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

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Program provides outreach to Veterans involved with the local criminal 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.

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 On average, these Veterans had five prior arrests, and 45 percent had served two or more state prison sentences. Three out of five 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. From the beginning of the VJO program in fiscal year (FY) 2010 through the end of FY 2013, VJO Specialists served over 66,000 Veterans, gave over 4,800 presentations to 53,000 VA and community audience members, and participated in 289 trainings for over 6,000 police officers.

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 identical. VJO Specialists provide direct outreach, assessment, and, often, case management for justice-involved Veterans in local courts and jails. They may also provide or coordinate training for law enforcement personnel on Veteran-specific issues such as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. Specialists may assist in eligibility determination and enrollment, function as members of court treatment teams, use evidence-based interventions appropriate for the justice-involved Veteran population² (e.g., Motivational Interviewing) and refer and link Veterans to appropriate VA and community services. Each Specialist's time may be spent differently in achieving this mission. One may work

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.

² See Blodgett, J., Fuh, I., Maisel, N., & Midboe, A. (2013). A structured evidence review to identify treatment needs of justice-involved veterans and associated psychological interventions. Available at: <http://csgjusticecenter.org/nrrc/publications/a-structured-evidence-review-to-identify-treatment-needs-of-justice-involved-veterans-and-associated-psychological-interventions/>.

primarily with Veterans in court, while another conducts outreach mostly in jails.³ 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.⁴

VJO Specialists work with Veterans in a variety of justice system settings, but their work in the courts is the most visible. Increasingly, this work is done in Veterans Treatment Courts (VTC), a new but rapidly growing⁵ model designed to connect justice-involved Veterans with needed treatment. VA was instrumental in creating the first VTC in Buffalo, New York, and efficient linkage to VA health care and benefits remains a defining aspect of the VTC model.⁶

VJO Specialists often contact Veterans in jail settings. The Specialists work closely with jail administrators and staff to identify Veterans as quickly as possible, conduct an initial clinical assessment, and facilitate linkage to needed treatment and other resources upon release.

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. As part of a joint national initiative to promote positive resolutions of crisis encounters with law enforcement, VJO Specialists and other VA mental health providers at each medical center serve on local training teams with VA Police officers. By the end of 2015, all VA Police officers will have received this two day skill-enhancement training.

VJO's newest initiative is the Veterans Reentry Search Service (VRSS), which launched in FY 2013. VRSS allows justice system users to identify all Veterans among their inmates or defendants via a comparison with VA's list of all Veterans who have served in the United States military. Since justice-involved Veterans tend to under-report their military service, many systems see more Veterans than they know of. For more information about VRSS, please go to: <https://vrss.va.gov/> or call the contact number on this Fact Sheet.

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³ See Clark, S., McGuire, J., & Blue-Howells, J. (2010). Development of veterans treatment courts: Local and legislative initiatives. *Drug Court Review*, 7, 171-208.

⁴ See Blue-Howells, J.H., Clark, S.C., van den Berk-Clark, C., & McGuire, J.F. (2013). The US Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans Justice Programs and the sequential intercept model: Case examples in national dissemination of intervention for justice-involved veterans. *Psychological Services*, 10, 48-53.

⁵ An informal VA survey identified 257 operational VTCs in November 2013.

⁶ Justice for Vets, "The Ten Key Components of Veterans Treatment Courts." Available at: <http://justiceforvets.org/sites/default/files/files/Ten%20Key%20Components%20of%20Veterans%20Treatment%20Courts%20.pdf>.