is available at: <http://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/VJO.asp>.

Structural and procedural differences among local justice systems dictate that not all VJO Specialists' roles are similar. Despite these necessary variations, certain key themes remain constant. Specifically, the VJO Specialists are responsible for direct outreach, assessment, and case management for justice-involved Veterans in local courts and jails, and liaison with local justice system partners. Additionally, specialists may provide or coordinate training for law enforcement personnel on Veteran-specific issues including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). They may assist in eligibility determination and enrollment, function as members of court treatment teams, use evidence-based

¹ U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Survey of Inmates in Local Jails, 2002. Conducted by U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 2006.

interventions appropriate for the justice-involved Veteran population (e.g., Motivational Interviewing) and refer and link Veterans to appropriate VA and non-VA community services. Each specialist's time may be spent differently in achieving this mission. One specialist may spend time primarily with Veterans in court, while another's time is spent almost exclusively on jail outreach. Both can be equally valid models for achieving VJO's goal of linking justice-involved Veterans with VA services, because each will reflect a locally-informed decision, made in consultation with community partners, as to the most effective way to reach Veterans.

Veterans Treatment Courts

VJO Specialists work with Veterans in a variety of justice system settings; however, their work in the courts continues to have the highest visibility. Increasingly, this work is done in Veterans Treatment Courts (VTC), a recently developed, but rapidly growing model designed to connect justice-involved Veterans with needed treatment. The National Association of Drug Court Professionals describes Veterans Treatment Courts as "hybrid Drug and Mental Health Courts that use the Drug Court model to serve Veterans struggling with addiction, serious mental illness and/or co-occurring disorders. They promote sobriety, recovery and stability through a coordinated response that involves cooperation and collaboration with VA medical centers, the Veterans Benefits Administration, volunteer Veteran mentors, and Veterans' family support organizations." VA was instrumental in creating the first VTC in Buffalo, New York, and efficient linkage to VA health care and benefits remain a defining aspect of the VTC model.

Law Enforcement Training

Because a Veteran's contact with the justice system will often begin with a law enforcement encounter, VJO Specialists often provide training and consultation on Veteran-specific issues to community law enforcement agencies. VA Police have first-hand knowledge of the priorities and concerns that community law enforcement officers deal with, and are essential partners in helping VJO Specialists frame and deliver their messages effectively. At many facilities, VA Police coordinate with local law enforcement to enact safe, rapid-handoff procedures when Veterans in crisis arrive at the VA medical center. The VA Law Enforcement Training Center in Little Rock, Arkansas is taking a lead role in the dissemination of Veteran-specific skills to help law enforcement agencies distinguish between criminal behavior and mental health crises when working with Veterans around the country.

Jail Outreach

VJO Specialists often contact Veterans in jail who are either detained pre-trial or serving a short sentence. The specialists work closely with jail administrators and staff to identify Veterans as quickly as possible and provide outreach, conduct an initial clinical assessment, and facilitate linkage to needed treatment and other resources upon release.

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