



Department of
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Office of Patient Care Services –
Office of Mental Health Services

Fact Sheet

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VA services for Veterans involved in the justice system: The Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Initiative

The VJO initiative is designed to provide outreach to Veterans in contact with the justice system through encounters with police, jails, and courts. The goal of the VJO program is to provide timely access to VA services for eligible justice-involved Veterans to avoid unnecessary criminalization and incarceration of Veteran offenders with mental illness.

The most recent U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) Survey of Inmates in Local Jails (2002) data indicate that 9.3% of people incarcerated in jails are Veterans.¹ Historically, reports of Vietnam and post-Vietnam era Veterans with histories of civilian and/or military trauma have suggested an association between trauma and subsequent contact with the legal system. Half of homeless Veterans have histories of encounters with the legal system, and the news media report with frequency stories of returning OEF and OIF Veterans being arrested for a variety of offenses, a number of which appear to be related to reactions to extended periods of battle readiness and combat exposure over multiple tours in the current wars, and maladaptive coping upon return to life in the U.S.

For Veterans in the jail population, the controlling offense for 70% was a non-violent crime, on average these Veterans had 5 prior arrests, and 45% had served 2 or more state prison sentences. Three in five of these Veterans have substance dependency problems, almost one in three has serious mental illness, one in five was homeless, and 60% had a serious medical problem. Psychological trauma is likely a common occurrence in this population: 18% have experienced either childhood sexual or physical abuse, 20% were in combat, and 36% had experienced either of these stressors. At minimum, 90,000 of the 9 million unique inmates released annually from U.S. jails are Veterans. A large majority (82%) are likely eligible for VA services, having been discharged either under honorable (65%) or general with honorable (17%) conditions. In sum, these data indicate that there are substantial numbers of Veterans in jail eligible for VA services, they have high levels of health and mental health service need, and many of them are potentially eligible for referral to, and are good candidates for, drug or mental health court intervention as an alternative to incarceration.

Prior to developments during the past year, a 2008 inventory of services to justice-involved Veterans indicated substantial involvement with community justice partners:

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.

- 28% of VAMCs provided outreach to Veterans in jails;
- 30% of VAMCs had agreements with jails, courts, DAs, or probation about VA services for Veterans;
- 29% of VAMCs were on task forces linking Veterans in jail to VA or non-VA services upon release;
- 25% of VAMCs worked with courts to identify Veterans for possible referral to VA;
- 32% of VAMCs educated/trained non-VA law enforcement about mental health issues relevant to Veterans.

The Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) initiative formally began in June 2008 with the publication of VHA Handbook 1160.01, Uniform Mental Health Services in VA Medical Centers and Clinics, which states: “VA is committed to the principle that when veterans’ non-violent offenses are products of mental illness, veterans and their communities are often better served by mental health treatment than incarceration.” This was followed by a planning conference in December 2008, with justice system experts and VA’s mental health leadership to develop models for police, jail and court initiatives. In April 2009, VHA hosted a Veterans Justice Outreach Summit, attended by two State Supreme Court justices and six Federal and State judges, several of whom have implemented successful Veterans Court programs. These justices and judges stressed the importance of active VA engagement with local courts, including Veterans’ and other treatment courts, to ensure that justice-involved Veterans are connected with treatment services appropriate to their needs.

VA Medical Centers have designated Veterans’ Justice Outreach Specialists, responsible for direct outreach, assessment, and case management for justice-involved Veterans in local courts and jails, and liaison with local justice system partners. VJO Specialists provide or coordinate training for law enforcement personnel on Veteran-specific issues including PTSD and TBI; in their court-focused role, Specialists assist in eligibility determination and enrollment, function as members of court treatment teams, use evidence-based 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. Regional training sessions for VJO Specialists began at the end of FY 2009, with a session in Buffalo, New York for VISNs 1 and 2. These sessions will continue through FY 2010, providing an opportunity for every Specialist to learn critical elements of working with the justice system, network and share strategies with other Specialists, and observe a treatment court in action. These regional trainings will be complemented by a national VJO training session in FY 2010. U.S. Departments of Justice (Bureau of Justice Assistance) and Labor as well as the National Association of Drug Court Professionals are additional partners in the development of VJO Specialist training.

VA Medical Centers are actively engaged in planning expanded efforts, particularly in the areas of police training as part of the Crisis Intervention Team model, participation in Veterans Treatment Courts, and participation in SAMHSA’s Grants for Jail Diversion and Trauma Recovery with Priority to Veterans.

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