



Veterans Reentry Programming

Supporting Transition to Civilian Life Across the Sequential Intercept Model



**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF CORRECTIONS**

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American University, in partnership with the National Institute of Corrections, has developed this white paper to highlight innovative approaches to assisting veterans in contact with the criminal justice system successfully transition to civilian life across all points of the sequential intercept model.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to those who gave their time and shared their insights, without which the Veterans Compendium Project would not have been compiled. We have the deepest appreciation for the work they are doing to make communities safer and to provide justice-involved veterans with opportunities to receive "A Second Chance."

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ABOUT THE Veterans Compendium Project

By Greg Crawford



SHORTLY AFTER MY ARRIVAL at the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) in 2012, I was sitting in my office one day when my then supervisor, Jim Cosby, walked by and said, “I’d like you to do something about veterans.” At the time, I didn’t really know what he meant.

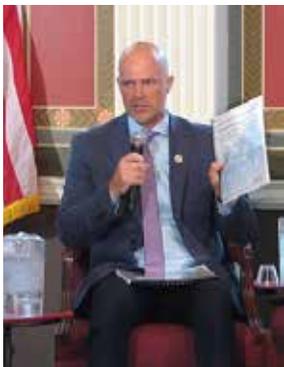
Jim’s comment to me was just before the first veterans treatment court conference held by Justice For Vets in Washington, D.C., in 2013. I attended that conference along with veteran-specific meetings in the local area and other national conferences and was introduced to some key figures fueling the veterans treatment court movement.

One of the first people to whom I was introduced was author and editor Bernie Edelman. Our first encounter took place in the food court at Union Station in Washington, D.C., just prior to that first veterans treatment court conference. We soon started scribbling down ideas on napkins, strategized an outline for a publication, and prepared for not only the conference, but also what would be this project. I had originally asked Bernie for 15-20 pages on sort of a “how to” guide for veterans treatment courts. To develop this, we made several site visits to veterans treatment courts across the country, collected tons of material through observations and recorded interviews, took photographs, and documented our experiences.

Our first site visit was to where it all began: Buffalo, New York, with Judge Russell. Judge Robert Russell had started the Buffalo Veterans Treatment Court in 2008, and when we were on site in February of 2014, there were over a hundred similar courts in jurisdictions across the country with scores more in various stages of planning and implementation. I couldn’t believe what I was witnessing: a judge welcoming a justice-involved individual into his courtroom and asking the audience to give the veteran who stood before him a standing ovation. There were Veterans Justice Outreach specialists from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) connecting veterans to services, volunteer peer mentors filling the gaps that the VA and court could not provide, and a judge with a treatment court team composed of prosecuting attorneys, defense, probation, the VA, and community-based treatment providers. They were all working in concert to not only improve community safety, but also see veterans restore their lives and once again become productive members of society. That first experience in Buffalo gave me goose bumps, and I was all in for veterans treatment courts, and essentially, the compendium project was launched.

Mr. Edelman ended up giving us 40,000 words for what we dubbed “*Veterans Treatment Courts: A Second Chance for Vets Who Have Lost Their Way.*” This publication ultimately served as the platform for many of NIC’s veterans-related publications and resources. It led to a 3-hour live

broadcast bearing the same name (*A Second Chance*), webinars, live panel events, conference workshops, and additional projects that focused on filling the gaps for the field to improve outcomes for veterans involved in the criminal justice system, along with four subsequent publications (including this one) that would become the Veterans Compendium Project.



The Veterans Compendium Project picked up some steam when NIC asked me to work with other divisions to create additional resources that intersected with the entire criminal justice system. In 2016, we formed the Justice-Involved Veterans Network (JIVN) and it provided an opportunity for all divisions to work collaboratively along with some of our federal partners and representatives from across the spectrum of justice. We worked to identify the gaps in the field and how we (NIC and the network) might help fill those gaps. The JIVN's influence was immediately felt as they contributed to the next several publications in terms of structure, helped us identify promising practices and sites to visit and highlight, and provided expertise and guidance in our work.

We developed strategic relationships with the VA, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Library of Congress, and the Veterans History Project, as well as key organizations, including the National Association of Drug Court Professionals/Justice For Vets, the American Probation and Parole Association, the Center for Court Innovation, and American University.

I am truly grateful for the opportunity to have met and worked with many of the champions and volunteers who are bringing promising innovative practices to the field that continue to save many worthy lives. For the professionals who work in these veteran-specific programs, to be able to provide a path in their court, jail, or prison for veterans that actually has meaning, makes a difference, and has proven to be effective, is both personally gratifying and something that is positive in an atmosphere that often is overwhelmingly negative and traumatic.

The goals of this project have always been to provide the field with resources, highlight promising and innovative practices, reduce recidivism, bring awareness to post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and other mental health issues related to military service, and inspire criminal justice agencies and individuals across the spectrum of justice to want to do more to help veterans who find themselves caught up in the criminal justice system.

We hope that the field finds these resources of use and of value and that you are inspired to continue to help veterans in crisis, implement jail and prison pods for veterans, develop veterans treatment courts and veterans reentry programs, and work collaboratively to put these troubled vets on a path to redemption.

This has simply been the most rewarding work of my career.

Table of Contents

About the Veterans Compendium Project	i
Foreword	v
Editor's Introduction	2
In Their Own Words: Bernard Edelman	4
So, You're (Thinking of) Starting a Veterans Reentry Program to Deal with Veterans Involved in Your Justice System...	12
In Focus: Veterans Justice Programs within the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration	14
Leveraging Front-End Veteran Resources to Reduce the Need for Back-End Reentry Services in Cincinnati	16
In Their Own Words: Terrence White	25
In Focus: Brokering Relationships: How One North Carolina VA HCRV and VJO Specialist (VJO Hybrid) Facilitates Collaborative Approaches to Reentry for Justice-Involved Veterans	26
Peace in Their Minds: How San Diego's Veterans Moving Forward Jail Program Promotes Veteran Rehabilitation Both Before and After Sentencing	30
"An Entire Yard of Nothing but Veterans:" How One San Quentin Veterans Program Inspired a New Approach to Veteran Incarceration Across the State	40
Making Great Neighbors: How Cybulski Community Reintegration Center's Veterans Services Unit Prepares Veterans for Successful Release.	48
WOMEN VETERANS	
Introduction	56
Follow-up: "Really a Veteran:" The Prison Program Helping Women Veterans Build Pride and Prepare for Reentry	57
In Their Own Words: Heather French Henry	64
In Focus: Raising Support and Awareness for Women Veterans and Their Needs: Conversations with Heather French Henry and Candace Bradley	67
Resources Specifically for Women Veterans	73
Conclusion and Moving Forward	78
Resources	82

As a center of learning, innovation, and leadership that shapes and advances correctional practice and public policy, the National Institute of Corrections continues to address the critical needs of justice-involved veterans and the corrections professionals who work with them.



Foreword



SHAINA VANEK
ACTING DIRECTOR
NATIONAL
INSTITUTE OF
CORRECTIONS

THE EFFECT OF WAR IS FELT by Americans of every generation. Today's men and women lived through the 9/11 terrorist attacks and nearly two decades of involvement in the Global War on Terror. For each generation, support for a war can change. America was committed to the conflict in World War II but stood divided in Vietnam. Regardless of a nation's commitment or support of a given war, it is our nation's military and their families who feel the effects of deployment to a combat zone. In many cases, our young soldiers are deployed several times.

The mental and emotional effect of service on those who have been deployed is constant regardless of the times. Trauma can occur both in wartime and in times where there is no combat. There are tremendous consequences to being deployed and away from one's family that most people have not experienced and cannot comprehend.

The Veterans Compendium Project of the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) has spanned the continuum of justice, highlighting innovative practices from law enforcement to jails to veterans treatment courts to prisons. In this publication, we continue to focus on these programs by addressing reentry practices from all stages of the justice system for veterans who find themselves incarcerated or under some form of correctional supervision. Development and implementation of these programs can be compared to any other significant transition in corrections: It's complicated, it's challenging, there are many uncertainties, and a lot of people are reluctant to ask for help.

As a center of learning, innovation, and leadership that shapes and advances correctional practice and public policy, NIC continues to address the critical needs of justice-involved veterans and the corrections professionals who work with them. This document is the fifth in a series of publications highlighting veteran-specific approaches along the criminal justice continuum. It highlights the approaches found in America's justice system regarding reentry and follows the signature features from the previous compendium publications. It's complete with vignettes, stories, and the experiences of pragmatic corrections professionals who have taken the initiative to create

sustainable veteran-specific reentry approaches to assist veterans acclimating from a criminal justice setting back into the community.

The efforts we are seeing across the country in our criminal justice system are helping justice-involved veterans deal with their war time trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. Our goal at NIC is to advance practices and improve public safety by holding justice-involved veterans accountable while—at the same time—providing opportunities to help veterans rehabilitate, find their sense of purpose again, and return to their families and communities ready to thrive.

This publication speaks to these essential programs. Justice-involved veterans face numerous challenges as a result of their experiences in the military, and numerous corrections programs have developed innovative ways to address these issues. The examples that you will read about are but a small sample of the many approaches across the continuum of justice that attempt to meet the needs of this deserving group of men and women.

Shaina Vanek

Acting Director

National Institute of Corrections



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EDITOR'S

Introduction

By Julie Marie Baldwin

WE ARE PLEASED to bring you *Veterans Reentry Programming: Supporting Transition to Civilian Life Across the Sequential Intercept Model*, the fifth and final issue in the Veterans Compendium Project.



JULIE MARIE BALDWIN
EDITOR,
PROJECT MANAGER
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

In this compendium's previous issues, we heard directly from many justice-involved veterans about their experiences which underscored the need for programs and practices to aid successful transition and integration from the justice system to the community. Several innovations in the criminal justice system have emerged to assist in this way. Some of the most promising have been the focus of those publications, including veterans treatment courts (issue 1), veteran-specific housing units in jails and prisons (issues 2 and 3, respectively), and law enforcement's de-escalation of veterans in crisis (issue 4).

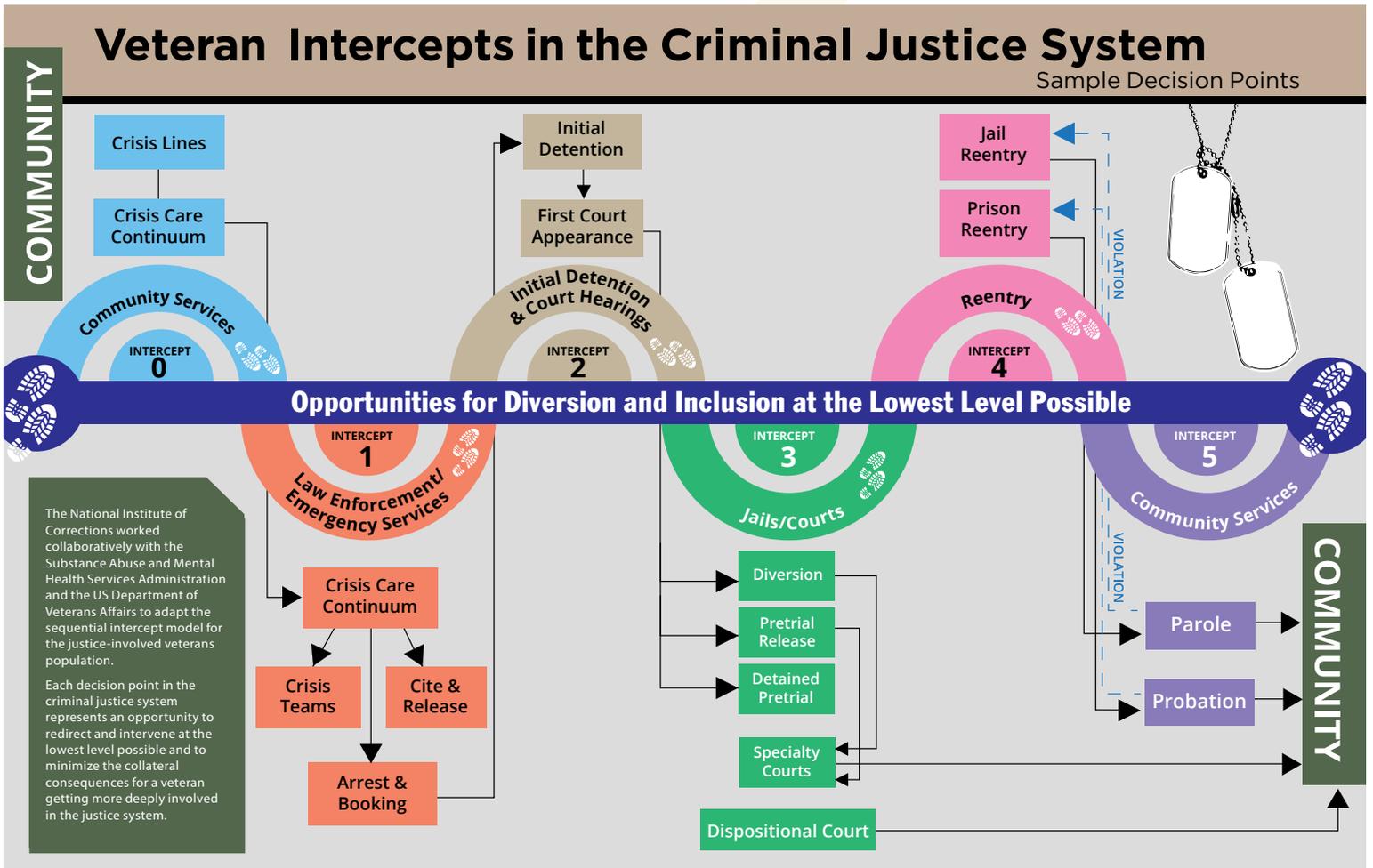
From my work on the ground, I know that many jurisdictions are still looking to adopt new programs and practices to assist justice-involved veterans. As such, this issue highlights several innovative approaches across key points in the sequential intercept model that ultimately seek to support the transition and re-entry of justice-involved veterans. Through this issue, we strive to provide you with not only ideas but recommendations for and insights into implementation of a variety of programs and practices to assist justice-involved veterans, but also the successes, challenges, lessons learned in implementation of these programs.

In addition, we give special attention to the needs of and innovative programs focusing on justice-involved women veterans. Women make up the fastest growing segments of the military, veteran, and incarcerated populations. However, these fast-growing subgroups are encountering a system and services originally designed to serve their male counterparts. New studies reveal a need for women's specific trauma-informed mental and substance use disorder treatment and approaches to reentry, and in this section, we examine women-specific programming innovations across the country and learn about the needs of women veterans and justice-involved women veterans.



Veteran Intercepts in the Criminal Justice System

Sample Decision Points



“ Bernard Edelman

By Bernard Edelman
and Leola Abraham

Bernard Edelman, a draftee into the U.S. Army and a son of Brooklyn, spent most of 1970 in Vietnam. He was a published author and photographer, an editor, and a key contributor to each of NIC's Veterans Compendium Project publications. Bernie passed away in November 2021. This was his final contribution to the compendium.

Birth of the Veterans Compendium Project

WHAT A TURBULENT TIME IT WAS, the latter years of the 1960s into the early 70s. So many young men were faced with a difficult decision concerning conscription. Believe me, I didn't enlist. I was a college graduate, and as soon as I finished 4½ years at Brooklyn College, I got my "Greetings" letter from Uncle Sam. I had a bad back and a bum knee. I wore glasses. The Army still wanted me; I was sworn in the second week of January 1969.

My first days in basic training were bizarre. What was neat was mingling with guys from all over—from the South, from Boston, from Detroit. We had a fine drill sergeant, Tom Canada. He'd been a tunnel rat in Vietnam. When he was back in the United States, he fell for a woman, but the relationship didn't work out, and unfortunately, he committed suicide. Sgt. Tom Canada was a good man. I don't think any of us realized then what the war had done to him mentally. It was a transformation so many of us would soon undergo.

Then, I lucked out. Following basic training, I was awarded a Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) of broadcast specialist. I was sent to Fort Hood, Texas, the Army's armor center and allegedly a staging post for deployment overseas to Germany. I got a cushy job at U.S. Darnall Army Hospital where I made coffee and wrote up citations. I had my own intra-hospital radio show. I figured this would be a safe place to serve out my time during a war that I didn't believe in. Then I got my orders for Vietnam.

It was towards the end of April that we flew Braniff airlines with flight attendants—who smiled, who wished us luck with tears in their eyes—to the airfield at Cam Ranh Bay on the coast of central Vietnam. As we landed, the first thing that hit me was the heat. It was like entering a blast furnace. There were about 250 of us on that flight. When we went into the large building, we passed guys who were going home; the thousand-yard look in their eyes told us what we were in for.

Over the next few days, cadre started moving people out, with ten troops heading up to this company and a baker's dozen to that. At the end of 2-plus days, I was the last man standing. They didn't know what to do with me and my MOS. Then, on the third day, I got posted to the Information Office for the U.S. Army Vietnam (USARV-IO), based in Long Binh, the largest army post in Vietnam. It was a small city of 50,000 at the height of the American presence there. I received a top-secret clearance. I could travel wherever I wanted to in-country. I didn't have to sit at a desk all day. I didn't know what I was getting into.





There, I met Mark Jury, who was to become a lifelong friend. He spent his year in Vietnam working on what became the *Vietnam Photo Book* that Cornell Capa championed and Francis Ford Coppola wanted to option. I took a lot of photos for myself, but as a broadcast specialist, my “weapon” was a tape recorder. I interviewed troops – grunts, docs, nurses, and REMFs.

I was there, in April 1970, when the U.S. had begun its exodus from Vietnam, part of something called “Vietnamization,” the brainchild of the Secretary of Defense, Melvin Laird. Yet, Americans were still engaging in pointless firefights, many were dying, and I couldn’t understand why. Each of us had our baptism of fire. Though mine was hardly tough; it seared me. I wanted to go see Major John Sullivan, a doc I had known at Fort Hood, and so my first trip out of Long Binh was up country to Chu Lai, to the 91st Evacuation Hospital, to see Sully. He had a wife and five kids and had volunteered to do orthopedic

surgery at Darnall. Big mistake. He was so good at it they kept him at the 91st. He invited me into surgery with him the day after I arrived. All I had to do was wear a mask. That morning he and his team amputated six legs and one arm off three soldiers. That was my baptism. When I walked out of the operating room (OR) I instantly knew that the docs, the nurses, the orderlies saw as much of the horror, the human devastation, the waste of that war as any grunt or any infantryman.

AS WE LANDED, the first thing that hit me was the heat. It was like entering a blast furnace. There were about 250 of us on that flight. When we went into the large building, we passed guys who were going home; the thousand-yard look in their eyes told us what we were in for.

Months later, I was working on a three- or four-part piece following a casualty and hopped on a medevac at first light. We fly 15 kilometers over the verdant Central Highlands. A grunt had been badly wounded at night in a firefight. When we rendezvous with the platoon, no landing zone has been cut and chopped through the triple-canopy jungle. So, our dustoff hovers as the door gunner hoists up the wounded guy after spraying machine-gun fire where some enemy are situated. The door gunner pounds the guy’s chest and gives him mouth-to-mouth all the way back to base. As we reach the perimeter of the base, the co-pilot turns around, and the door gunner signals thumbs down, meaning we don’t fly to the hospital, we fly to Graves Registration. We land. I jump off the chopper. I start scribbling notes. It had been the first time I’d seen someone die. It has affected me to this day.

Early in my tour, President Nixon sent troops into “neutral” Cambodia to stop the infiltration down the Ho Chi Minh trail—which of course wasn’t a single trail. Mark and I went in to do stories. The night we were at Fire Support Base Brown, situated on a dry lakebed, it wasn’t supposed to rain, but of course it poured. We bailed, with steel pots [helmets]; communication was lost for hours because this temporary fire base had been sited on a dried-up lakebed. The Viet Cong had attacked the night

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Bernard Edelman



before Mark and I got there; they left about 50 fighters along the berm and into the jungle. Had they attacked that night, I don't know what might have happened because we couldn't call in any air or artillery support for some hours.

Mark and I, we just looked at each other. Once the Tactical Operations Center (TOC) was functional again, some of us went into a tent where a young lieutenant strummed his guitar and we sang "Where Have All the Flowers Gone." At some point, we nodded off and woke to a bright and sunny day, the night just passed, only a memory. In a war zone, you move from one moment to the next using instinct and what you've learned, and following orders, knowing that anything can erupt at any time.

Having decided to move on from Brown, we hitched a ride on a Loach, a small helicopter that had delivered a pair of spit-shined brass to Brown. A pilot, a co-pilot, and room for two. In moments, we are 3,000 feet above triple-canopy jungle. It was like a carpet of green. A few minutes later, I hear sounds that don't seem quite right. I'm looking at the control panel, and I'm seeing blinking red which tells me this isn't good. I'm thinking, as I look back down, I've been in Vietnam for 2½, maybe 3, weeks, and I'm going to die here. Will they even find my body, because what happens if they can't find the helicopter? I glanced over at Mark. No one said a word. Then the pilot toggled a switch that shut the power off in what I later learned was an auto-rotation. The chopper lurches down several hundred feet. My stomach is in my throat. He toggles again and, voila! no more red. It's green, blinking green! And off we go again. Neither Mark nor I say a blessed thing the rest of the way. I don't know where we landed.

AS WE REACH THE PERIMETER of the base, the co-pilot turns around, and the door gunner signals thumbs down, meaning we don't fly to the hospital, we fly to Graves Registration. We land. I jump off the chopper. I start scribbling notes. It had been the first time I'd seen someone die. It has affected me to this day.

I was in Vietnam for 10 months before they had to let me go, because my 2-year active-duty hitch was coming to an end. In that last month, I wanted to stay close to "home;" I wanted to stay in Long Binh. I didn't want to go anywhere. I wanted to just record and broadcast stories. Which is one of the things we did: receive stories from the field. We would "translate" them for radio, and one of us would go into a soundproof broadcast booth and record them. Sometimes, I would sleep in the broadcast booth. Long Binh was just a bizarre place in 1970. In my last month in country, I was sent out to different places. I also was promoted to Spec/5, Specialist Fifth Class.

I just wanted to get home. We all cheered when our Freedom Bird lifted off at Tan Son Nhut. Before I got back to Brooklyn, I dropped off in Milwaukee to see my brother. He had volunteered in Vista, sort of a domestic version of the Peace Corps; it was his way of contributing. We got a call after I'd been there a couple of days: Our stepfather had died. This was just awful for my mother, to lose her second husband to a sudden massive heart attack. We were able to get a flight home. For the next 6 months, I just tried to get my head back together. I traveled the country with my brother and then got a job with a chain of local newsweeklies that I had worked for when I was in college, where I'd edited a student publication.



I became the editor and stayed for 5½ years. I was able to give jobs to John Hamill, Michael Daly, Denis Hamill—guys who went on to become top journalists in New York City. I was able to hone my skills as a writer and editor. In fact, the first story I covered was an exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum on photographers who died in Southeast Asia. When I first got home, I was angry, because our guys were dying, needlessly, in what I saw as a civil war.

At What Cost?

When I got home, I felt incomplete. What I really wanted to do was return to Vietnam, to begin a career as a photojournalist. But I couldn't put my mother through more daily grief and worry. In April of '71, I headed down to Washington to participate in and chronicle what was dubbed Operation Dewey Canyon 3. I opposed the war in which I'd served. We did what we were asked to do, and I've always believed that the troops engaging the enemy fought as well as their fathers and uncles in World War II and their grandfathers in World War I. I was gratified that 20 of my photographs—under a *nom de guerre*—are in *The New Soldier* by John Kerry and Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

I participated in a Vietnam art show in Saint Paul, Minnesota, and we were the tag item on the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite. A veteran, and an artist named Dick Strandberg, who had served in the Navy running patrol boats along the Mekong River and its tributaries in the south of Vietnam, had put the show together. He and I then formed the Vietnam in the Arts, a non-profit, and brought a new exhibit to New York City. I raised money from the Smith Corona Corporation (SCM) and paid unemployed Vietnam veterans to create an indoor art space in what had been the rubble-filled former birdhouse in the Central Park Zoo.

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I put together a multi-media slide show and had a loop playing riffs from songs we listened to in Vietnam, like "We Gotta Get Out of This Place" by Eric Burden and the Animals, "Sam Stone" by John Prine, "Bring the Boys Home" by Aretha Franklin interspersed with Vietnamese folk music. The art show garnered positive press and public response. Some 12 to 15 percent of the art sold.

After the art show, Mayor Edward I. Koch, a former sergeant during World War II who was very partial to veterans, helped us achieve our



Bernard Edelman

memorial. I was one of 100 New Yorkers, most of us Vietnam veterans, named to the New York Vietnam Veterans Memorial Commission (NYVVMC). During my time in Vietnam, 1970, a little more than 6,000 troops perished, which is about 1,000 fewer than have been lost in all the years we've had troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Working freelance and finishing up my master's degree in criminal justice, I was able to devote time to the commission, initially as a photographer and then as a writer. I joined the design committee for the

I WAS ASKED by Robert Santos, who headed the design committee to compile what became *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*. At first, I didn't think the letters would make for an interesting book, but the third piece I read, by Major Michael Davis O'Donnell, blew me away.

memorial. We were given a site in lower Manhattan's Jeanette Park, near the former Fulton Fish Market, now the South Street Seaport, and Wall Street. We worked with architects and a construction firm but needed content for the memorial. When the *New York Times* ran a feature about our request, it generated an avalanche of material and triggered half a dozen offers from publishing houses.

So I was asked by Robert Santos, who headed the design committee, to compile what became *Dear America: Letters*

Home from Vietnam. At first, I didn't think the letters would make for an interesting book, but the third piece I read, by Major Michael Davis O'Donnell, blew me away. I also reached out to some friends from the Vietnam Experience art exhibit. I completed the initial draft in 6 weeks; in total, it took 10 weeks to complete. It was the most intense journalistic experience of my life, and the most satisfying.

Both the memorial and the book were ready on May 7, 1985, on the 10th anniversary of the official end of the Vietnam Era.

To the Silver Screen

When *Dear America* was auctioned to paperback, I did the book tour. *Dear America*, in print now for 36 years after it was first published, inspired an Emmy- and Peabody-winning film of the same name and then an Academy Award nomination. I was a co-producer in the documentary short category for *Memorial: Letters from American Soldiers*, which ran when *Dear America* was syndicated and was honored with an Academy Award nomination.



In the meantime, the NYVVMC Executive Committee was contracting with HBO for a film based on the book. I was asked to work with Bill Couturie and his co-producer, Tom Bird, because I'd been in touch with most of the letter writers. I came on as the associate producer of the film, which won HBO two of its first three Emmys. A year later, we produced a documentary short that was nominated for the Academy Award. My wife, 5 months' pregnant, and I were flown to California on a corporate jet to attend the Oscars ceremony.



The film has been seen by over 70 million people worldwide. What's amazing to me is that the *Dear America* book is still in print after three and a half decades. Next to the birth of Aidan, my son, *Dear America* is what I am most proud of.

The time I served in Southeast Asia has had an indelible effect not only on my psyche, but on the course of the rest of my life. In terms of employment, I kept coming back to veterans. I became Director of the Mayor's Office of Veterans' Affairs under Ed Koch. We invited Edward Derwinski, the head of the former Veterans Administration, to tour our shelter devoted to veterans and learn about the reality of homelessness among veterans. We put in motion the refurbishment of the veterans wing in a significant city building near City Hall that otherwise would have been given over to the court system, and we worked with Korean War veterans to help them create their memorial at a site in Lower Manhattan.

I also worked with Scott Higgins, who had led the NYVVMC, when he established Veterans Advantage, a benefits program for veterans. As Director of Content Development, I wrote dozens of profiles of "herovets." The focus was not what any of these individuals accomplished while wearing the uniform but on what they had achieved in the months and years after they rejoined the civilian world.

One of these veterans is Rick Weidman who directed the legislative efforts of Vietnam Veterans of America. I had written a profile for VVA's national publication and needed to be paid. I met Rick who needed an assistant director in Silver Spring, Maryland. I lived in New Hope, Pennsylvania, and commuted for a year, which was no way to be a father to my son. I moved my family to Montgomery County, Maryland, just outside of Washington, DC, where we've been since.

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A Second Chance

I'd been at Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) for 9 or 10 years when I met Greg Crawford. He was looking for a writer with a background in criminal justice who could put together a how-to publication for jurisdictions seeking information on setting up a veterans treatment court (VTC). When we first got together, in the Union Station food court, we just started scribbling down ideas on napkins. The possibilities interested me. What was meant to be a 12- or 16-page brochure/booklet became 40,000 words, *Veterans Treatment Courts: A Second Chance for Vets Who Have Lost Their Way*.

When I began this journalistic journey, I didn't even know what a VTC was. The more I learned, the more I wished there had been something like this in the wake of the Vietnam War because these courts save lives, and restore families, and can have a salutary effect on communities.



Bernard Edelman

Initially, we trekked up to Buffalo, New York, where we met with the judge whom I dubbed the “godfather” of the VTC movement, Robert Russell. His courtroom was unlike any I’d ever been in. He began each session with the Pledge of Allegiance. Earlier that day, he and his remarkable staff had reviewed each case that was to come before him that afternoon. He offered praise when praise was due. He gave stern warnings when warranted. He sent a few fellows who had not been working the program back briefly into confinement. For me, this was a revelation, one that was to be repeated in every other jurisdiction either I or Greg visited.

WHEN I BEGAN this journalistic journey, I didn’t even know what a VTC was. The more I learned, the more I wished there had been something like this in the wake of the Vietnam War because these courts save lives, restore families, and can have a salutary effect on communities.

I insisted on recording interviewees. The recordings were transcribed, then I integrated remarks and short “out-takes” where I felt they belonged in the narrative. Because some of the stories were just told so wonderfully, I started “In Their Own Words,” which has become a signature element in the subsequent publications in what the National Institute of Corrections (NIC) has dubbed the Veterans Compendium Project. Let Judge Russell describe how and why he created the Buffalo VTC, which is now a national model. Let Patrick Welch, a

former Marine who left part of a leg in Vietnam and who oversees mentor training in Erie County, explain how he became an advocate.

Because of the reception to *A Second Chance*, NIC moved forward with four more publications on justice-involved veterans, of which this is the last in the compendium. We visited jails and prisons which have set aside separate spaces for incarcerated persons in *Barracks Behind Bars: In Veteran-Specific Housing Units*, *Veterans Help Veterans Help Themselves (Jails)*, and *Barracks Behind Bars II: In Veteran-Specific Housing Units, Veterans Help Veterans Help Themselves (Prisons)*. In the fourth issue, we focused on first responders and their interactions with vets, often in tense situations, on the streets in *Law Enforcement Officers Respecting Service, Restoring Honor to Vets in Crisis*. And now, we have this current issue looking at veteran-focused efforts across the criminal justice system. It’s been a worthy effort that started with an exchange of ideas and scribbled notes on napkins at Union Station in Washington, D.C.

Invaluable

After half a decade’s experience visiting local jails and prisons, speaking with scores of veterans on both sides of the law, attending national conferences, hosting panels at the Library of Congress on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues, I can say that the VTC programs are invaluable.





A Second Chance and Barracks Behind Bars represent an understanding that experiences in a combat zone played a role in twisting too many vets. In the courtrooms, at the beginning of a session, everyone stands and salutes the flag. This just doesn't happen elsewhere. The judge, who has been prepped by their court team, will often get down from their perch and go over to a vet who has perhaps completed a phase of his or her program. They'll shake hands, and the judge will tell the individual how well they're doing and how proud of himself or herself they should be. When a vet successfully completes their full regimen, they "graduate," and the new graduate reads an essay he or she has written touching upon how they became involved in the criminal justice system and how much they've learned, and changed, in the time spent in the VTC.

In some jurisdictions, the crime for which the vet has been convicted will vanish, (i.e., their record is expunged). In other cases, not yet adjudicated, charges will be reduced. This is justice the way justice should be.

Vets are impacted by their experiences in a combat zone and many come back with mental health issues such as PTSD that haven't been treated. They are left alone to deal with their demons.

VTCs are trying to understand them and trying to save worthy lives. Federal agencies and others need to work with key veterans service organizations to create a task force and work in concert to assist justice-involved veterans, who are still hurting, come to terms with their experiences and transition safely to their families and into their communities. We would be wise to do this now, to prepare for the next influx of combat weary troops who will be confronted by the same mental health issues as veterans of prior conflicts.

AFTER HALF A DECADE'S EXPERIENCE visiting local jails and prisons, speaking with scores of veterans on both sides of the law, attending national conferences, hosting panels at the Library of Congress on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health issues, I can say that the VTC programs are invaluable.

So, You're (Thinking of) Starting a Veterans Reentry Program to Deal with Veterans Involved in Your Justice System...

...OR YOU'RE IN THE PROCESS of implementing a Veterans Reentry Program (VRP) in your local jurisdiction to better respond to veterans transitioning back into their communities. At either stage, you are faced with questions to ponder or tentatively answer and have identified several issues and concerns.

Consider the following questions to help you decide whether starting a VRP is right for your jurisdiction:

- What is the **FIRST THING** I/we ought to do?
- Are we asking the **RIGHT QUESTIONS** about military service to those veterans who are in custody or under community supervision?
- Are we tracking **RELEVANT DATA** (issues, needs, demographics) on our veteran population?
- Do the data **SUPPORT THE NEED** for reentry programming?
 - Does our county or region have the demographics to support such a programmatic effort for veterans?
 - Do we have enough veterans involved in our justice system?
- What are the **CORE COMPONENTS** needed for a VRP in our jurisdiction?
 - What treatment options and/or services do we have or need to help these veterans?
 - What programming or services could we offer to veterans if they are to be safely diverted from jail?
 - Is there a Veterans Justice Outreach specialist or Healthcare for Reentry Veterans specialist or other individual who can help set up a VRP and identify resources to assist with veterans' transition back into the community?
 - Does our jurisdiction have a Veterans Response Team with local law enforcement, or a Veterans Treatment Court, or Veteran-Specific Housing Unit at the local jail or prison? If not, do we need to plan for one to increase our success with a Veterans Reentry Program?
 - Can we identify a “champion” who will be driven to create a VRP?



- What is our **PLAN FOR IMPLEMENTATION**?
 - Who are the key players?
 - What roadblocks or obstacles should we anticipate?
 - How should we address them?
- **CAN WE EXPECT** the legal establishment and/or jail or prison administrators to be supportive and community leaders accommodating?
- How do we **ACHIEVE BUY-IN** from the chief of police, sheriff, jail administrator or prison warden, county executive or mayor, as well as other key stakeholders?
- How will the VRP and the specialized training it will require be **FUNDED**? Will there need to be any outlay of dollars or can we incorporate this training into existing training?
- How do we create a **SUSTAINABLE** program? What if our champion moves on or retires?
- How do we **GAUGE SUCCESS**?

You should discern answers to your questions and concerns in the sections throughout this publication, which features a variety of veteran reentry resources and programs that are operating with significant success.

"A 'CHAMPION' IS NEEDED; it takes someone who is willing to pick up the ball and run with it and move it forward, because I think this is a hugely important thing that we're doing."

**BLAIR MYHAND, FORMER CHIEF OF POLICE,
CLAYTON, NORTH CAROLINA**

Veterans Justice Programs

within the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration

By Jessica Blue-Howells
and Sean Clark

IN 2007, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Veterans Health Administration (VHA) started the Health Care for Reentry Veterans (HCRV) Program, which provides outreach and reentry planning assistance for veterans incarcerated in state and federal prisons. HCRV was quickly followed in 2009 by the Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Program, which directs its efforts toward the “front end” of the criminal justice system—courts, local jails, and law enforcement agencies.

The two programs together comprise VHA’s Veterans Justice Programs (VJP) which aim to serve veterans involved in the criminal justice system at any point in the continuum from crisis encounters, through arrest, incarceration in a local jail, oversight in a treatment court, to reentry from a sentence in a county jail, state prison, or federal prison.

The VJP mission is to identify justice-involved veterans and engage them through outreach to facilitate access to VA services at the earliest possible point. VJP accomplishes outreach to veterans by building and maintaining partnerships between VA and leaders at all levels of the criminal justice system. VJP’s vision is to ensure all justice-involved veterans will have access to care, services, and other benefits to help them maximize their potential for success and stability in the community. As an integrated health care and benefits system that offers primary care, mental health, substance abuse treatment, housing support, financial benefits, and employment services, VA is uniquely situated to assist veterans who qualify for federal VA benefits in developing plans that can help them be successful in the community and leave criminal justice involvement behind.

VJP’S MISSION is to identify justice-involved veterans and engage them through outreach to facilitate access to VA services at the earliest possible point.

VJP’S VISION is to ensure all justice-involved veterans will have access to care, services, and other benefits to help them maximize their potential for success and stability in the community.

A NEW TOOL, SQUARES (Status Query Exchange and Response System), is now available to local law enforcement. Officers can use the SQUARES web-based tool to determine, within a few minutes or less, whether an individual has a record of military service. It can use this determination to offer VA clinical services to a veteran in a crisis situation if appropriate.

One of the challenges that VJP and the criminal justice partners we work with have faced in the past decade of service is the very first part of VJP's mission: identifying veterans involved in criminal justice. Over the years, communities have made a commitment to identifying and offering services to veterans in their populations by adding an intake question asking about military service, changing the question from "Are you a veteran" to "Have you ever served in the United States military," and some communities have begun using data match tools such as the Veterans Reentry Search Service (VRSS). VRSS is an online tool that allows a criminal justice entity (such as a state department of correction) to upload its entire list of incarcerated persons that is then matched against U.S. Department of Defense records to determine which individuals have a history of U.S. military service. A new tool, SQUARES (Status Query Exchange and Response System), is now available to local law enforcement. Officers can use the SQUARES web-based tool to determine, within a few minutes or less, whether an individual has a record of military service. It can use this determination to offer VA clinical services to a veteran in a crisis situation if appropriate.

As VJP moves into its second decade of operations, we are committed to continued partnerships across the spectrum of criminal justice. Our aspirational goal is to deliver services at the earliest possible point to help veterans engage in services that address their clinical issues and keep them from criminal justice encounters, or once involved in criminal justice, have them exit the system as early as possible and readjust healthily in their communities.

By Julie Baldwin
and Lillian Tuttle

Leveraging Front-End Veteran Resources to Reduce the Need for Back-End Reentry Services

Cincinnati, Ohio

SERGEANT DAVID CORLETT has worked with the Cincinnati Police Department (CPD) for 30 years, a law enforcement career that began just a few months after he exited the Army in 1992. For the past 7 years, he has led CPD's Military Liaison Group (MLG), a small group of military veteran officers within the CPD that works to connect veterans to the resources they need as quickly as possible.

Sergeant Corlett, a veteran of Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm, considers himself one of the lucky ones in terms of his experience transitioning out of the military, calling this transition, “one of the hardest, scariest, most difficult things you’ll ever do in your life...because when you’re in the military, your life is so regimented, and everything is provided for you, and direction is so meticulous... The day you sign your papers and walk out the front gate of the post, none of that exists.”

Upon exiting the military, high rates of behavioral health needs and physical injuries can prevent veterans from successfully reintegrating into society, particularly if they become involved in the criminal justice system. Once justice-involved, these veterans face a dual reentry process of reentering society from both the military system and the justice system, facing a compound set of hurdles. Securing employment, housing, and education often becomes more difficult with a criminal record. Difficulty finding stable housing and employment makes it hard to successfully “reenter” and can contribute to recidivism, creating a vicious cycle that keeps people in the justice system and costs law enforcement, courts, jails, and prisons significant time and money. For many justice-involved veterans, reentry challenges are magnified by underlying behavioral health needs, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injuries (TBI), military sexual trauma, physical injuries, substance use disorders, and an array of other issues.

Focusing on the Front Door

The **sequential intercept model** that the National Institute of Corrections, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs adapted for justice-involved veterans (see page 2) defines law enforcement as Intercept 1. Functioning as

SERGEANT
DAVID CORLETT



the “front door” of the justice system, law enforcement can leverage veteran-specific resource networks to divert veterans away from the justice system early on and concentrate on the issues involved in the initial reentry process, the one that begins upon exiting the military.

Although Sergeant Corlett was able to find employment with CPD soon after exiting the military, he and his team understand that many veterans fall through the cracks during their military transition. Even those who do not get entangled with the justice system can struggle to reintegrate and find themselves isolated. According to Shelterhouse, a Cincinnati homeless shelter, 10% of the people served in their emergency shelter in 2020 were veterans, which is higher than the national rate of veteran homelessness at 6.5%.

Sergeant Corlett is often confronted with the thin line between his own experience and the experiences of veterans who are not so lucky. His growing awareness of that thin line was part of the impetus for his involvement with the Military Liaison Group. Responding to a call involving a deceased veteran living alone in an abandoned building, he found himself wondering, “What’s the difference between me and this guy? I mean, what is in his life that caused him to hide away from society and become this hermit... with no contact with the outside world, and now he’s died alone? You know, it kind of bothered me.”

Around the same time, about 7 years ago, Sergeant Corlett began noticing a troubling trend. He was encountering more and more local veterans buying heroin and crack cocaine, getting arrested, and entering the justice system. Together, these experiences pushed Sergeant Corlett to volunteer with Battle in Distress, a veteran peer support network that works to prevent veteran suicide through mentorship, treatment, and research. He found that his position as a police officer was particularly useful for suicide calls because he could leverage law enforcement databases and his own police experience to communicate information in a way that ensured a safe and successful police response.

Sergeant Corlett quickly became involved with more and more suicide calls, and before long, he realized that he should fill in the Cincinnati Police Chief, former Chief Jeffrey Blackwell, on his volunteer role. ►

“I went up, I sat down with the chief, and we had about a 2-hour meeting about what I was doing. And he said, “You know what? That’s fantastic...Now you do it for me...Make it a program. Make it successful.” I’m like, “What does that mean?” He goes, “Eh, you’ll figure it out. Make us look good. Keep doing what you’re doing.” And that’s where we started. That’s honest to god how we started. —Sergeant Corlett

The Military Liaison Group

The Military Liaison Group (MLG) began in 2014 as a small group of CPD officers with military experience who helped Sergeant Corlett respond to Battle in Distress suicide calls. Since then, their focus has expanded to include significant resource outreach and diversion efforts for Cincinnati veterans, although the group remains small (limited to about five officers). The program is structured around three pillars: community outreach, education, and military recruiting.

Pillar 1: Community Outreach

“Just be out there in your communities. If you run into [the veteran] population and you see them in need, get them to a resource.” —*Officer Terrence White*

The biggest pillar of the program is community outreach, which involves interactions like the ones that led Sergeant Corlett down the path to begin MLG. In the course of their regular police duties, MLG officers do their best to help veterans access resources at the earliest possible point—hopefully avoiding the need to make an arrest at all. When CPD officers come across a veteran in need and are unable to make the appropriate resource connection, they call MLG, which Sergeant Corlett likens to a hospital triage. If the veteran has an emergency, MLG officers head to the scene immediately and decide whether the VA Hospital or an emergency room is appropriate; if the veteran has a less urgent need, such as employment, the officers follow up during business hours and connect him or her to job placement services in the community.

Sometimes MLG officers function almost as translators, using their shared military experience to de-escalate police-veteran situations, often by simply talking as one veteran to another. The ability to bring tensions down when dealing with a veteran in crisis is critical. All parties are better off when these interactions resolve nonviolently. See page 2 for a story showcasing this de-escalation in action.

This pre-arrest, resource-focused system has the potential to go deeper than typical police work—work which Sergeant Corlett describes as a “Band-Aid on a sore.” He is optimistic that this diversionary work can substantially improve lives. ▶

“Hopefully, with the veteran community and us, we can go in behind that Band-Aid and figure out what caused the wound in the first place. And if we can figure out what caused that wound and correct it, then we never have to go put on another Band-Aid. So that benefits the veteran, benefits the police department, and the city. It benefits everyone.” —*Sergeant Corlett*



When officers can connect a veteran to mental health counseling, medical treatment, sponsored housing, and job placement services, rather than putting him or her in jail, the veteran's opportunities improve; but on top of that, the criminal justice system saves the resources required to arrest, book, jail, try, and incarcerate that veteran.

Pillar 2: Education

"Teach people that...PTSD doesn't mean what everybody thinks it means." —*Officer Terrence White*

In researching ways to improve outcomes for justice-involved veterans, Sergeant Corlett realized that there was a serious lack of veteran-specific law enforcement training across the country. MLG has stepped into this void on both a local and national level. Over the past 7 years, Corlett and Officer Terrence White, the Assistant Coordinator of MLG, have trained thousands of first responders around the country. These trainings teach law enforcement officers, mental health workers, other justice system stakeholders, and civilians about PTSD, dispelling myths and providing tactics for handling it in high-tension situations with veterans. By providing officers with tools to effectively engage with people experiencing PTSD, Corlett and White hope to see more veteran-law enforcement interactions resolve without violence, resulting in fewer justice-involved veterans and safer communities.

Pillar 3: Recruiting

"We already know [veterans] can be trained, because the military trained them. We already know some of the attributes they bring to the table as far as discipline, work ethic."
—*Officer Terrence White*

Understanding the importance of employment during veterans' precarious military transition period, Corlett and White travel to military bases around the country to recruit military personnel for careers at CPD. To further incentivize military hiring in their department, they recently received approval to

We're that middle person to the resources. So if I find a veteran, and they're struggling with transitional issues—"I can't find a job. I can't find a place to live. I just got out of the military, and I don't know what I want to do."—I'm that person that connects them from where they are to where they want to be... [This isn't even necessarily] law enforcement. I'm not making an arrest; I'm not taking them to jail. This is me patrolling, seeing somebody in need, and saying, "Hey, I can take you to this resource."

—*Officer Terrence White*



expand CPD's veteran hiring benefit. Now, all veterans, not only those who are already Ohio residents, receive an additional credit of five points on the police entrance examination. With almost 30% of CPD officers being either active or former military members, it is clear that the program's efforts to help employ veterans are working. MLG has also formed relationships with the military hiring programs at many of Cincinnati's major employers, such as Procter & Gamble and Kroger, and the program is able to leverage this network to connect veterans to employment in non-law enforcement sectors.

Importance of Partnerships

Essential to this community outreach work are the partnerships that the MLG has formed with the local VA Medical Center, the local Vet Center, and several other community-based organizations. For VA-eligible veterans, MLG officers can be an essential link to VA-sponsored medical care, behavioral health services, housing, and disability benefits. Many eligible veterans, whether or not they are ever arrested or incarcerated, can miss out on these resources for a number of reasons: they may be unaware of their eligibility; they may not identify as veterans; they may downplay the connection between their military experience and their post-military issues; and they may be resistant to the VA and other government agencies. Sergeant Corlett understands how easy it is to miss these services as he didn't realize he was VA-eligible himself until he formed a relationship with the VA through his MLG work.

Seana Creech, the Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist (VJO) at the Cincinnati VA Medical Center, works closely with the MLG to connect eligible veterans to VA benefits. Upon finding a veteran in need, MLG provides Creech with the veteran's basic contact information so she can reach out and offer relevant services. This partnership allows Creech to help veterans with medical and/or behavioral health needs before they end up in the justice system. Without it, she believes fewer veterans would access VA services, and the ones who did would have to wait longer. ▶

“ [What's missing in other jurisdictions that lack a group like MLG is] that they don't have the opportunity to resolve anything before the charge. They would be catching them all after they're in jail, and a lot of times months and months and months after the charge...[and not offering them] treatment until around 6 or 7, 8 months after the legal situation. By networking within MLG, we are able to intervene and offer treatment sometimes before a serious charge is on the table, or at least shortly thereafter. — VJO Seana Creech ”

Building this relationship with the VA helped Sergeant Corlett connect a significant number of veterans to services, but he quickly learned that it would not solve every healthcare need. He estimates that only around half of the veterans who come into contact with the MLG are VA-eligible. Looking for other agencies to fill that gap, he connected with the **Cincinnati Vet Center**, the local arm of a national network of community centers that provide counseling services to veterans who have experienced active duty, military sexual trauma, or other situations. Sergeant Corlett estimates that the VA and the Vet Center together cover about 60% of the veterans his officers encounter.

To access services for the other 40%, the MLG developed a close working relationship with **Easterseals**, a local 501(c)(3). Since 2012, Easterseals has provided employment, education, housing, and financial wellness services to Greater Cincinnati veterans, people with disabilities, and others. The organization has no eligibility restrictions, making it possible for MLG to connect veterans with a wide array of services regardless of their discharge status or length of service.

Dozens of non-veteran-related organizations and individuals have also partnered with MLG, providing officers with a long list of resources to offer. If Sergeant Corlett and Officer White have learned anything through the process of developing these community partnerships, it is that people everywhere want to help veterans. Sergeant Corlett noted, "As we've gone on, we've learned about 300,000 501(c)(3)s that help veterans, you know. There's always somebody out there to help. You just have to figure out...what the veterans qualify for, and where [you] can send them."

When Arrest Is Inevitable

If arresting a veteran is unavoidable, the MLG continues to connect veterans to services, trying to start the process of reentry as soon as justice involvement begins. Officer White explains the process of working to understand a veteran's needs once in custody: ▶

For those veterans who join the Veterans Treatment Court (VTC), MLG continues to be a resource. Officer White works as part of the VTC team in the Hamilton County Municipal VTC, which handles misdemeanors; another MLG officer works with the Hamilton County Common Pleas VTC, which handles felonies. The VTC partnership began in 2015 when White started volunteering with the court as a mentor. Before long, the court asked him to come on board as an official law enforcement member of the treatment team.

“[At that point I ask], ‘Why did you do what you did?...Is it because of mental illness? Could it be because of a TBI that you suffered in the military? Could it be chemical dependency?’ A story I hear a lot is, ‘Well, I was deployed; I got hurt; they gave me painkillers; the prescription wore off; I was still in pain; I trickled down through this drug.’ So understanding that background, okay, I know you need treatment now [and still help you access treatment and other resources].” —Officer Terrence White

MLG holds that their officers' role in VTC can be divided into the following five parts:

1. **Act as liaison** between local law enforcement and the treatment team
2. **Educate** law enforcement officers about the treatment court, how to identify veterans in crisis, and how to connect them to treatment
3. **Coordinate** quickly and efficiently with probation officers regarding veterans on the court docket
4. **Participate** in VTC team meetings
5. **Assist** in locating veterans who have violated probation or are on active warrant status

Having a police officer on the VTC team benefits the court, the police department, the VA, veteran participants, and other treatment court stakeholders by reducing redundant work between agencies, increasing the efficiency of the VTC referral process, and performing wellness checks or giving rides to participants as needed. Because of their dual positions in the court and the police department, these officers can help veterans get into VTC quickly by flagging people they think are potentially eligible for the VTC program. This allows the VTC team to engage with veterans sooner after arrest, potentially reducing the length of justice involvement.

Expansion

To reach an even larger veteran population, Sergeant Corlett worked to get the **Cincinnati Fire Department**, also part of Intercept 1 on the sequential intercept model, involved in MLG's veteran resource outreach. HIPAA privacy concerns stymied the effort at first, as the fire department cannot legally share information about medical runs with police officers who are not on the scene. To resolve this issue, Assistant Fire Chief Steven Breitfelder, himself a veteran, decided to take on an informal military liaison role of his own within the fire department. Similar to the role Sergeant Corlett plays within CPD, Assistant Fire Chief Breitfelder helps connect veterans directly with services without sharing health information inappropriately. The fire department has even built a computer interface that automatically alerts the VA Hospital when the fire department makes a medical run involving a veteran. This system helps the VA offer services to veterans who might not have contact with the police, thereby expanding the reach of the pre-arrest veteran resource network.

While locating the appropriate resources is not usually a challenge, accessing them 24 hours a day, seven days a week can be. Because they work around the clock, law enforcement officers often come in contact with veterans in need in the middle of the night, when many service providers are difficult or impossible to reach. This means that officers must either bring veterans to an emergency room, which frequently lacks the follow-up and veteran-specific care of the VA and other veteran organizations, or try to find them again during business hours, which is particularly difficult when dealing with homeless populations. In the future, given the resources, both Sergeant Corlett and VJO Creech envision creating a 24-hour VA hotline for police to connect with VA services.

An Instance of MLG De-Escalation

"[Once], we get this run for a suicidal Marine in his car parked downtown. They give us an address. They tell us he won't tell them what the problems are, but he's taken a few pills and he's got more pills.

Well, the city dispatches two [non-veteran officers who try to talk to him, but he won't talk to them at all]. So one of them calls me...And I'm like, you know what? That's not even a good run for me. I don't speak very good Marine.

So my partner, Terrence [White], who's a Marine, and another guy that works with us, Baron, who's a Marine—I sent the two of them down there...And in a matter of 2 minutes, this guy was out of the car smoking and joking and shaking hands and having a conversation with these two Marines about how the VA had put him on medication that had made him impotent and the impotence was causing marital issues and other things at home...that a 30-year-old man doesn't want to discuss with anybody, let alone a police officer in the middle of downtown Cincinnati.

These two Marines were able to have that conversation with him in under 5 minutes, put him in a car, drive him up to the VA. And then they were able to talk to the doctor at the VA and properly explain the problems that he was having without him having to go through it again.

I saw him. He was completely successful in a matter of 5 minutes just because we used the two Marines."
—Sergeant David Corlett

The future is looking bright for veteran-police interactions in Ohio. Soon, cities across the state may have their own versions of the MLG, as the Ohio Attorney General recently decided to take the program statewide. Although this process is still in a preliminary stage, Sergeant Corlett is thrilled. ▶

Law enforcement agencies, usually the entryway into the justice system, have the opportunity to redirect people in need to the appropriate resources quickly and effectively.

When officers like those in the Cincinnati Police Department's Military Liaison Group direct time and energy toward helping veterans address their medical, behavioral, financial, and housing needs at the earliest possible point, they can reduce the number of veterans who enter the justice system. For veterans who do enter the system, law enforcement can work to ensure that the reentry process and all its necessary resources begins as early as possible.

“For me, [the program has] been an incredible source of pride and kind of refreshed my career for the last 7 years. And, you know, now here I am almost at the 30-year mark, and I would venture to say the only reason I still wear that uniform is because of what I do [with the MLG]...It's a big deal to me, and seeing the Attorney General now taking on the program and going to put it statewide, that may be the icing on the cake. —Sergeant Corlett”

Advice for Starting a Law Enforcement Veterans Program

Below are four pieces of advice from Sergeant Corlett and Officer White, born from their experience getting, and keeping, their MLG program off the ground.

- **Get agency leadership on board.** This conversation usually revolves around funding, so it requires being clear about the fact that a veterans program will cost little to no money. Because local government agencies like CPD must by necessity be budget-conscious, keeping program costs low is key to MLG's success. The group does not have any full-time personnel, which means that the primary challenge is juggling officer hours to ensure that the program is not a line item in the department's budget. If an officer puts in overtime on MLG work, they often try to trade those hours for hours off the next morning. Sergeant Corlett details the lengths to which he goes to keep costs down: "We cost very, very little, and we ensure that we cost very, very little... when the chief tells us to go to Fort Stewart, Georgia, and do a job fair, I make [Officer White] get in the car and we drive 12 hours to Georgia because it costs us \$150 to drive to Georgia and back, and it costs us \$600 to fly."
- **Make sure that the people running the program are personally motivated by the work.** Without this motivation, there is no program, especially at the beginning. Sergeant Corlett has seen law enforcement agencies assign an officer who is not passionate about the veteran community to build a veterans program and rarely sees that program get off the ground.
- **Keep the program a manageable size.** Although almost 30% of CPD officers are veterans, the main corps of MLG is only about five officers. Since MLG work takes place in addition to and around an officer's normal police duties, the program's small size allows Sergeant Corlett and Officer White to ensure that costs stay low.
- **Prioritize developing strong working relationships with the local VA and community-based veteran organizations.** At base, a program like this is a constellation of resources. Law enforcement is almost always the first point of contact in the justice system, so at that early stage, the ability to maneuver a strong network of resources is key to preventing veterans from penetrating further into the system. Sergeant Corlett and Officer White make it clear that without their relationships with the VA, the Vet Center, Easterseals, local businesses, and others, their ability to help veterans would be hamstrung.

By Terrence White
with Lillian Tuttle

Police Specialist Terrence White, a Marine Corps veteran, has worked in the Cincinnati Police Department (CPD) for 20 years. Since 2015, he has served as both the Assistant Coordinator of CPD's Military Liaison Group and a member of the Hamilton County Municipal Veterans Treatment Court team.

"I'm There for You, Brother"

AN AIR FORCE VETERAN [who has criminal charges tells the Pretrial Services officer that he is going to kill himself]. There's substance abuse issues. He's going through it with his family. He's getting divorced. He can't see his children. He is at his wit's end, and he made the decision. 'I'm going to kill myself.' That was the last words he said to the pre-trial service member before he hung up.

[The Pretrial Services officer calls me and gives me the veteran's address]. Me and my partner immediately, immediately, no delay, we go to the address he gives me. It's a motel/hotel. A lot of doors open when you wear this uniform, so I go to the manager's desk and I say 'I'm looking for this person,' [and the manager directs us to the guy's room].

SEANA CREECH, the VA Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist who works with Officer White in the Hamilton County Municipal Veterans Treatment Court, heard that anonymous veteran explain the value of Officer White's intervention:

"In his graduation presentation he really talked about that—you know, having Officer White coming get him and how he felt—and he [said], 'Being in this treatment court has been the best year of my life. [Now] I know that I can have really great years. I never knew that I would get to where I'm at right now and feel like this is the best year of my life.' So it was really, really awesome [and] the Military Liaison Group really played a role from the very beginning of that situation until that veteran graduated."

I peek in [the window]: he's laid out on the bed. And when I tell you I couldn't count the number of liquor bottles that were scattered around the room... I couldn't count. And he's just laid out on the bed, not moving. We knock on the door, knock on the door. He finally, you know, gets enough strength to get up. He opens the door. I immediately introduce myself: 'I'm Terrence. I'm a United States Marine veteran. I understand you're an Air Force veteran. I got a call because somebody said you want some help.'

Tears rolling down his face. He tells me he's at his wit's end, 'I can't take it.' 'I'm there for you, brother. I'm here.' I'm not [there] as Terrence, a police officer, I'm Terrence, a United States Marine Corps veteran. A veteran helping a veteran.

We get him cleaned up. We get him, and we take him to the VA because of the comments he made about being suicidal... He goes through detox. He winds up making it through the court system to be into vet court... Several times before he graduated, he looked at me and said, 'he saved my life.' ... He said if we [hadn't shown up to] his room and took him where we took him in and talked to him the way we talked to him, he was done.

He graduated from vet court 2 weeks ago, has an outstanding job making more money than me. But we took him from that place to where he wanted to be, and that's our ultimate goal. That's what we want.

Brokering Relationships

How One North Carolina VA HCRV and VJO Specialist (VJO Hybrid) Facilitates Collaborative Approaches to Reentry for Justice-Involved Veterans

By Julie Baldwin
and Lillian Tuttle

"Being the VA Veterans Justice Program, [our role is not only] developing relationships, it's also brokering those relationships for other folks... [and] trying to encourage cross-sharing and mutually beneficial relationships through the systems that oftentimes might be siloed and don't communicate." —*Lucas Vrbsky*

Lucas Vrbsky has been a Healthcare for Returning Veterans (HCRV) Specialist in the North Carolina Veterans Affairs system since 2011. Recently, many of the state's HCRV positions were combined with Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) positions, and as a result, Vrbsky now works as the VJO Hybrid for the Durham VA catchment area. As he sees it, the position lets him do exactly what he wants to do: help justice-involved veterans access the resources to which they are entitled ▶

Vrbsky uses his position to raise awareness of the issues facing justice-involved veterans, share information about best practices and resources, and broker collaborative relationships between system actors. Outlined here are three things he keeps in mind when working toward these goals.

"It's somewhat of a gift to be paid for something that I'd be doing anyway...If I didn't have this job, I'd still be trying to build a better way with the brothers and sisters behind the walls."

1. Let Veterans with Lived Experience Lead the Conversation

Lacking the personal experience of being a justice-involved veteran, Vrbsky understands his role in part as a facilitator. Having a "seat at the table" allows him to bring others to the table as well. With this in mind, he tries to facilitate discussions that include directly impacted voices and historical analyses of racial inequality, both of which he sees as key to just, equity-centered solutions. ▶

Treating those in the justice system with respect, which includes following through and being consistent, is very important to Vrbsky. This makes life easier not only for the veterans but also for service providers. When you establish credibility and trust, individuals encourage one another to connect with you, thereby expanding both the spread of information and the number of veterans who access resources.

"[My goals are] sharing information, raising awareness, [developing] those community relationships, and most importantly, attempting to be led by the men and women that are incarcerated and have come out...[At several presentations,] we've been fortunate enough to have... a veteran that lives in that area come out and share a little bit. I have mixed feelings about asking folks to come and bleed all over the place and...not paying them for [it]. That is somewhat exploitative. But... it's beneficial for the folks in the audience because they can hear it first-hand."

2. Build a Network of Partners with Varied Strengths

Vrbsky makes it very clear that he does not work alone. The system of resources available to veterans in the North Carolina justice system is made possible by a complex network of VA staff, veterans organizations, state and local agencies, and community partners. Within this network, different actors have different strengths. State agencies can bring issues into high-level discussions about funding and policy; county groups can coordinate post-release resources and opportunities; and nonprofits can work through more informal channels and push for systemic reform. An HCRV/VJO Specialist like Vrbsky can maximize VA engagement behind bars and utilize statewide connections to facilitate relationships along the justice-involved veteran continuum of care. ▶

“It’s a collaborative effort, right? So although it might have been me physically going to some of these [meetings and conferences], forging those relationships...it’s a combination of state, county, [and] nonprofit community [entities].”

He and his partners, including local reentry councils, the North Carolina Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (NCDMVA), and NC Second Chance Alliance have organized several events to bring justice-involved veteran issues to a larger audience. In 2019, they held a Veterans Incarcerated and Reentry Summit, which brought together state and county organizations that work with homeless and justice-involved veterans to participate in communal strategizing sessions to house veterans during the reentry process. In 2012, they organized a conference about veterans treatment courts (VTCs) that was attended by the Administrative Office of the Courts and other state agencies, as well as local justice system actors. At the time, North Carolina had only two VTCs, and the VTC concept was still unfamiliar to many. Perhaps in part thanks to this conference, the number of VTCs in North Carolina has doubled.

LUCAS VRBSKY HELPED THE NORTH CAROLINA SECOND CHANCE ALLIANCE ORGANIZE A 2019 SECOND CHANCE LOBBY DAY TO ADVOCATE FOR LEGISLATION TO IMPROVE THE REENTRY PROCESS. OTHER PARTNERS INCLUDED FORWARD JUSTICE, CONSERVATIVES FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM, AMERICAN CONSERVATIVE UNION FOUNDATION, AND OTHERS.



3. Get Involved in as Many Statewide Groups and Conferences as Possible

One of the most remarkable things about Vrbsky's work is the breadth of his involvement. He is an active member of several statewide groups, and he and his colleagues present at meetings for stakeholders of all kinds. Below is an overview of some of the groups in which Vrbsky works to raise awareness about veterans in the justice system and contribute to large-scale equitable solutions.

North Carolina VA System

Vrbsky leverages his role as VJO Hybrid to incorporate justice-involved veterans into larger VA conversations. One such conversation took place with the Winston-Salem **Veterans Benefit Administration** (VBA), which had for a long time used a toll-free phone number. Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated veterans helped Vrbsky and his community partners understand that prison phones cannot dial toll-free numbers. Vrbsky facilitated a dialogue between justice-involved veterans and the VBA that led to the creation of a direct local number with a voicemail system. In this way, Vrbsky and his partners created space for information sharing that helped both parties involved.

Governor's Working Group

In 2011, Vrbsky became a member of the Governor's Working Group on Veterans, Service Members, and Their Families, alongside the Secretary of NCDMVA, other department heads, and federal VA personnel. He and his justice system colleagues give the Working Group a short presentation on justice-involved veterans once a year, an opportunity which they take to discuss issues like preventative measures, VTCs, supporting incarcerated veterans, and reentry.

Within the Working Group, Vrbsky also takes part in a project called **Operation Home Task Force**, which aims to end veteran homelessness. Bringing the perspective of justice-involved veterans to

these meetings has helped expand the transitional housing model so that it can fit the needs of more veterans. Most programs use the federal definition of homelessness, by which anyone who has been incarcerated for more than 90 days is not automatically considered homeless upon

MANY JUSTICE-INVOLVED VETERANS reentering society from incarceration who lack a home must sleep outside or enter a shelter before they can qualify for transitional housing.

release. This means that many justice-involved veterans reentering society from incarceration who lack a home must sleep outside or enter a shelter before they can qualify for transitional housing. Vrbsky is frustrated by the number of veterans he has seen in this position: "These are folks that are at imminent risk of homelessness...so doesn't it make more sense to try to take a more proactive [approach]?" By drawing attention to such gaps in services during Task Force meetings, he and his partners have begun to change the culture and ensure housing for more veterans during reentry.

State Reentry Council Collaborative

As a result of his work with the Governor’s Working Group, Vrbsky was recommended to join the State Reentry Collaborative Council when it began in 2018. This position has allowed him to contribute to the larger conversation around reentry in North Carolina. As a member of the Council’s **Employment Work Group**, Vrbsky helped write recommendations to improve access to jobs for returning citizens. Thanks in part to their recommendations, North Carolina enacted certain occupational licensing reforms in 2019, eliminating non-specific terms like “moral turpitude” from licensing restrictions.¹

Stakeholder Meetings and Conferences

Taking part in as many stakeholder-specific gatherings as possible is one of the best tools Vrbsky has found for sharing information about justice-involved veterans. This begins with prison staff. Showing up to as many staff meetings as possible, whether they are for program staff or superintendents, helps HCRV/VJO bolster relationships with staff and remind them that the VA is a resource for incarcerated veterans. Thanks to these relationships, the state prison system recently agreed to keep a copy of the NCDMVA veterans resource guide in every prison library.

Veteran Service Organizations

Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), which help veterans file claims and access VA benefits, are another key stakeholder. Getting more VSOs into prisons to help veterans file claims before release is crucial, as early access to benefits is a boon to successful reentry. To this end, Vrbsky and his colleagues have attended multiple VSO conferences. They encourage VSOs to take the following steps: respond promptly to every request from incarcerated veterans; hold annual briefings inside prisons to provide an in-person claims resource; and implement a claim tracking process.

Inspired by a program in Maryland, Vrbsky would also love to see North Carolina VSOs create an “each one teach one” program. This would entail training a few incarcerated veterans in each prison on the claim filing process; each of whom would then train five peers. In this way, they could build a network of knowledge and peer support behind bars.

Vrbsky has seen the difference that early access to benefits can make for recently released veterans. He tells the story of a veteran who was released early from a federal life sentence due to the First Step Act. ►

“We had helped him with that claim process [before his release] and...he was able to get rated at 100%...So when he came out, he's way ahead of the game, because he knows that he has an income—versus somebody else who's done 20 years and coming out with nothing... [It's a] very different [experience].”

¹ <https://files.nc.gov/ncdps/documents/files/State%20Reentry%20Council%20Collaborative%20Draft%20Workgroup%20Recommendations.pdf>

Peace in Their Minds

How San Diego's Veterans Moving Forward Jail Program Promotes Veteran Rehabilitation Both Before and After Sentencing

By Lillian Tuttle
and Julie Baldwin

San Diego County, California

"[Having a veterans unit] cuts down on violence in the jail... You don't have all this fighting, because most [veterans]... did their fighting already, you know, and what they want is peace in their minds." —Ricardo Davis, Program Graduate and Peer Mentor

BEGINNING IN 2011, California jails experienced significant population gains due to a shift at the state level called "criminal justice realignment." This legislative policy shift transferred incarceration and probation responsibilities for non-serious non-violent non-sexual felonies from the state to the county level, resulting in a 16% increase in average daily jail population across the state by 2014 (Lawrence, 2014). The average daily population in San Diego County jails jumped even higher, increasing by 23% in those 3 years (County of San Diego, 2014).

Sheriff William D. Gore decided that the San Diego Sheriff's Department needed to do more to prepare its newly expanded jail population reenter society successfully. Soon after realignment, he hired a Reentry Services Manager to oversee the expansion of the Reentry Services Division, which manages every aspect of the San Diego jail population's needs except medical, food, and security. As the department's first Reentry Services Manager, Christine Brown put her energy into expanding the evidence-based reentry programs that the incarcerated population truly needs, which are divided into four main categories: educational, vocational, psycho-social, and wellness. Under each umbrella, the department offers a variety of classes and interventions to everyone incarcerated at San Diego Sheriff's Department (SDSD) detention and reentry facilities.

Early in the process of expanding reentry services, Brown and the other reentry staff realized that they had a large veteran population in their facilities. San Diego County has the highest concentration of military personnel in the world and the third-most veterans of any county in the country. San Diego is the number one destination in the country for returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, meaning that the county's veteran population skews much younger than the national veteran population. Unfortunately, veteran unemployment levels are also high. As of 2016, in comparison with similar metropolitan areas, San Diego had the second-highest veteran unemployment rate, at 5.6% regardless of age and 8.9% for veterans between the ages 18 and 34 (San Diego Regional Chamber Foundation, 2017). Perhaps due to this assortment of factors, San Diego jails house a significant number of veterans.



The reentry team realized that the veteran population could benefit from focused attention and programming while in custody, and with the Sheriff's support, they decided to design a veteran-specific program. Poised at the intersection of pretrial detention, incarceration, reentry, and post-release community services, SDSD had the opportunity to create a program that could provide veterans rehabilitation opportunities at multiple intercepts on the Sequential Intercept Model. They envisioned a housing unit within one of the facilities that would facilitate not only in-custody treatment and services but also connections with community organizations to increase successful reentry. This included touchpoints at Intercepts 2-5 to build a continuum of care that could extend from booking through post-release resource connection.

To kickstart the design process, Christine Brown, the Captain of Vista Detention Facility, and several of the Sheriff's Department command staff members visited the San Francisco Sheriff's Department's jail veterans' program, Community of Veterans Engaged in Restoration (COVER). Upon returning, the reentry team began designing what would become Veterans Moving Forward (VMF), a veteran-specific program at SDSD's Vista Detention Facility.

Building the Veterans Moving Forward Program from the Ground Up

Pivotal to the program design process were the relationships that the Sheriff's Department built with other criminal justice system stakeholders, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and several local veterans organizations. After visiting San Francisco's COVER program, the reentry team met with a group of key San Diego system partners to discuss building a comprehensive veterans system.

SAN DIEGO COUNTY has the highest concentration of military personnel in the world and the third-most veterans of any county in the country.

This group included the District Attorney's office, the Public Defender's office, the Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) team, and the Probation Department. The already-established VTC paved the way for system-wide support for an in-custody program, and the other stakeholders were enthusiastic about the idea of an SDSD veteran reentry program.

After meeting with system partners, the reentry team scheduled a meeting with community nonprofits and service providers. Due to the work they were already doing with local justice-involved veterans, the organizations were able to give the team helpful input about the needs of the population.

Taking into account each organization's strengths, the group also fleshed out the roles each could play within an in-custody program—from giving trainings inside the facility to providing clothes or transportation upon release to accepting service referrals after release.

Once system and community partnerships were established, the team turned to the question of funding. Brown was adamant that the program should not rely on a grant for funding. As a social

worker with extensive experience in the nonprofit world and program design, she wanted to avoid the time-sensitive resource challenges that can come with grant funding. Her team was able to establish an ongoing funding stream that includes both internal Sheriff's Department resources and donations from nonprofits. To date, these resources have allowed the program to continue for the past 8 years without any significant resource-driven service lapses.

How the Program Works

Upon joining Veterans Moving Forward in 2013, the first group of veteran participants wrote a set of rules for themselves that is still used in the program today. These rules include making beds by a certain time, participating in daily programming, and avoiding racial and ethnic divisions. Because demographic divides are often prevalent in carceral environments, unity across demographics is very important to VMF where participants often “cell off” together with people of different races.

Most VMF participants are identified soon after booking using a VA database. Eligibility considerations include the classification level of the charge or conviction, the length of sentence, any previous disciplinary incidents, mental health, and a few other factors. Military discharge status and VA benefit eligibility are not factors that staff consider when determining program eligibility. Any veterans not identified by the VA system can request to enter the program.

At this time, the VMF program is only available for male veterans, due to a small women veteran population in the jurisdiction's jail system and a low level of interest among these women. Brown suggests that high rates of military sexual trauma and the existence of robust gender-responsive trauma-informed programming in the facilities contribute to a general lack of interest in programming directed toward women veterans specifically. The VA provides services inside jail facilities for all VA-eligible veterans regardless of program participation.

When a veteran enters VMF, program staff perform a thorough intake interview to determine his goals. He may want to prioritize getting his medication needs under control through the VA; reconnecting with his family; addressing substance use; beginning the search for stable post-release housing; or registering for college classes.

This plan is the beginning of the case management continuum that, with the help of collaborating organizations, extends through the Sequential Intercept Model from entry past release. Program staff make every effort to personalize this plan and ensure that it centers on the veteran's own priorities as success is dependent on his buy-in. ▶

“We build a plan around their plan—it's not our plan...What we found is, historically, a lot of people have planned for [incarcerated people] and it doesn't really work ...[If] it's your plan, if you fail, [the] plan is still yours. It's the ownership you took over [in your life]. —Shalimar Jackson, Pretrial Supervisor and Reentry Supervisor at Vista Detention Facility”

The program has one dedicated correctional counselor, Talafulu Sagale, who provides one-on-one counseling and group program management. All VMF participants must participate in programming from 7:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. every day and engage regularly in cognitive behavioral therapy. This daily programming schedule includes slots for counseling, classes, and other services provided by program staff, the VA, the county Office of Military and Veterans Affairs, the county Health and Human Services Agency, local nonprofits, and community colleges. The adjacent box illustrates an example of a weekly schedule from 2015.

Strengths

In 2014, a year after VMF began, the Applied Research Division of the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) received a National Institute of Justice grant to conduct a 3-year evaluation of Veterans Moving Forward. Their findings, published in a 2019 report, suggest that VMF had benefits for both the veteran participants and the facility. Between 2015 and 2016, VMF participants had fewer rule violations and lower recidivism rates than a similar non-VMF sample. Compared to 43% of the non-VMF comparison group, just 1% of the VMF group had a rule violation. Using the data they collected, the researchers estimated that the probability of conviction within 1 year of release for the VMF group was 16% compared to 27% for the comparison group. Importantly, both VMF participants and staff rated the program highly when surveyed for the evaluation, with almost every participant saying he would recommend the program to others and every staff member giving VMF program implementation and management a positive rating (SANDAG Evaluation, 2019). Beyond those SANDAG identified, staff and graduates think the program has several strengths, such as service coordination, camaraderie, safety and security, and post-release mentorship, that are important to participants' success.

Weekly Schedule, June 2015

Monday 0730–1830	
7 hours + 4 hours unscheduled	
0730	Community Group
0800	Critical Thinking
0830	CODA
1030	Substance Abuse
1300	Anger Management
1630	Voice for Vet
Tuesday 0730–1500	
7 hours + .5 hour unscheduled	
0730	Morning Meeting
0830	Non-Denominational Studies
0900	Parenting or Journaling
1030	Meditation
1300	Art
Wednesday 0730–1430	
6.5 hours + .5 hour unscheduled	
0730	Community Group
0830	Financial
1030	Journaling
1200	Vet Book Review
1300	Family Relations
Thursday 0730–2100	
8 hours + 5.5 hours unscheduled	
0730	Community Group
0800	Journaling
0830	Thinking for a Change or Outpatient Processing Group
1100	Mentoring
1200	Meditation
1300	Combat Veterans of America
1930	NA
Friday 0730–1500	
7 hours + .5 hour unscheduled	
0730	Community Group
0830	Substance Abuse
1030	Yoga
1130	Critical Thinking
1400	Creative Writing
Saturday 1430–1600 CODA	
Total class types	22
Total class time	35.5 hours



Service Coordination

One of the program's biggest strengths is its ability to coordinate services while veterans are incarcerated. The process of making and attending appointments is often challenging and stressful for people with mental health issues, and veterans with PTSD in particular can struggle with what Shalimar Jackson calls "agency time." Coordinating a schedule, finding transportation, and waiting in unfamiliar busy spaces can be triggering and exhausting, leading some veterans to forgo the process entirely. ▶

"[In the VMF], we bring all those resources and components here... We'll make the appointment to have those providers come in, or we'll set the phone appointment right here [so that] at 2:00 you're just walking right out your [module], and we know you [had] lunch at 10 and a snack to where you're not starving hungry right now while you're expected to have this appointment. Or we know that you're [stable] because you had your [medication]. —Shalimar Jackson"

Camaraderie

Unlike general population units, the VMF unit has open cell doors, longer visiting hours, a separate library, the ability to work on computers, a microwave, and coffee maker. The tangible perks of the unit are only one form of encouragement, however. The program fosters a strong sense of community, helping veterans work toward rehabilitation within a positive environment centered on camaraderie. The unit itself is full of colorful wall murals that pay homage to each military branch; each Veterans Day they hold a unit-wide celebration. In Jackson's eyes, veterans' shared experiences provide a solid grounding for a community-oriented program. ▶

"When you go through the military, you go through a common core [of] beliefs, you go through a common core of structure, to where, regardless of...demographic or background, that's something [you] all have in common... [When building a program], you tie onto that, and... that's tangible for that military man, where it's not really tangible for a general population... [Veterans] can go back and...imagine being in boot camp, going through those struggles with these different men or women, and know that when they came through the other side, they all came together. —Shalimar Jackson"





Safety and Security

The program is insular, with almost no interaction between the veterans unit and the facility's general population. Christine Brown sees this as key to its success. "We want them to be able to focus and feel safe and secure, and really start dealing with some of the issues of why they came into custody in the first place." Ricardo Davis, a VMF graduate who now acts as a peer mentor to those leaving the program, agrees that the program's insularity boosts rehabilitation. ▶

According to program staff, the veterans themselves address most problems in the unit, either self-identifying or identifying each other as failing to meet the unit's rules. Once an ongoing issue is identified, staff and participants try to find solutions through conversation, and only if an issue is unresolved is a participant removed from the program.

Post-Release Mentorship

Several VMF graduates call or write letters to the program to encourage those still inside. Some, like Ricardo Davis, have taken it even further. Group counseling within the VMF program helped Davis, a Marine Corps and Army veteran, process grief and confront substance use in a way that he had not found possible before. Due to his life experience, his ease with people, and his age—he is in his 60s,

THE VETERANS THEMSELVES address most problems in the unit, either self-identifying or identifying each other as failing to meet the unit's rules.

When he graduated 2 years ago, Davis told other participants to contact him upon release in case he could facilitate their reentry path, and thus his mentor role began. Not only does he lend an ear to those who needed to talk, he gives veterans rides to behavioral health programs and appointments,

A lot of veterans, when they go into general population, they become a lot...angrier...[Having a veterans unit] cuts down on violence in the jail...You don't have all this fighting, because most [veterans]...did their fighting already, you know, and what they want is peace in their minds...[It's helpful to feel like], even though I'm in jail, at least I don't have to worry about somebody, you know, stabbing me or trying to, you know, fight me...Not only that, I don't have to worry about [the deputies] because...[most of them are] veterans also. So they understand some of what you are going through.—Ricardo Davis (Program Graduate and Peer Mentor)

Davis quickly took on a mentor role within VMF, helping younger veterans navigate the program. Soon, he was made a "trustee," a formal position that involves helping others prepare for release and taking care of the housing unit itself.

keeps an eye out for housing and employment opportunities, helps initiate benefits requests, and even occasionally pays for a temporary hotel stay.

Davis also facilitates “ironing board meetings,” which are informal monthly meetings that bring together around 50 previously incarcerated veterans for a group problem-solving session. Over a donated meal, the veterans help each other with issues in their post-release lives, “ironing out” the problems that they can. Shalimar Jackson sees this post-release mentoring work, at Intercept 5 on the Sequential Intercept Model, as critical to VMF’s continuum of care and support. ▶

“ [Our VMF graduate mentors show participants] that it just doesn't stop once you get out of incarceration, that there's a whole community out there willing to support [you]...The vet-mod is not just making sure people are okay when they're in our services, but building more of a support system when they get to the community, as well...They know when they're walking out the jail, they're not going to be looked down upon by the community, because they're being received by one of their own. —Shalimar Jackson ”

Challenges and Solutions

Although both staff and graduates are enthusiastic about the successes of VMF, running the program is not without its challenges. VMF staff identified four main challenges—staff resistance, the unpredictability of pretrial detention, services after release, and the COVID-19 pandemic—along with solutions and lessons learned.

Challenge 1: Staff Can Be Resistant

When San Diego began planning for a veterans program, some deputies in the department were wary of the unusually relaxed security planned for the unit. Personnel from other sheriff’s departments, when visiting San Diego’s program for inspiration, have expressed the same resistance, if not downright alarm. Shalimar Jackson explains the importance of the unit’s relaxed atmosphere: ▶

“ This guy might be your neighbor in real life, you know, he's going to be in the grocery store; they're going to be everywhere...We want them to have normal behaviors...in the community... It's important for us to get these men back to, you know, real mannerisms...rather than... jailhouse mannerisms. —Shalimar Jackson ”

Once again, command staff support has been helpful when encountering this kind of staff resistance. San Diego Sheriff William D. Gore, who was enthusiastic about building a veterans program, helped make a few short videos to distribute to staff about reentry and veterans programs. This effort, in combination with further training and strong support from a number of deputies within the department, helped boost buy-in across the department.

Challenge 2: Pretrial Detention is Unpredictable

In the first year, Vista Detention Facility designated one housing unit for VMF, and only veterans who had already been sentenced were eligible for entry. A year later, seeing the need, they expanded to two housing units for a total of 64 beds, and staff decided to try reserving the second unit for unsentenced veterans awaiting trial. This proved difficult, however, because of the uncertainty inherent in pretrial detention. ▶

Although reentry staff originally wanted to reserve the program for those who had at least 6 months in custody, they realized that they needed to be more flexible, particularly when dealing with the pretrial population (Intercept 3 on the Sequential Intercept Model). Finding a sweet spot between extending services to every veteran in custody in a pretrial status and having enough time to comfortably execute each reentry plan took program staff some time to figure out, but they have developed a model that works well within the uncertainties of the pretrial system. Those who are detained pretrial have different program requirements than those who have a release date, and these prescriptions are often more individually tailored. For example, the program has created shorter reentry group intervention curriculums for the pretrial population to ensure that each person can complete the program before a court date.

Other system partners collaborate with VMF to ensure services for veterans detained pretrial as well. Because screening for VTC can take some time, the District Attorney's Office will occasionally alert the Sheriff's Department that a veteran in custody will probably enter VTC a few months down the line. For the reentry team, the knowledge that that veteran will receive case management through VTC after release assuages the unpredictability of pretrial detention, and they will screen the veteran for the VMF program.

For the pretrial population, participation in VMF can also function as an informal recommendation in court. Committing to the program and meeting its high expectations speaks highly of participants, which can make a difference when they are awaiting sentencing. In this way, a veterans program while in custody can have ripple effects across a local justice system, providing veterans opportunities for rehabilitation at multiple intercepts across the Sequential Intercept Model. ▶

“The problem is you put [in] a lot of resources and effort and then all of a sudden they go to court and [the case] gets dismissed, right, and then they're out the door, and then you're scrambling to try to do this reentry plan and this coordination into the community...At that point we're scrambling for...basic needs. —Christine Brown, Former Reentry Services Manager, San Diego Sheriff's Department”

“Being housed in the vet mod...says a lot for you...[and] your willingness to take undeniable direction, because we have a 100%—actually 110%—adherence [requirement], or you can't be a part of this program...We have a high expectation for these men: Even though you're incarcerated, you have to be trusted. — Shalimar Jackson”

Challenge 3: Ensuring that Services Continue after Release Is Difficult

In its evaluation, SANDAG found that graduates had some difficulty accessing necessary resources after release, particularly if they were not eligible for VA services. Only three out of five VMF graduates in their sample were connected with external services upon release, suggesting that this post-release piece of the continuum of care needed some improvement (SANDAG Evaluation, 2019).

After SANDAG released their report, the San Diego Board of Supervisors joined forces with the Sheriff's Department and other system partners to try to address this gap. The Board formed a committee to find solutions and asked Ricardo Davis, among others, to join and provide perspective on the issue. This led to the creation of a county-run program called Community Care Coordination for

IN ITS EVALUATION, SANDAG found that graduates had some difficulty accessing necessary resources after release, particularly if they were not eligible for VA services.

Veterans that helps fill this reentry service gap for those ineligible for VA services. After helping the county design the program, Davis joined it in a formal capacity, transitioning from his post-release peer mentor volunteer work to a paid position.

Christine Brown still sees some room for improvement in the reentry transition process (Intercept 5). She would like to see a consolidation in the number of probation officers who work with VMF participants after release, as that would help ensure cohesion in case management. If all VMF participants on probation worked with just one or two probation officers, she believes that those officers would have the opportunity to become very familiar with VMF, the needs of returning veterans, and the services available to them.

Challenge 4: COVID-19 Has Restricted Many Veteran-Specific Services

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected VMF and the larger in-custody population in several ways. First, the Sheriff's Department changed booking acceptance criteria to prevent unnecessary detentions, so fewer people were entering the detention and reentry facilities. Second, the facility stopped transferring individuals between housing units unless absolutely necessary, meaning that fewer veterans were entering the VMF from general population units. Third, due to backlogs and the use of new virtual court technology, people detained pretrial were moving through the court system much more slowly and, therefore, staying in VMF longer. Fourth, the State restricted transfers from jail to prison, meaning that some VMF participants who would normally leave to serve a prison sentence were staying in VMF longer.

Due to these factors and the need for facility-wide social distancing, VMF was reduced from two housing modules back to one, a reduction which has persisted for the duration of the pandemic. Once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted, program staff will reevaluate the use of two distinct veteran modules and continue working to find the most effective form of organization.

The pandemic has also significantly hamstrung VMF participants' access to services and classes. SDSD facilities suspended all outside entry in the spring of 2020, meaning that all services and classes led by outside entities were put on hold. However, access to services has not been entirely eliminated. VMF participants have been able to access some services virtually, using computers and individualized workbooks to participate in classes. In addition, thanks to VMF's peer-led model, many participant groups have been able to continue uninterrupted. This model, in which long-term participants take turns conducting groups, provides veterans an opportunity to practice communication skills, boost confidence, take ownership within the therapeutic community, and increase work experience. In this way, even with reduced access to outside facilitators, these peer-led groups have been able to continue helping participants prepare for reentry throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

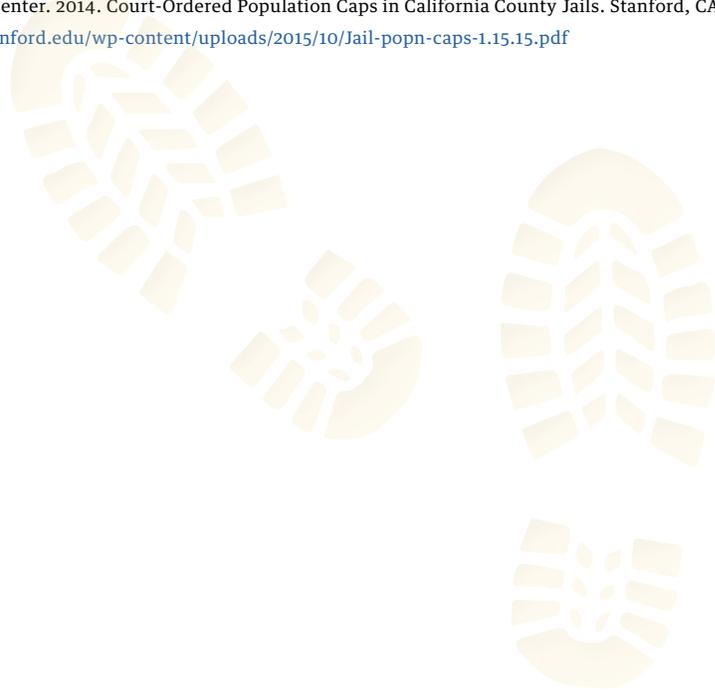
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“An Entire Yard of Nothing but Veterans”

How One San Quentin Veterans Program Inspired a New Approach to Veteran Incarceration Across the State

By Julie Baldwin
and Lillian Tuttle

California

VHV is based... on honor, respect, and confidentiality... [In the newly created veterans hubs,] we bring those same principles to [a larger group of] people... When a brother or sister is having a bad day, you get a chance to be a “battle buddy”... to help them through that tough time. Every time we succeed in helping an individual through a tough time, we grow as humans, as men and women; we grow stronger as an organization.

—Isaiah Thompson, one of the first participants in the San Quentin VHV pilot group and soon to be Director of Program Replication and Facilitation at the VHV nonprofit

Several years ago, we spoke with **Ron Self**, at that time incarcerated in California’s San Quentin State Prison, about **Veterans Healing Veterans from the Inside Out (VHV)**. VHV is the program he founded to help incarcerated veterans who, like Self, struggle with complex histories of trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and moral injury. That interview, which focused on how Self designed and implemented the program at San Quentin, is detailed in the 2019 issue of the NIC publication *Barracks Behind Bars II*.

This year, we caught up with Self to hear about his work in the intervening years. During this time, he has partnered with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) to build a statewide “Veterans Hub” system. Here, we explore the Veterans Hubs, which are only partly complete but will eventually allow all of California’s incarcerated veterans to join a veteran-specific housing unit. Self credits *Barracks Behind Bars II* in part with the Veterans Hubs idea: ▶

“If I had never read *Barracks Behind Bars*, I don’t know that it would ever have occurred to me to think of creating a Veterans Hub idea... I was looking at [the programs highlighted in the publication], okay, they’re doing this, this is county-level, they’re doing pods, they’re doing dorms... Being the Marine that I am, I’m like, “Why take one front at a time; why not just win the war?”... It was a no-brainer. —Ron Self, Founder and Executive Director of VHV

In 2017, 5 years after the VHV pilot program started at San Quentin, Ron Self paroled from prison and immediately went to work as Executive Director of VHV. In partnership with CDCR, he expanded the program to other facilities, eventually starting peer processing groups in seven of California’s 34 state prisons. Not satisfied with piecemeal changes, however, Self has set his sights on a system-wide shift: creating a statewide Veterans Hub system to offer all of California’s incarcerated veterans a sense of community and access to centralized services.

RON SELF SPEAKING AT THE
MAY 2021 RIBBON-CUTTING
CEREMONY FOR THE CENTRAL
CALIFORNIA VETERANS HUB
AT CENTRAL TRAINING
FACILITY IN SOLEDAD.



California's Veterans Hub System: A Work in Progress

On Memorial Day 2021, Self joined CDCR and local leaders at Correctional Training Facility (CTF) in Soledad, California, for a ceremony to unveil the first of three planned veterans hubs. CTF's veterans hub is an entire "yard," which consists of five 200-person housing units redesignated for veterans. The event was celebratory with speeches by Self, local U.S. Congressman Jimmy Panetta, and state- and facility-level CDCR leadership. CTF incarcerated veterans raised the colors, sang the National Anthem, and performed the invocation for the ceremony.

In its final form, the Veterans Hub system will consist of three such regional hubs. CTF hosts the Central California veterans hub; within the next couple of years, CDCR will designate separate Northern California and Southern California hubs. The hubs will differ not only by region, but also by security level and facility resources. For example, veterans serving sentences of life without parole, who cannot currently enter the central hub because the facility lacks an electric fence, will be accommodated at another veterans hub with higher security. Once established, Self foresees the veterans hub system housing every incarcerated male veteran in the state, helping them "get everything that they need to succeed when they leave."

For joining a hub, there are no requirements around prison security level, sentence length, or military discharge, but participants are required to take part in counseling and peer groups and must avoid any behavioral issues and substance use. On offer will be an array of specialized programming, including classes on vocational and emotional skills, suicidal ideation, and resocialization; veteran mentorship and K-9 training programs; and support groups. Thanks to the veterans hubs' roots in VHV, hub participants will also be able to take part in VHV peer processing groups, using narration therapy and intensive peer group work to tackle PTSD and moral injury.

Narration Therapy, in the words of VHV:

A group practice in which veterans "writ[e] and shar[e] personal stories that probe key relationships, experiences and concepts. Participants support and challenge each other in a process of developing insight into their circumstances and decisions."

Source: <http://veteranshealingveterans.com/how-we-help.html>

ONCE ESTABLISHED, Self foresees the veterans hub system housing every incarcerated male veteran in the state, helping them "get everything that they need to succeed when they leave."

How Veterans Hubs Benefit Both Incarcerated Veterans and Correctional Facilities

A Greater Sense of Community

When the first VHV group met in San Quentin in 2012, Ron Self and Isaiah Thompson (one of the group's first participants) were amazed by the power that came with sharing stories of trauma with fellow veterans. The community of veterans made space for understanding and healing, regardless of whether the trauma discussed resulted from military service. Thompson recounts the story of the moment he understood this power. ▶

[A]s the first pilot group began to [get going, one participant] read from a letter with what we call narration therapy...And what happened when [he] read was magic, because he told about an [experience from his youth]...that was so traumatic and so taboo to talk about—and yet he did. [That] popped the cork on what VHV would later become, and it's this circle of healing where...men are growing by leaps and bounds in how to: (1) express themselves and become vulnerable and realize the power in that, and (2) become confident enough to be able to talk about these traumatic experiences and know that other[s]... are healed by these stories, because they have these similarities. —Isaiah Thompson

In the close-knit VHV community, the shared veteran identity trumps many of the divisions that can characterize prison life. As many who have been incarcerated or worked in corrections observe, prison yards are often divided along racial and ethnic lines. In particular, California prisons have long been known for entrenched racial segregation, in part due to unwritten CDCR policies of segregation.¹ VHV offers incarcerated veterans a community relatively free of these schisms. ▶

[T]here are a lot of politics— "prison politics"—where race mixing is taboo...However, when we meet in our veterans group, it's all-inclusive, and we see each other as equals...[Even] others who are not veterans, they respect [the lack of racial divisions in the veterans group]...[If] a veteran is having a problem and needs to tap into another veteran, he can do so without fear of reprisal from the [respective] racial group. —Isaiah Thompson

The inclusivity and communal healing that defines VHV remains a central focus as VHV and CDCR build the veterans hub

system. Due to the large size of the hubs, veteran participants have less interaction with the non-veteran incarcerated population, a shift which may go even further in eliminating divisions among veterans.

¹ Multiple court cases have pointed to the presence of racial and ethnic segregation in California prisons and suggest that it has resulted in part from institutional policies. In *Johnson v. California* (2005), the petitioner alleged that the California Department of Corrections had a policy of assigning cellmates to new prisoners by race, which violated his Fourteenth Amendment right to equal protection. The US Supreme Court held that any racial segregation policies in prisons must be subject to "strict scrutiny" and drew a parallel to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), in which the Court rejected the notion of "separate but equal." Almost a decade later, class action suit *Mitchell v. Felker* (2014) alleged the unconstitutionality of a CDCR policy that would lock down an entire race of prisoners when an incident occurred involving one member of the racial group. In the settlement, CDCR was prohibited from imposing lockdowns based on race or ethnicity.

<https://www.justice.gov/osg/brief/johnson-v-california-amicus-merits>

<https://www.clearinghouse.net/detail.php?id=12165>



Ron Self on the Benefits of Narration Therapy

"There's something about writing [your traumatic experiences] down: They're tangible now. You can hold them, look at them, relate to them in a different way than just thinking about them. And when you share those experiences with other veterans that have similar experiences, something starts to happen, something unexpected, something that you didn't think could ever happen again. You start to feel a connection. You start to feel alive. And you learn that it's okay to take one step out of the shadows of denial and depression."

—Ted Talk (2016)

Consolidated Veterans Services

One of the biggest benefits of the veterans hub model is the consolidation of veterans services, which would be almost impossible in a traditional prison setting or even a smaller veterans housing unit. With up to 1,200 participants, the Central California Veterans Hub has enough VA-eligible veterans to make it worthwhile for the VA to station an examiner onsite 5 days a week to conduct VA Compensation and Pension Examinations. This VA presence helps veterans understand the benefits to which they are entitled and makes it easier for all the parties involved—veterans, CDCR, and the VA—to get veterans connected to their benefits.

Prior to the creation of the Hub, most incarcerated veterans had to make individual appointments at a VA medical center for these examinations. This ate into CDCR resources, as each trip required staff for transportation and security. It also made it difficult for the VA to perform any necessary follow-ups, as well as interrupted individuals' daily programming. Now, the Hub's onsite VA examiner makes it easy for veterans to access examinations, get questions answered, and submit benefits claims as early as possible. In Ron Self's opinion, the combination of concentrating veteran resources in one place and empowering veterans to use them is one of the main ways that the hubs promote rehabilitation and prepare individuals for reentering society. ▶

“Most veterans, to my surprise, really aren't aware of all the resources they have available to them...that would have helped them not come to prison, and...that'll help them when they get out of prison. —Ron Self²”

Integrated Reentry Preparation

Isaiah Thompson, who paroled from San Quentin just a few months ago, compares his transition out of prison to “being in the dark and [then] opening your eyes and realizing it's 12:00 noon in the middle of summer.” After almost a quarter-century behind bars, he was overwhelmed by the pace of the outside world and the laundry list of tasks he faced to fully transition into society. Thanks to a partnership between VHV and the organization Veterans Transition Center, however, Thompson was able to immediately enter a veteran-specific transitional housing program where he has access to food, help with medical appointments, and other post-release resources. The Center, which is in the same county as the Central California Veterans Hub, collaborates with VHV to identify incarcerated veterans who need transitional housing and case management before they are released. Together, Veterans Transition Center and VHV have built a direct pipeline to post-release resources, ensuring that veteran returning citizens have resources lined up to meet their basic needs as soon as they leave the prison yard.

² <https://nicic.gov/understanding-veteran-specific-resources-available-both-veterans-and-criminal-justice-agencies>

While food, shelter, medical needs, and employment are usually cited as the biggest challenges facing returning citizens, things as simple as socializing outside of prison can also be difficult for those who have spent years inside. With this in mind, Ron Self actively recruits both veteran and non-veteran volunteers to staff the veterans hubs. Inside, the camaraderie and mutual understanding of an all-veteran group is one of the hubs' key strengths; when preparing to transition outside, however, a partly civilian volunteer force gives incarcerated veterans practice working and socializing within diverse groups that mirror the post-release world. ▶

“[I have to] slowly acclimate back into society. And because of the programming that I am associated with right now, VHV and Veterans Transitional Center, I am able to do so in a way to where...I'm acting normal; people in society who don't have a clue of who I am or where I come from treat me normal. And it is an all-encompassing win-win for everybody.”
—Isaiah Thompson

Veterans as a Pilot Group for General Population Policy Changes

Both Ron Self and Isaiah Thompson see veterans as a group that can informally “pilot” new policies that may, in time, be expanded to the general incarcerated population. VHV has developed a program called “Veterans of the Streets” that brings the approach of peer support and narration therapy to incarcerated people with experience in gangs and other high-tension, high-trauma environments. Isaiah Thompson, who grew up in an environment with a lot of veterans of the streets, explains that both military veterans and veterans of the street learn to follow specific rules—whether military regulations or informal rules of engagement for gangs, and both groups experience trauma, moral injury, survivor’s guilt, and extensive violence, often as both victim and perpetrator. As Thompson says, “we believe that we have a formula that can help.”

CDCR got on board with the idea that the same techniques could help others in the correctional population, and in spring 2022, the Veterans of the Streets pilot program will begin at CTF with an initial cohort of 14. VHV plans to build the program exponentially, pairing program graduates from the first cohort with outside facilitators to co-lead 7 new groups the following year. In this way, participants can both participate and facilitate the groups, creating a decentralized, peer-led model of growth for the program.

If You Want to Create a Program Like This...

Below are three things to keep in mind when designing a system like the veterans hubs, gleaned from the experiences of Ron Self and the VHV team.



1. Work with Those Who are Affected

Self credits CDCR for believing and investing in VHV, a program designed by someone incarcerated in one of their facilities. Although CDCR does not provide grants to incarcerated people, they provided grant funding to the VHV nonprofit in 2012, led at the time by former Executive Director Mary Donovan. That funding marked the first time that the department funded the replication of a program created by an incarcerated person, and it was a good move. Soon, CDCR began hearing from veterans that VHV was helping them more than their traditional mental health resources were, so CDCR partnered with Self to replicate his program. As someone with the lived experience of long-term trauma, military combat, and incarceration, Self was able to design a program that effectively helps veterans process psychological wounds and cultivates a trusting community inside the prison environment. He salutes Kathleen Allison, Director of CDCR, and Brant Choate, Director of CDCR's Division of Rehabilitative Programs, in particular for placing trust in Self and the VHV vision. "If it wasn't for Brant, I wouldn't be in the position I am to help as many people as I am."

In all likelihood, there are justice-involved veterans in your jurisdiction as well who can speak to the needs of the population and collaborate to find creative solutions.

2. Think Carefully about Funding Sources

Although a \$100,000 seed grant from CDCR in 2012 made the VHV pilot program possible, Ron Self and Mary Donovan were initially intent on funding the program entirely through private donations. Self's view has changed on this matter in the last several years, and he is now open to federal and state funding, as long as it does not come with a "roadmap" that details day-to-day program requirements. He remains firm that he will not seek Grant and Per Diem Program (GPD) funding from the VA, however, because he disagrees with the VA's "harm reduction" model for transitional housing programs. Because the harm reduction model does not allow a sobriety requirement, GPD-funded providers must house veteran-returning citizens in the same facility as chronically homeless veterans, many of whom have substance use disorders. Through the VHV-Veterans Transition Center transitional housing partnership, Self has observed the challenges that come with housing these populations together. Unlike many of the homeless veterans, most of the veteran returning citizens have stopped using substances, and a sober living environment is usually one of their parole requirements. As veterans returning from prison are Self's top priority, he has determined that he needs to be able to provide them with a stable, sober landing place during reentry. For this reason, although

Self enthusiastically partners with the VA on the veterans hub model, VHV and the Veterans Transition Center work to find non-VA funding for their returning citizen transitional housing program.

Although VA GPD funding does not fit with Self’s program design for veteran returning citizens, it may work for your program. In either case, if you are designing a program with an integral transitional housing component, it is important to research exactly what requirements any funding includes and assess the pros and cons.

3. Focus on Educating and Training Correctional Officers

Frontline staff are in a position to make or break any alternative programming inside prisons, and veterans programs are no exception. Although they have found that most CDCR staff are “good people who support vets,” both Ron Self and Isaiah Thompson have had experiences with correctional officers who were antagonistic toward them because of their veteran status. Particularly if officers are veterans themselves, they can feel tension toward incarcerated veterans whom they see as bringing shame or dishonor to the veteran community. This behavior weakens the rehabilitative potential of programs like VHV and the veterans hubs, which focus on nurturing vulnerability and community. ▶

“How you treat [incarcerated people] inside will set the precedent for how [they] react to authority when they get out. If you have a nasty CO, that carries over when you get out. You roll through a red light and the cop turns his lights on, you panic, you run. Officers have to understand that their actions predicate the actions of people when they get out. —Ron Self

Self commends CDCR for working to eliminate this kind of behavior in the correctional environment, including requiring the use of the more respectful term “resident” instead of “inmate” or “offender.” “CDCR has done a complete paradigm shift and put the spotlight on rehabilitative programming [and behavior].” Self and Thompson agree that if correctional officers are trained to treat incarcerated people with dignity and openness, the rehabilitative possibilities skyrocket.

SELF AND THOMPSON AGREE

that if correctional officers are trained to treat incarcerated people with dignity and openness, the rehabilitative possibilities skyrocket.

Ensure that all frontline staff understand the need for the veterans program. If you are teaching incarcerated veterans what PTSD and moral injury feel like and how narration therapy can be a tool for rehabilitation, teach correctional officers as well, so that they can participate in creating a healing, trusting environment.

Though most of us may not understand what living in a combat zone does to those who serve, there are increased efforts to recognize, appreciate, and help our veterans as they attempt to transition successfully back into our communities.

Making Great Neighbors

How Cybulski Community Reintegration Center's Veterans Services Unit Prepares Veterans for Successful Release

By Lillian Tuttle
and Julie Baldwin

Enfield, Connecticut

"Our mission is to help and provide services. Everyone who leaves here is going to be our neighbor, [so] how do we help make great neighbors? That's our goal."

— Deputy Warden Aesha Mu'min

In 2015, with the strong support of former Connecticut governor Dannel Malloy, Willard-Cybulski Correctional Institution in Enfield, Connecticut, opened the Cybulski Community Reintegration Center. This facility-within-a-facility aims to reduce recidivism by providing people who are approaching the end of their sentences with intensive, reentry-focused services. This is possible at Cybulski because it is a Level 2 facility, which means that everyone there is going home within 7 years. As Deputy Warden Aesha Mu'min puts it, "This is where you go before you go home."

In late 2015, Cybulski formed the Veterans Services Unit (VSU), a veteran-specific housing unit within the Reintegration Center. At the time, it was only the seventh veterans prison unit in the country and the first in Connecticut. Creating this unit was a collaborative effort between Cybulski leadership, mental health and substance use staff at the state Department of Corrections (DOC), and the West Haven Veterans Administration (VA) Health Care for Re-Entry Veterans Specialist. To understand how this unit might look, representatives from the three institutions visited existing veterans units around the country together, including Groveland Correctional Facility in New York and State Correction Institution at Dallas, Pennsylvania.

Once DOC and the VA had a memorandum of understanding in place that allowed them to link their data systems, the VA Health Care for Re-Entry Veterans Specialist, Michele Roberts, was able to run DOC data against national Department of Defense data and match social security numbers to generate a list of veterans incarcerated across the state. After determining which veterans were VA-eligible, Roberts began touring prisons with a couple of counselors to ask incarcerated veterans to come join a new veteran-specific unit at Cybulski. Despite resistance from many non-combat veterans who did not feel that they deserved a spot in a veterans unit, with time, Roberts and the counselors began to fill the 110-bed unit, and the VSU was born.

THIS FACILITY-WITHIN-A-FACILITY aims to reduce recidivism by providing people who are approaching the end of their sentences with intensive, reentry-focused services.

The Unit

That first group of VSU participants played a pivotal role in shaping the unit's culture. In 2015, they drafted a contract for each new participant to sign that includes a code of conduct and certain other rules. Referencing the military's emphasis on a strict daily routine, the contract requires veterans to

Code of Conduct

- I will respect myself and others at all times.
- I will keep my area clean and my rack made every morning by 0800 hrs.
- I will address anyone who speaks to me by their title, Officer... Lieutenant...If it's not a staff member, I will address them as Mister or Miss.
- I will conduct myself in a respectful and military manner.
- I will adhere to all inmate handbook rules set forth by WCCI.
- I will fully participate in all assigned programs and will adhere to the rules and regulations set forth by each program.
- I will own my actions and accept the responsibilities that are given to me.
- I will follow all orders issued by staff, always following the last order given.
- I will keep a clean and squared-away uniform at all times.

make beds by a certain hour, attend classes or work duties most days, and take part in daily group meetings and weekly unit cleanings. The full schedule of VSU programs runs from 8:00 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. every day.

The contract also details the penalties for disciplinary infractions. Depending on the class of infraction, a participant can be removed from the unit for 60 days, 90 days, or permanently. Often, when someone is removed from the unit temporarily, the rest of the unit makes a group decision to bring him back before the end of the suspension period. The only people who are permanently removed from the unit have committed repeat infractions that jeopardize the safety of the rest of the unit. Since 2018, only about four veterans have been permanently removed.

As evidenced by group decisions to bring back those who have erred, the VSU is a tight community that values group cohesion and rehabilitation. James Ziembra, Executive Director of Veterans Justice Outreach at an organization called Soldier On that partners with the VSU to provide services, says that camaraderie is a given in the VSU in a way that it is not in most prison units. ▶

“They advocate for each other; they stick up for each other. If somebody is going to court that day, they all worry together...And they want to know what's going to happen when they leave. “How can I reconnect with you on the outside?” So it's like a brotherhood...as opposed to what we're seeing in some other [prisons].

—James Ziembra, Executive Director of Veterans Justice Outreach, Soldier On

The unit provides centralized reentry services and integrated case management to ensure a continuum of service from incarceration to release. Veterans who live within the parameters of the VSU have access to services that address an array of issues in preparation for reentry. These include veteran-specific needs, such as upgrading discharge status, accessing veteran-specific benefits programs, and connecting with veteran service

organizations; and non-veteran-specific needs, including mental health and substance use treatment, peer mentoring, educational and vocational programs, parenting classes, life skills training, nutrition and yoga classes, and assistance finding post-release housing and employment. VSU participants

have access to a computer lab, work furloughs, and, through Asnuntuck Community College, two college certificate programs.

As the only veteran-specific unit in Connecticut DOC, veterans come to Cybulski's VSU from across the state. There are two possible pathways into the unit. When a Department of Defense-listed veteran enters Connecticut DOC's computer system, his or her veteran status is flagged. VA-eligible veterans are then routed to Roberts at the VA, and non-VA-eligible veterans are routed to DOC's population management department. If a veteran meets the VSU's eligibility requirements—he must be able to be housed at a level 2 facility. Roberts or the VSU staff contacts that veteran's counselor to offer him a position in the VSU. Alternatively, if this system fails to identify an eligible veteran for some reason, he is able to write to Cybulski's VSU directly and ask about transferring. There have been points at which the unit is full, and eligible veterans must wait for entry.



Ease of Access for Service Providers

Having a veterans unit allows service providers like the VA and Soldier On easy access to incarcerated veterans, which saves time and resources and arguably improves the quality of care. When Roberts visits most DOC facilities, she has to schedule an appointment within visiting hours and communicate with veterans in the general visiting room, using only a pen and paper. At Cybulski, she has a desk where she can use her computer to access her online VA charting system, and rather than scheduling individual appointments ahead of time, she can call veterans over to her desk whenever they're available. As Roberts sees it, this provides the veterans with more of a sense of "personal care" as she is accessible to the VSU participants in a way that makes them feel that their care is a priority.

James Ziemba of Soldier On applauds the way that Cybulski administrators include service providers like Michele Roberts and himself in weekly meetings about VSU participants. This level of collaboration, which does not happen in most facilities, allows the service providers to work with VSU staff to "shore up" any holes in veterans' discharge plans and facilitate a smooth reentry process.

Ziemba was surprised by the VSU's group harmony when he began working with the unit. He sees harmony not only among the incarcerated veterans, but among the staff as well. Whereas in other facilities, Ziemba has felt competitive tension between in-house programming staff and himself. As a third party offering programming, he feels no tension with the VSU staff. This has allowed him to offer services that complement existing VSU programs to provide a fuller array of options for VSU participants. In addition to more traditional services for non-VA-eligible veterans, Soldier On offers all VSU participants a book group, a debate club, a meditation club, an anger management group, and a domestic violence group.

One of the most important things the VSU does is ensure that the continuum of care provided to incarcerated veterans does not end with release. Through the VA jail release program, social workers assess VA-eligible veterans while still incarcerated for medical, behavioral health, employment, veterans benefits, and housing needs. Based on this assessment, the VA creates a plan that goes into effect upon release. A partnership with Homes for the Brave, a federal transitional housing program for veterans, allows veterans on “transitional supervision” to move from prison to a halfway house in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and picks up case management where the VSU leaves off. Homes for the Brave helps veterans with wraparound services, including education and job training, resume building, permanent housing, and transportation to appointments.

Assisting VA-Ineligible Veterans

Although Roberts, as a VA representative, cannot work with veterans with dishonorable or other-than-honorable (OTH) discharge status, she makes an effort to connect those with OTH discharges to legal services such as the Connecticut Veterans Legal Center (CVLC). CVLC can help veterans with OTH status apply for status upgrades, potentially bumping them up to honorable discharge so that their medical and behavioral healthcare, as well as other benefits, can be covered through the VA.

For the VSU veterans who are not VA-eligible, a 501(c)(3) called Soldier On fills the services gap, helping all veterans, regardless of discharge status or active-duty experience. With a goal of ending veteran homelessness and helping justice-involved veterans reenter society, the organization uses trauma-informed care to provide counseling, substance use services, transitional housing, homeownership help, education, job preparation, financial services, and more. Established in Massachusetts in 1994, Soldier On operates through grant funding, which means that facilities like Cybulski do not need to reimburse them for their services.

A Creative Approach to Programming

In contrast to higher-level facilities, Cybulski and other minimum-security facilities have a lot of flexibility when it comes to programming. Presented with this opportunity for creativity, Deputy Warden Mu'min wants to ensure that she and her staff are providing services that the veterans truly need. As someone with no personal military experience who has never been incarcerated, she readily admits that she is not the expert, so she asks the people who are: the veterans in the unit. ▶

“Outside groups make decisions for [incarcerated people] all the time. There is always a group suggesting, “Hey, by the way, we think this is good for you.”...What has been successful for us... is asking the offenders what they need...”How can I help you be a better returned citizen? How can I help you be a better father, husband, or whatever it is that you're trying to be?”...then [we] put their requests into play...They're the ones who are going to be leaving here, walking their own path. As the unit manager, I want to make sure that I provided opportunities for growth and success to the best of my abilities. —Deputy Aesha Warden Mu'min



Deputy Warden Mu'min and her staff have regular meetings in which they brainstorm new program ideas to meet the veterans' needs. After fathers across the Reintegration Center expressed a desire to develop better relationships with their children, Cybulski partnered with the Connecticut Office

of Early Childhood (OEC) to facilitate a fatherhood program, teaching participants about stages of child development and helping them build parenting skills. As part of this program, Deputy Warden Mu'min recently asked OEC to bring some infant simulators in to help the men in the program learn how to hold a baby and change a diaper. Many of Cybulski's incarcerated fathers have had little interaction with their infants but will return home while their children are still young, and programs like this can help them feel more confident and prepared when that day comes.

Since employment is one of the primary concerns for incarcerated people, veterans and non-veterans alike, preparing VSU participants for employment is a major programming focus. After multiple participants expressed interest in trucking careers, for example, Deputy Warden Mu'min sought the assistance of a local trucking school, which came to Cybulski and hosted an information session. The session included explaining how to get a commercial driver's license, defining the differences between Class A and Class B licenses, and exploring the options for licensing classes.

Program participants continue to be a resource for the VSU even after release. Past participants are particularly helpful in preparing veterans for the world of post-release employment. When a veteran in the VSU is released, VSU team members ask them to keep in touch and report what is working on the outside. For example, if a veteran is hired as a forklift driver at a local business after release, the VSU becomes aware that the business is open to hiring returned citizens with criminal records. VSU staff can pass that information along to veterans who are approaching their own release dates and are worried about finding jobs.

Past participants have written to the program to explain how a job interview or driver's license test went for them, describe successful reconnections with their children, or share stories of a recent house purchase or a marriage. The returned citizens also encourage current VSU participants to make contact with them when they are released.

These stories and accounts give current participants useful, real-world information and connections, as well as encouragement. Deputy Warden Mu'min is heartened by the number of post-release veterans who do write back, seeing it as proof that something is working in the VSU. ▶

“It just speaks to the kind of environment that has been created in the VSU and the relationships developed. It is encouraging that so many past participants want to write back to share the positive things in their lives. This provides hope and helps current participants make it through each day. They see and start to believe that there is hope for their futures. —Deputy Warden Aesha Mu'min”

Things to Keep in Mind when Starting a Veterans Unit like Cybulski's VSU

1. Helping incarcerated veterans access services is often cost-free for the facility

In some ways, veterans are one of the easiest populations to connect with services because there are a large number of organizations, both nationally and locally, who have resources earmarked for veterans in need. At Cybulski, this means that DOC does not need to fund any of the special services that come into the VSU, including those provided by the VA, Soldier On, Veterans Legal Center, Vet Centers, and the Connecticut Office of Early Childhood. Deputy Warden Mu'min was surprised by the sheer number of groups that want to help incarcerated veterans. Many organizations, upon learning about the unit and the facility's willingness to bring new resources in, find their own grant money to bring programs to the unit.

2. Start with conversations with "boots-on-the-ground" staff

Not only are staff able to provide a key perspective on the needs of incarcerated populations, they are vital to any new program's success, so ensuring their buy-in early on is important. Counselors, correctional officers, people who run education programs, and non-DOC programming staff who interact with the incarcerated veterans every day often have good insight into what is missing and what can help. Wardens and deputy wardens must be at the table, but for Deputy Warden Mu'min, the first question to ask is directed to the daily staff: "What do these veterans want and need that we're not currently providing?" This could include new programs related to mental health, substance use, higher education, job training, family relationships, and more.

When starting a new program, staff at all levels should be involved. During the planning stage of the Operation Warrior Horse program, a 10-week equine therapy program for incarcerated veterans, the administrators organizing the program walked around talking to correctional officers about the idea; before long, officers were asking if they could help with the program. This kind of across-the-board commitment is what allows interesting new projects to work.

At Cybulski, correctional officers and counselors can request to be assigned to the VSU, and many do—especially those who are veterans themselves. A low rate of disciplinary issues in the unit makes it a relatively desirable assignment, and Deputy Warden Mu'min gets very few complaints from line staff. She chalks this up in part to the fact that most of the veterans in the unit are truly invested in their rehabilitation and involved in facility programming. She said, "They have a purpose for being there. They're either working, going to groups or school, [or] they're helping out in different parts of the facility; they're all doing something."



In addition to correctional officers, the VSU is staffed with a unit manager, a unit counselor, and a DOC veterans liaison. They have access to an addiction services counselor, a reentry counselor, mental health staff, education staff for the state school district housed within DOC, and medical staff. Non-DOC support staff include a VA Veteran Justice Outreach specialist, a VA-certified peer support specialist, graduate-level social workers and psychiatry interns, Yale School of Nursing fellows, attorneys from Connecticut Veterans Legal Clinic, and Vet Center staff.

After developing some solid program ideas with staff, the unit manager and/or facility administrators gather information about the benefits of the proposed program and get approved up the chain of command. As long as VSU staff make sure to sufficiently research a potential new program or partnering organization, leadership is generally supportive—even backing innovative ideas like Operation Warrior Horse.

Deputy Warden Mu'min helped bring Operation Warrior Horse into the VSU a few years ago when she was still counselor supervisor; she and her deputy warden brought the idea forward to the state Commissioner of Corrections who approved it. The Commissioner at that time, Rollin Cook, was impressed by the results: “The men that are involved, they’ve expressed to us that they’re in a place now, a very positive place in their lives that they haven’t seen for a very long time, and it just comes from these sessions of being able to interact with the treatment providers and with the horses.”¹

3. Ask veterans themselves what they need and be open to adjusting programming based on shifting needs

In general, Deputy Warden Mu'min advises operating under the assumption that no one knows what incarcerated veterans need better than they do themselves. Direct input from VSU participants has led to information sessions about specific career paths, parenting programs, and more. These needs can change over time as well, so it is important to be flexible.

Over the VSU's 6 years of operation, administrators have shifted the lineup of available programs and classes to reflect changes in the population. For example, while the first group of participants were older on average, the current group is relatively younger, meaning that a lot of them have young children and therefore have more interest in the fatherhood program. To take this shift into account, the fatherhood program might meet more often or the Office of Early Childhood might facilitate more programs.

Thinking outside the box is the basis of a program like the VSU. As Deputy Warden Mu'min sees it, “Prisons have been around forever. So if we want to reduce recidivism and we want to really help people, let’s try something that’s never been done.”





Soldiers have struggled to deal with trauma in every conflict throughout history as they have tried to adapt from a combat zone back to civilian life. No matter what it is called—exhaustion, nostalgia, soldier’s heart, the effort syndrome, shell shock—PTSD by any other name can wreck lives.

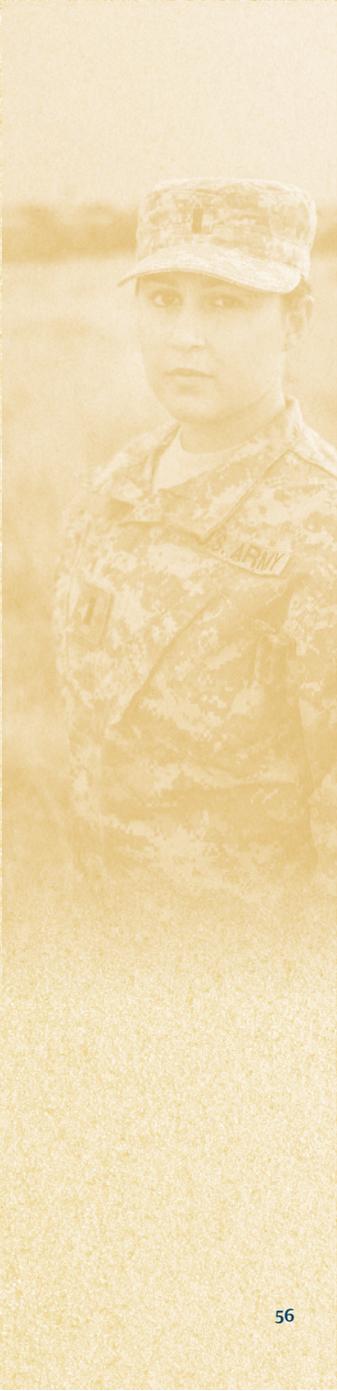
Women are the fastest-growing subgroup of the military and veteran populations. Women represent more than 15% of active-duty military, 19% of the Guard and Reserve, and 10% of veterans nationwide. While the overall veteran population is decreasing at a rate of 1.5% per year, and the women veteran population is increasing at an annual rate of 1%.

The total population of women veterans is expected to increase at an average rate of about 18,000 women per year for the next 10 years. Projections indicate that 12% of veterans nationwide will be women by 2025, and women veterans are projected to comprise 16% of the veteran population by 2043.

Similarly, women are the fastest-growing subgroup of the incarcerated population. While the overall jail population fell 9% from 2008 to 2018, the women's jail population increased 15%. In state prisons nationwide, the number of women grew 22% from 2000 to 2015, and the women's jail population grew 40% over the same period. Over approximately 40 years, the pace of growth for women's state prison populations more than doubled that of men with women's state prison populations growing 834%.

As these rates rise, an increase in the number of women that have a military background in contact with the criminal justice system is a foreseeable consequence that poses unique challenges to a system that often overlooks gender-based distinctions in treatment and treatment response. Studies that reveal a need for women-specific trauma-informed mental and substance use disorder treatment and approaches to reentry demonstrate ways in which the system could adapt to better accommodate the needs of women in general and of justice-involved women veterans in particular.

This section highlights the women-specific justice-involved veterans' needs, several efforts across the country aimed at addressing their needs, and resources for relevant for this group of individuals.



“Really a Veteran”: The Prison Program Helping Women Veterans Build Pride and Prepare for Reentry

Washington State Corrections Center for Women

By Julie Baldwin
and Lillian Tuttle

“We have had a few [veterans, such as D., who] did not want to come even to a meeting, because she was ashamed...She didn’t think she was really a veteran, whatever “really a veteran” means. And we explained to her, “You signed a contract, you joined with good faith to serve your country...And that is what we call a veteran.”...And when we first get a woman into the group, automatically—tears, because we are the first ones to say, “Thank you for your service. You were a veteran before you were an inmate.” And...nobody’s ever said that to them. — Sharon Kirkpatrick, Member of the Washington Women Veterans Advisory Committee

The 2019 NIC publication *Barracks Behind Bars II* included a highlight about an innovative support and transition group for veterans inside Washington State’s women’s prisons. A few years later, the program, which has over 300 graduates, remains a rarity. Although the number of veterans programs in men’s prisons is growing, few other states, if any, have a program dedicated to incarcerated women veterans. In this year’s issue, we revisit the program to see how it has tackled the challenges specific to a veterans group for women behind bars.

The Program

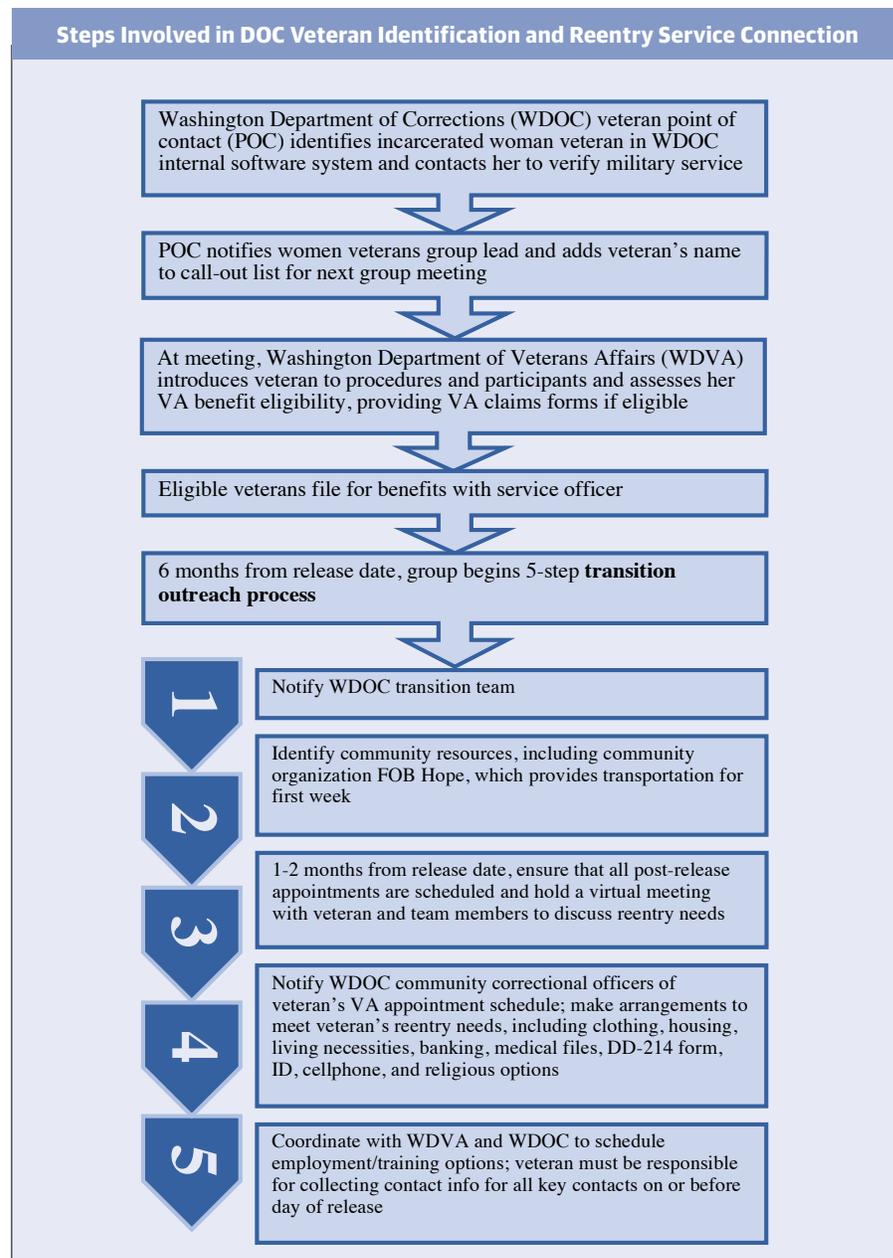
In 2013, Lourdes E. ‘Alfie’ Alvarado-Ramos, Director of the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA), established the Women Veterans Advisory Committee (WVAC) to address the unique issues facing women veterans. Sharon Kirkpatrick, one of the committee’s founding members, spent decades volunteering in women’s prisons and had a passion for the incarcerated population that quickly spread to the whole committee. With Kirkpatrick leading the charge, WVAC collaborated with the Washington Department of Corrections (WDOC) to establish a group inside the state’s two women’s prisons that prepares participants for reentry and helps them access a sense of veteran pride.

Prior to COVID-19, the veterans group held monthly meetings in each women’s prison with representatives from WDVA, WDOC, the VA, and community organizations. These meetings provided the incarcerated women a space for education, peer support, and reentry planning. Each month, a different speaker discussed a topic of interest, which could be anything from military sexual trauma to nontraditional career paths. As a veteran’s release date grew closer, the partnering agencies and organizations worked together to build a thorough reentry plan and set it in motion.

However, these in-person meetings came to halt with COVID-19. Pivoting to meet the veterans’ immediate needs, the group has become a reentry-focused triage team, holding a virtual “reentry team meeting” right before each woman’s release. These meetings include a thorough run-down of each step of the reentry plan: who is picking the veteran up at the door of the facility; where she is

spending the first night; how she is getting the items she needs to cook, sleep, and bathe; whether she has her healthcare, counseling, and benefits lined up; and how she is getting to any necessary appointments. The graphic below details the steps involved in this new model, starting with initial identification of a veteran and ending with release.

Reentry team meeting attendees usually include Sharon Kirkpatrick and a few other WDVA representatives, a DOC facility social worker, a parole officer if the veteran is being released to supervision, a VA representative, and various community organization representatives. Below is an overview of what each partner brings to the reentry planning process.



Each Partner's Role in Reentry Planning

Washington Department of Veterans Affairs (WDVA)

WDVA's WVAC member Sharon Kirkpatrick plays the role of meeting coordinator, building on years of experience helping incarcerated women veterans file VA claims and plan for reentry. Also joining the meetings are representatives from WDVA's King County Reentry Program, who help answer housing and benefits questions. These representatives leverage strong relationships with both DOC and the VA to ensure that incarcerated veterans receive the services they need on the right timeline.

In a recent reentry team meeting for incarcerated veteran D., who will be released in one week and is preparing to enter law school, Kirkpatrick runs through a reentry checklist, making sure each item is resolved before moving onto the next. She and the King County WDVA representatives try to connect D. to the law school's veterans program and brainstorm several quick fixes for D.'s urgent housing and benefits needs. When it becomes clear that D. does not yet have a long-term housing plan, they recommend completing a DVA housing assessment before her release, as a "released to homelessness" status makes one eligible for more transitional housing programs. When D. mentions her still-pending request for a DD-214 from the VA, they recommend asking the central DVA office for an official Statement of Service to use for benefits in the meantime. Toward the end of the meeting, Kirkpatrick asks D., "What are we doing with hair?" D. says she would love to get a cut and color to feel put-together before school starts but that she has too much on her plate to figure that out. "I have a connection," Kirkpatrick responds. She arranges a free appointment with a community member who owns a salon and wants to help veterans.

WDVA is ready to support justice-involved veterans after release as well. Liza S. Narciso, Washington State Women Veterans Coordinator and Assistant to WDVA Director Alvarado-Ramos, is another long-standing member of the veterans group meetings. She stresses to each program graduate, "Keep our number handy... Before you do something that's really gonna end you up in the prison, call us so we can figure out what we can do to help you in this crisis."

Washington Department of Corrections (DOC)

Without DOC's buy-in, it would be much more difficult for WDVA and their community partners to access incarcerated veterans. Luckily, both DOC administrators and facility staff believe in the group's value. As DOC Correction Specialist and part of DOC's transition team, Misty Patterson provides essential support to the veterans group. Although she does not participate in the reentry team meetings, she equips the veteran point of contact at each facility with an up-to-date list of all veterans in custody, helps write reentry plans, and maintains a shared drive of veteran-specific reentry resources for DOC staff to reference.



DAY OF RELEASE FOR E., A MEMBER OF THE VETERANS GROUP AT WASHINGTON CORRECTIONAL CENTER FOR WOMEN. E. IS ACCOMPANIED BY KIM ALNESS, DOC PSYCHIATRIC SOCIAL WORKER, LEFT, AND MONIQUE BROWN, FOUNDER/EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF FOB HOPE, RIGHT.

In D.'s reentry team meeting, D. sits next to Kim Alness, a DOC psychiatric social worker. On top of her counseling duties, Alness has spent the last few weeks helping D. make calls to find housing and other post-release services. Near the end of the meeting, Alness describes a vision that makes D. smile: At a future reentry team meeting, D. might be on the call as a licensed attorney, ready to help other graduates with reentry-related legal needs.

Veterans Administration (VA)

Although the VA does not always attend reentry team meetings, they are a major player in the reentry process for many of the veterans in the group. WDVA and the VA worked with DOC to initiate in-facility VA medical examinations, thereby both saving DOC the expense of trips to the VA hospital and expediting the veterans' claims process. With VA examinations available behind bars, incarcerated veterans are more likely to see a doctor early in their incarceration period, increasing the chance that claims will be processed before their release dates. All the partners agree that having health-care and benefits commence immediately upon release is a major boon to reentry.

The veterans group has even helped a few incarcerated spouses of veterans enroll in VA benefits, addressing a need that is perhaps more common in women's facilities than men's. Narciso tells the story of one such woman veteran. ▶

“Last year, we helped this spouse of a marine veteran who, [because of military injuries], needs 24/7 care...She didn't know [how to apply for help from the VA]. So we were able to call the husband, walk him through the process. And he was able to get the benefits. And...when the spouse was released last year, we were able to help her apply as the primary caregiver for the [veteran, so] they will get additional money. —Liza S. Narciso, Washington State Women Veterans Coordinator”

Community Partners

As Founder and Executive Director of the Seattle-based nonprofit Forward Operating Base Hope (FOB Hope), Monique Brown offers on-the-ground resources to women veterans leaving incarceration. Whenever a graduate of the veterans program does not have a strong support network, Brown meets her at the door of the facility on the day of her release with supplies for bed, bath, and kitchen. Knowing the value of mental and physical healthcare during reentry, Brown also offers the women rides to all necessary appointments in the first week.

In D.'s reentry team meeting, Brown asks D. exactly what her post-release needs are. D. has a ride home from the facility but no other transportation help; she needs food, clothing, and school supplies. Brown agrees to provide rides to all medical appointments in the first week and plans to bring D. a grocery gift card, a short-term prepaid cellphone, and even a laptop and some notebooks for

law school. She and D. plan a clothes shopping trip. At the end of the meeting, D. asks each partner for their contact information and expresses her relief. “Every time I go to one of these meetings, I feel so much better. I really needed this today.”

The women veterans group has established a highly effective collaboration-based method to help veterans like D. feel ready for the reentry process. As Kirkpatrick said in 2019 and reiterated this year, however, the most remarkable thing about the program is that “it exists” at all. Running a program for incarcerated women veterans comes with its own set of obstacles. Below are several challenges that the group has faced and, for the most part, overcome in the past 8 years.

Challenges and Solutions

Challenge 1: Finding Dedicated Space and Funding for an Incarcerated Women Veterans Program Because of the Small Population

“**[The women veterans group] is the kind of program that takes a few passionate people, but their capacity is tapped out because, you know, each case takes significant effort.**

—*Lourdes E. 'Alfie' Alvarado-Ramos: Director of the Washington State Department of Veterans Affairs*

When interviewed in 2019, Sharon Kirkpatrick spoke about the need for a dedicated veterans housing pod in Washington’s women’s prisons. A few years later, there remains no women veterans housing pod or dedicated facility space, although the concept has support from key stakeholders like Misty Patterson, DOC Correction Specialist. “[T]here’s always benefit for [a dedicated unit]... we’ve shown success with [the men’s veterans] units. I just don’t know that

we’ll have a female veteran unit with the numbers we have.” With only about 25 women veterans in the entire Washington State prison system at any given time, DOC cannot justify setting aside space. Nonetheless, it remains a goal for Kirkpatrick. She wants the women’s facilities to have a space where women veterans can feel safe, hold meetings, and connect to a sense of pride in being a veteran.

The agencies that run the women veterans program struggle to find funding, as well as space. WDVA has some federal and state funding earmarked for incarcerated veterans. Nonprofits like FOB Hope, while they lack specific grants for the work, are able to direct certain resources toward reentry needs. For the most part, however, this group is a labor of love with partners piecing funds together from multiple sources and “look[ing] for money under every rock,” as Kirkpatrick says.

Lacking funding, the program still does not have a formal tracking system to monitor its successes. A tracking system would allow the partners to understand the true cost of the program and pursue

funds, make any necessary tweaks to improve effectiveness, and provide usable metrics with which to promote the program as a model for women veterans reentry support. This creates a vicious cycle: no funding begets no funding. Anxious to resolve this issue, Alfie Alvarado-Ramos is waiting on approval at WDVA to hire a Women Veterans Coordinator who could focus significant time on the incarcerated women veterans program and build a tracking system.

For the meantime, the group relies on strong anecdotal evidence of its successes and a robust volunteer network to fill in gaps. They have seen very few of the hundreds of women who have been involved with the group return to the justice system. In fact, the only two women who Alvarado-Ramos and Narciso know were reincarcerated actually chose to return to prison.

To meet resource and personnel needs, Kirkpatrick, Brown, and others have built a network of community members who volunteer their time to help women veterans get back in the swing of outside life. People donate clothes and offer salon services; two of Brown's friends, also women veterans, recently volunteered to help her drive recent graduates to appointments.

Alvarado-Ramos does see some benefits to the small size of the incarcerated women veterans population. With a maximum of two veterans leaving the women's facilities each month, program partners have the capacity to provide hyper-individualized reentry planning. Each woman gets a personalized, all-hands-on-deck reentry meeting, a luxury that the men in the prisons' veterans pods do not have.

Challenge 2: Correctional Staff Can Be Antagonistic Toward Veterans and a Veterans Program

“If they find out [an incarcerated] woman is a veteran, there are some [correctional staff] that might say things like, “How do you look at yourself in the mirror? How do you call yourself a veteran? Look where you are.” And that’s the type of harassment that we have to make sure is not occurring. —Sharon Kirkpatrick”

the reach of a program like this, as those involved must be willing to go the extra mile to find reentry solutions. If staff do not believe that these women are veterans who deserve to be called veterans, the whole program suffers.

Although many correctional officers are supportive of the veterans program, sometimes staff who are themselves veterans harass the incarcerated veterans, shaming them about their justice involvement. This immediately compounds the shame that many incarcerated veterans already feel and impedes their progress in building self-esteem and preparing for reentry. Resistance from staff also restricts

Kirkpatrick came up with a creative solution to this problem. With the superintendent's permission, she put on a seminar about veteran benefits specifically for veteran correctional staff, using her knowledge and experience to benefit them in addition to the incarcerated veterans. This showed staff how useful an in-prison veterans program can be and helped them understand just how much they have in common with their incarcerated sisters-in-arms. The group saw most of the harassment stop after the seminar. Alvarado-Ramos is pleased with the level of veteran staff outreach that the women's program has made possible. ▶

“Many veterans choose to go into [corrections]. And... many of them have not seen their benefits because the state provides health care [through their employment]...[but] it's important for them to know that they can also partake of the benefits. So...it's not just the [incarcerated] women veterans [that we help], it's the military spouses, it's also...the employees of the prison...That domino effect of this kind of a program is pretty significant. —Alfie Alvarado-Ramos”

Challenge 3: Justice-Involved Women Veterans Often Do Not Feel They Are “Really Veterans”

“Women veterans that end up incarcerated want to hide. Their male counterparts, for the most part, have this total pride...they want to, you know, kind of have a little credibility because they're a veteran. And you don't see that with most of our incarcerated women veterans. —Sharon Kirkpatrick”

Due to the shame and stigma associated with justice involvement, it is often difficult to get incarcerated veterans to identify as veterans. Although this is true for many in the justice system, Sharon thinks it is more common with women than men, observing that “women go inward with shame and guilt [while] men go outward with, ‘I was a veteran!’” She believes that women veterans can gain a sense of self-worth and a close-knit community through a veterans program like Washington's.

Over the past few years, the group has gotten better at locating veterans in the women's prisons, although it continues to be a challenge. They work to maximize visibility, distributing an in-prison newsletter when possible and talking to as many incarcerated women as they can. Growing visibility outside the facilities might help as well. Several news outlets have done stories on the program, and Kirkpatrick has seen her fellow American Legion members grow more vocally supportive of justice-involved women veterans over the years. In fact, her all-women American Legion post agreed to sponsor membership for all the incarcerated women in the program, providing them access to benefits assistance and a national and local veterans network. Kirkpatrick is hopeful that with increased attention, justice-involved women veterans may find it easier to be proud of their veteran status and reenter society with their heads held high.

“ Heather French Henry

Heather French Henry
with Julie Baldwin
and Lillian Tuttle



Heather French Henry, former Commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Veterans Affairs (KDVA) and former Miss America 2000, has been an advocate for veterans for over 20 years. The daughter and niece of Vietnam veterans, a young French Henry saw firsthand the interplay of service-connected disabilities and PTSD, substance use, justice involvement, and homelessness in the lives of veterans. She brought this perspective to the national stage as Miss America 2000, where she made veterans her platform and toured the country discussing veteran homelessness and healthcare issues. In 2014, French Henry was appointed KDVA Commissioner, a role that allowed her to expand veteran healthcare and homeless services and develop a women veterans program. She transitioned to Deputy Commissioner under a new administration, bringing her total tenure at KDVA to 5 years. Today, she continues her veterans work with the Heather French Foundation for Veterans, which provides education and policy advocacy around veterans issues.

Pounding the Pavement: Over 20 Years of Veterans Advocacy

An Issue Close to Home

My first interaction with a justice-involved veteran was actually my father. So in the '80s, when there wasn't such a thing as a "justice-involved veteran," our family encountered my father who experienced a variety of issues coming home from Vietnam. He had co-occurring issues with PTSD and substance abuse,

and it took him a long time to be able to emotionally, physically, and spiritually come home from that transition of war in Vietnam, so my adolescent years were a very tumultuous time. He wound up in the correctional system in my home county—which, when you're in a small county in a rural area, everyone in town pretty much knows that, right? And there was a huge stigma around all of the mental health and the issues from the Vietnam veteran population. So that was an eye-opening experience as a young person having a family member who is justice-involved.

THERE WAS A HUGE STIGMA around all of the mental health and the issues from the Vietnam veteran population. So that was an eye-opening experience as a young person having a family member who is justice-involved.

That was also before there were alternative treatment programs for veterans, what we now know as homeless veteran reintegration programs that offer veteran-specific drug rehab capabilities. [Despite that, he was able to find a non-veteran-specific] alternative sentencing path, which was really ahead of its day...[a faith-based program called] Teen Challenge...And then he actually did some work with a homeless veteran facility, again, that was ahead of its time in Cincinnati. And then after his fifth rehabilitative try, he was able to get even more spiritual healing at Oral Roberts University...So it was interesting seeing these veteran-assistance programs on a very preliminary and pedestrian level as a family member.



The Right Cultural Moment

As Miss America, I was able to get more involved on a national perspective. Of course, in 1999/2000, when I won, we had such a huge pro-veteran force, right? You had Steven Spielberg with Saving Private Ryan, and Tom Hanks and myself and others doing fundraisers for the World War II Memorial...and all of the Honor Flights that started because of that; and just the whole conversation that was going on around mental health issues of veterans, hepatitis C in Vietnam veterans, the lack of screening, the lack of enrollment in the VA. The '90s also saw the growth of the homeless veteran Stand Downs, a precursor to veterans treatment courts (VTC). It was just like the perfect storm in '99 and 2000 for someone like me, as a family member, as a daughter, to be able to sort of pound the pavement on a national perspective...

THE WHOLE CONVERSATION ...was going on around mental health issues of veterans, hepatitis C in Vietnam veterans, the lack of screening, the lack of enrollment in the VA.

And then I continued that work when I came back to Kentucky... with the Heather French Foundation for Veterans. The first president of the Foundation's name was Ken Moore, a Vietnam veteran from Rochester, New York...and he got me involved with Judge Robert Russell up in Buffalo, New York, who started the

Buffalo VTC. And then I helped Ken and the judge there in Rochester to get a VTC started...[After that], we just continued to advocate through various programs and outreaches for this type of service, all across the United States.

The Cycle of Homelessness and Justice Involvement

A large percentage of homeless veterans probably either have been, are, or should be a justice-involved veteran. They don't know where to go, and some of them are not ready to make a transition, so you see a number of them just in this perpetual state of spiraling and circulating within the homeless population.

My uncle is a Vietnam veteran, and he just disappeared on the streets in Florida. And they finally found him and put him into a veteran-specific drug rehab program called, then, the Serenity House in Daytona Beach. He went through the program, became a counselor there, and just retired a few years ago as Counselor of the Year. So, you know, he got to turn his whole life around, as did my dad. So I saw the possibilities. But when you see some of these men and women who get stuck in [homelessness and justice involvement],...often they don't get someone trying to meet their needs for their healthcare or their benefits once they exit out of the correctional facilities, and they're back on the streets. So those connection points are very important....The people or community-based organizations that are prepared to be able to be that bridge or that net for those types of veterans within the correctional facilities [are essential to reducing the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement].

Heather French Henry

The Need for Enhanced Communication Between System Actors

When I look at the veteran resources we didn't have 20 years ago to what we do have today, thanks to the work we did it's very encouraging. The downside that I see is sometimes still the lack of networking. When I was Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner with KDVA, it always seemed to be a constant struggle [to maintain] the same level of cooperation from, you know, the federal VA, to our state agency, to the regional courts and the judges and that system.

It used to be that the federal VA was the largest networking arm of veterans services available for a veteran and his or her family. But now, the state DVAs are really the largest bank of resources for

veterans and their families within each state, because a lot of states have programs that are very indigenous to our state, right? So what Kentucky has may not be the same resources that Indiana has. And within Kentucky, we have 120 counties, so there's 120 possibilities that there might be different programs.

[The problem] is that when people see a state DVA, they assume that since they contacted the VA, or they are working with the VA rep who is assigned to the VTC, that they

have encompassed the state DVA, but that's not the case [because we are different entities]. Although every state has a state DVA, we still keep having to re-educate [veterans and] people within federal government, and even within the court systems locally, that the state departments are there, ready and able to help.

Reflecting on the Growth of Resources for Justice-Involved Veterans over the Past 20 Years

I'm so proud of the fact that I was there from the beginning. That I got to watch huge, monumental people like Judge Russell, who is like the father of the VTC program, get the Buffalo VTC off the ground, and to be able to be involved in getting the Rochester VTC off the ground. There are multiple levels of leadership, right? There are those roles that thrust you into leadership like Miss America, or KDVA Commissioner, or what have you. But then the fifth layer of leadership is being able to watch others take on and utilize your work as a platform or a foundation. And they may never know that you were there from the beginning, and that is okay. But you get to see the second and third and the fourth generation of people continue that on in an even bigger way. And so that is very satisfying.

THE PEOPLE OR COMMUNITY-BASED

ORGANIZATIONS that are prepared to be able to be that bridge or that net for those types of veterans within the correctional facilities are essential to reducing the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement.

Raising Support and Awareness

Women Veterans and Their Needs:

Conversations with Heather French Henry and Candace Bradley

While KDVA Commissioner, French Henry created a new position within the department to address the needs of Kentucky's women veterans: the KDVA women veterans coordinator (now called the women veterans program administrator). Since the position was formed in 2015, three women veterans have held the role: Kentucky Army National Guard veteran LuWanda Knuckles, Kentucky Air National Guard veteran Candace Bradley, and currently, Army veteran Addie Mattox.

We had the opportunity to speak with both Heather French Henry and Candace Bradley about the growth of support for women veterans over the past two decades and how KDVA's women veterans coordinators and program administrators have raised awareness of and improved resource access for Kentucky's women veterans.

Building Support for Kentucky's Women Veterans

When Heather French Henry began her veterans advocacy work in 1999, the needs often challenging women veterans (e.g., women's healthcare, resources for military sexual trauma (MST) and parenting), were not usually included in larger discussions of veterans' issues, and there were few dedicated resources or staff available to address these needs. Although many resource conversations continue to center male veterans today, French Henry has seen immense growth in the visibility of women veterans and their needs over the past 20 years. ▶

“Twenty-one years ago, just talking about women veterans in general was unheard of... We fought really hard to make sure that the term “woman” or “female” was added...when we talked about homeless veterans on the floor of Congress and Senate...That was when we really started pushing hard for the differentiation of men veterans versus women veterans and making sure that their access and their journey was 100% on both sides.—Heather French Henry, Former Commissioner, KDVA; Miss America 2000”

Access to healthcare is one of the most important issues for all veterans, and French Henry is gratified by the VA's ongoing efforts to dedicate space and staff to women. Although the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA's) Women Veterans Health Program has been in existence since 1985, the VA doubled down between 2007 and 2012, building a more comprehensive public health approach to women's health and hired dedicated Women Veterans Program Managers (WVPM). Today, each VA Medical Center in the country has a WVPM to coordinate women's services within the facility, and around half of VA Medical Centers have a separate women's health clinic.¹ French Henry emphasizes the value of separate women's clinic entrances, which enhance privacy and reduce the likelihood of unwanted attention or harassment during a medical visit. She celebrates these changes as a move

¹ <https://www.va.gov/health-care/health-needs-conditions/womens-health-needs>
<https://www.womenvetsusa.org/cmsfiles/docs/vha-handbook-1330-02-wvpms-23-may-2012.pdf>
<https://www.va.gov/ve/docs/storybookWomenVeterans.pdf>

toward “understanding, really understanding what a woman veteran really needs and wants delivered healthcare-wise.” When she was appointed KDVA Commissioner in 2014, French Henry tried to bring the same understanding into the realm of non-healthcare services. She calls instituting women veteran resources one of her “number one priorities.”

The Goals of the KDVA Women Veterans Program

1. Perform outreach to improve women veterans' awareness of eligibility for federal and state veterans services and benefits.
2. Assess the needs of women veterans with respect to improve the Women Veterans Program.
3. Make recommendations to the Commissioner to improve benefits and services.
4. Review programs, research projects, and other initiatives designed to address or meet the needs of Kentucky's women veterans.
5. Incorporate women veterans issues in the Department's strategic planning and participate in national forums and committees for women veterans.

Creating the KDVA Women Veterans Coordinator Position

KDVA did not initially have the funding to hire a staff member dedicated to women veterans. However, within 9 months of French Henry's tenure as KDVA Commissioner, the department was able to establish a Women Veterans Program and hire a full-time women veterans coordinator position. Now in its seventh year, the program combines public education and resource coordination, with the women veterans coordinator (now called the women veterans program administrator) leading both efforts. Having this position has allowed KDVA to proactively address the two primary challenges to women veteran resource access: women veterans' reluctance to self-identify and service gaps that disproportionately affect women.²

Countering Women Veterans' Reluctance to Identify Themselves as Veterans

“One of the things that we noticed is [that] men are most of the time not afraid to tell their stories in a positive light...[Y]ou can tell in so many different ways that a [male] veteran is a veteran...because a lot of them, you know, they'll have it right on the top of their head [on a “combat veteran” hat]. And women don't often do that. —Candace Bradley, former KDVA women veterans coordinator”

Early on in their efforts to locate women veterans, French Henry and the coordinators realized that they needed to come up with new methods of getting women to identify as veterans. Many women, as well as men, do not self-identify when asked the question “Are you a veteran?” because they do

not feel like the word “veteran” fits or applies to them. Maybe they never had a deployment or were never in combat. Maybe they experienced military sexual trauma that led them to associate anything military-related with trauma. Maybe they consider their service to be short-lived and were not career military. Maybe they have been incarcerated and feel that they do not deserve the title of veteran. The reasons are endless and often unknown.

In dealing with this terminology issue, the Women Veterans Program learned that if they omitted the word “veteran” and rephrased the question to “Have you ever served in the military?” they had

² <https://veterans.ky.gov/Veterans-Programs/Women-Veterans/Pages/default.aspx>

a much easier time identifying women veterans. As French Henry says, “That’s [the answer to the new question is] either a yes or a no; there’s really not a middle ground on that.”

Terminology aside, however, there remains a deep current of resistance to veteran spaces among many women veterans. Candace Bradley, women veterans coordinator from 2018 to 2021, can relate to the identity challenges many women veterans feel. While both she and her husband are veterans, her husband had multiple combat deployments, unlike her. This contrast in military experience has, at times, made it hard for her to accept the “veteran” moniker. ▶

“You know, you put on so many hats as a woman: you’re a mom, you’re a daughter, you’re a wife. So that kind of just—and I’ve heard so many women [veterans] say the same thing—[your identity as a veteran] just kind of gets swept to the side. And we somehow feel undeserving of being referred to as a veteran or telling our stories...[To counter that narrative], we have to continue to build each other up [by telling each other], you 100% deserve this recognition, you 100% deserve your benefits.

—Candace Bradley”

Having a woman veteran serve in the women veterans coordinator position creates a shared experience that enhances the effectiveness of the role. In Bradley’s view, having a woman veteran in the position is essential to putting individuals at ease, whether they are processing MST, feeling isolated after a divorce, struggling with homelessness, or facing justice involvement. ▶

“If you want a mental health provider [at the VA who is] female, you are allowed to ask for that, and you shouldn’t be denied. [For the same reason,] I think having a woman veteran in [the KDVA women veterans coordinator] position is highly important. —Candace Bradley”

The Role of Outreach and Public Education Campaigns

To further address women veterans’ resistance, the responsibilities of the women veterans coordinator includes substantial work on outreach and public education. These efforts serve a dual purpose: educating the civilian population about the existence and contributions of and barriers experienced by women in the military and inspiring more women veterans to identify themselves and gain access to well-earned benefits.

As KDVA Commissioner, French Henry built creative public education campaigns to reach more of the women veteran population. In 2015, she and women veterans coordinator LuWanda Knuckles helped organize the KDVA Women Veterans Unite campaign, a broad-based effort to identify women veterans across the state and “lessen the obstacles to information.” Capitalizing on the fact that two-thirds of those who grocery shop are women,³ the campaign worked with a retailers’ association to put “Have you served?” signs in grocery stores with information about VA benefits and other

³ https://files.plma.com/2013PLMA_GfK_Study.pdf



STATE REPRESENTATIVE
PATTI MINTER, LT. COL
APRIL BROWN, AND
STAFF SGT. CANDACE
BRADLEY SUPPORTING
THE CREATION OF WOMEN
VETERANS DAY (HB 318)
TO ITS PASSAGE.

resources. Additionally, French Henry and Knuckles organized the first statewide women veterans conference and partnered with the VA and the American Heart Association on a Go Red for Women Veterans campaign in order to raise awareness of heart disease as the number one killer of women and women veterans. As part of that campaign, they created a program that allowed women active service members and veterans to connect over experiences of heart disease.

Despite the challenges, Bradley and French Henry agree that the work required to increase self-identification of veteran status among women is worth it. With just a start and end date for military service, they can begin a conversation about healthcare and financial benefits that a veteran may not have known were available to her. As Bradley says, “Opportunities to access healthcare and education benefits...can really change the direction of somebody’s path.”

Connecting Women Veterans to a Network of Resources

In addition to public education, the women veterans coordinator focuses significant energy on culling and distributing veterans resources to Kentucky’s women veterans. This means providing assistance with locating military records and enrolling in VA healthcare, connecting individuals with service organizations, and releasing a weekly newsletter with updates and resources related to everything from home loans to vocational school. The coordinator also manages the statewide women veterans database, which helps keep women veterans in touch with one another and with KDVA. Having the database in place has allowed KDVA to distribute relevant information to every woman veteran in the network, including veteran-specific celebrations for women, resources for VA enrollment, and upcoming job fairs.

On a more basic level, the coordinator acts as a general point person for women veterans across the state, leveraging KDVA’s network and resources to address the needs of women veterans. At one point during her tenure as coordinator, Candace Bradley remembers receiving a call from the parents of a young woman veteran who had gone missing. They suspected that their daughter was in a county jail but were having difficulty narrowing it down further. Bradley was able to quickly connect with a VA social worker who, despite the fact that the woman veteran had never enrolled in VA healthcare, was able to locate her in a jail and began the enrollment process so that she would have healthcare upon her release. Bradley’s coordinator position allowed her to field that phone call and quickly connect the detained veteran to the VA resource network, beginning the path of reentry planning. In this way, having a women veterans coordinator allows KDVA to serve as the connection to a resource grid that can address many needs of women veterans.

Addressing Service Gaps that Disproportionately Affect Women Veterans

“From the very beginning, during my year of service as Miss America, there was a huge lack of resources for women veterans within the healthcare community, and even in the homeless veteran community, which there still are today because we are still dealing with a predominantly male population, although the ...women veterans population is growing significantly.

—Heather French Henry

Because men constitute the majority of the veteran population, the homeless population,⁴ and the justice-involved population, many services are designed to meet the needs of men. This means that certain needs that are more applicable to women veterans, such as gender-specific community gatherings and childcare responsibilities, are difficult to meet within existing systems. The women veterans coordinator works to identify these service gaps and construct solutions.

Many veterans service organizations that serve as valuable community-building spaces for veterans, such as Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, and Disabled American Veterans, have a majority male membership. French Henry and Bradley acknowledge that because of this, many of these spaces do not necessarily feel welcoming to women veterans. This means that women veterans often miss out on the rehabilitative aspects of these communities, which can help during challenging periods such as the transition from military service to civilian life and also the reentry process for justice-involved veterans.

The women veterans database is a tool that French Henry and the women veterans coordinators have used in working to meet the need for a similar veteran-specific community for women. Building the database, which required extensive outreach across the state, provided French Henry with an opportunity to understand just how to create spaces that do feel welcoming to women veterans. She found that, despite their lack of involvement in the currently established organizations, women veterans are often very interested in social gatherings that are specific to women veterans. Taking this cue, the Women Veterans Program has held veteran-specific events for women over the years and worked to keep the women veterans in the database connected to one another.

The biggest unmet needs that French Henry and Bradley see within the women veteran population, however, relate to childcare responsibilities as women are more likely to be primary caretakers.⁵ Bradley sees fewer opportunities for women veterans to “get back on their feet” during transition, whether that is the transition out of the military, out of the justice system, or out of marriage. She has spoken to many women veterans who enter marriages that, due to military service for one or both parents, include a lot of moving around; when those marriages end, the women veterans are

⁴ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/05/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population>
<https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-2021>
https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_gender.jsp

⁵ <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/04/25/the-changing-profile-of-unmarried-parents>

often left in an unfamiliar place without a support system and with full parenting duties. This can exacerbate the risk of homelessness and justice involvement.

Not only did they find that many women veterans with children often lack a support system, but they also discovered that many services that could help women veterans lacked resources that parents need. For example, until relatively recently, the homeless women veterans with children with whom KDVA worked had difficulty finding temporary housing with the capability to house women and children together. ▶

“Women are coming in with more responsibilities like children, so where do they go? What resources are available for them? ...Not that there can't be male veterans who are the predominant caretakers ...but that's not the norm. And so we have to really take what a woman veteran is going through with a family in those situations and cater the services around them. —Heather French Henry”

Today, the women veterans coordinator can connect women veterans struggling with stable housing with an organization that is devoted specifically to this population: Lady Vets Connect. The organization provides a transitional housing space in Winchester, Kentucky, ...“where women veterans can heal from the trauma in their lives created by homelessness, post-traumatic stress syndrome, and military sexual trauma.”⁶ Importantly, this housing is flexible for those with children.

By addressing needs related to community involvement and childcare, the women veterans coordinator is able to further the KDVA Women Veterans Program's goal of helping women veterans feel pride in their service, find community with other veterans, and utilize the resources that are available to them as veterans. At the base of all of this work is a simple principle: Listen to what women veterans say they need. ▶

“Learning and understanding the scope of their need [and] how they want to be reached out to is very important to not only veterans in general, but specifically women veterans. And I think that once you show that you're willing to listen and understand what they need, and to be there to serve them in that capacity, [it] really makes a huge difference.—Heather French Henry”

AT THE BASE OF ALL OF THIS WORK is a simple principle: Listen to what women veterans say they need.

⁶ <https://lv-connect.org/about>

Resources specifically for Justice-Involved Women Veterans,

Justice-Involved Women, and Women Veterans

JUSTICE-INVOLVED WOMEN VETERANS RESOURCES

ARIZONA

We Steel Rise (Tucson)

A 6-month live-in reentry program for women veterans leaving incarceration with room for 10 women at a time. Provides housing, therapy, job preparation, case management, and courses on finances, skills training, and parenting. Only available to those convicted of nonviolent crimes.

<https://www.westeelrise.org>

866-224-3424

CALIFORNIA

Veterans In Prison Post No. 1, California Institute for Women (CIW)

An inmate activity group inside CIW that provides incarcerated women veterans a space to discuss veterans issues and resources and to support veterans in the local community. Open to both veterans and women who support veterans. Meetings include benefits counseling and speakers as well as time to sew and knit products to donate to local veterans in need. Meets twice a month.

Contact CIW Public Affairs for more information:
909-606-4921

WASHINGTON

Women Veterans Group at Washington Corrections Center for Women and Mission Creek Corrections Center for Women

A group of stakeholders that holds a virtual "reentry team meeting" right before each woman veteran's release. Meetings include a thorough run-down of each step of the reentry plan, including connections to resources, healthcare, benefits, transportation, employment, and housing. Any woman who has served in the U.S. military and is incarcerated in either of the state's two women's prisons is eligible for participation.

Contact Sharon Kirkpatrick: sakirkpat@comcast.net

JUSTICE-INVOLVED WOMEN RESOURCES

ALABAMA

Aid to Inmate Mothers

Provides parenting, anger management, and self-image classes to incarcerated mothers, as well as their children, in preparation for reentry. Also assists those who act as caregivers to the children of incarcerated mothers.

<https://inmatemoms.org>

334-262-2245

A Day of New Beginning Transitional Living Services

An 8-month transitional housing program for homeless women who have been incarcerated.

256-399-6908

MISSOURI

Center for Women in Transition

Provides justice-involved women with wrap-around services, including supportive housing, behavioral health services, employment assistance, court advocacy, life skills training, and peer support.

<https://www.cwitstl.org/store/c1/Home>

314-771-5207

OREGON

Mercy Corps Northwest – Lifelong Information for Entrepreneurs (LIFE) – Coffee Creek Correctional Facility

A 32-week entrepreneurial training program with a curriculum that includes optometry, cosmetology, plant management, welding, and horticulture. Mercy Corps Northwest partners with Portland Community College to provide this program at the women's prison Coffee Creek Correctional Facility, as well as the men's prison Columbia River Correctional Institution. Everyone within 18 to 24 months of release is eligible.

<https://nw.mercycorps.org/what-we-do/prison-and-reentry>

WOMEN VETERANS RESOURCES

PENNSYLVANIA

Women's Reentry Assessment, Programming and Services (WRAP) – Chester County

A specialized unit of Chester County's Adult Probation, Parole and Pretrial Services Department that provides gender-responsive assessment, supervision, and programming with the goal of reducing recidivism, decreasing technical community supervision violations, and increasing the well-being of justice-involved women. The county partners with several community organizations to provide case management and programming. Women who are transitioning from county incarceration or facing technical violations are WRAP's focus.

<https://www.chesco.org/3852/WRAP-Program>
610-344-6290

WASHINGTON

Freedom Education Project Puget Sound

Provides a rigorous college program for incarcerated women and transgender and gender-nonconforming people in Washington and creates pathways to higher education after students are released from prison.

<https://fepps.org>
206-729-2480

NATIONAL

American Veteran Organization of Women Magazine (AVOW)

A quarterly magazine dedicated entirely to women veterans.

<https://www.avowmagazine.com>

Bombshell Patriots

Assists active-duty military personnel, veterans, and spouses find community and resources through peer support groups and relationships with county-level Veterans Affairs Offices. This organization focuses primarily on women, although they also assist male active duty, veterans, and spouses.

<https://www.bombshellpatriots.org>

VA Center for Women Veterans (CWV)

Created by the VA in 1994 to monitor and coordinate the VA's administration of healthcare and benefits for women veterans and to serve as an advocate for a cultural transformation in recognizing the service and contributions of women in the military. Holds training and events focused on women service members and veterans.

<https://www.va.gov/womenvet/index.asp>

National Women Veterans United

Provides women veterans with information and case management assistance for VA benefit claim filing and makes referrals to county, state, and federal Veteran Service Officers.

<http://nwwv.org>

Service Women's Action Network (SWAN)

SWAN has developed a network of vetted resources that are uniquely qualified to address challenges servicewomen and women veterans face, including access to healthcare, housing, workplace discrimination, caseworkers, family and financial services, employment and transition, legal services, and alternative therapies.

<https://www.servicewomensactionnetwork.org/about>

Veteran Sisters

An advocacy and support organization focused on eliminating MST and providing a peer support network for those who have experienced MST. Membership is available to all service members and veterans, regardless of discharge status.

<https://veteransisters.org>

951-305-3244

Women Stress Disorder Treatment Teams and Women's Trauma Recovery Programs via the VA National Center for PTSD

The VA National Center for PTSD is a research and educational center devoted to PTSD, with information available to help all veterans learn about PTSD and treatment options. The website includes a directory to PTSD-related programs around the country, including Women Stress Disorder Treatment Teams and Women's Trauma Recovery Programs.

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov>

ARIZONA

Women Warriors – Tucson

Helps homeless and at-risk women veterans transition into sustainable employment and permanent housing by offering financial support, peer support, health and wellness training, and employment services.

<https://www.womenwarriorstucson.com>

520-345-5273

CALIFORNIA

Foundation for Women Warriors – Southern California

Assists women veterans with the transition from military life to civilian life, focusing on education, employment, housing, and childcare. This includes financial assistance, resource connections, professional development, and peer support. Justice involvement does not make veterans ineligible, although only those with an honorable military discharge can participate.

<https://foundationforwomenwarriors.org>

310-733-2450

Women Vets on Point – Los Angeles

Through one-on-one counseling and case management services, this group helps women veterans access benefits, counseling, employment, and housing.

<https://womenvetsonpoint.org>

213-335-5432

San Diego Women Veterans Network – San Diego

A group dedicated to cultivating community, peer support, and a network of service providers for San Diego's women veterans.

<https://sdwvn.org>

GEORGIA

Women Veteran Social Justice Network, Inc. — Atlanta

Provides leadership coaching, behavioral health and wellness services, and digital literacy training to women veterans.

<https://www.wvsjnetwork.org/index>

FLORIDA

Operation 120

Provides supportive housing and transitional life skills services, including counseling, interpersonal skills development, and community involvement, to displaced and at-risk women veterans.

<https://www.operation120.org>

561-463-8387

ILLINOIS

National Women Veterans United Sgt. Simone A. Robinson Military Women Veteran's Center — Chicago

Provides immediate benefits assistance and peer support for women veterans with an emphasis on at-risk and homeless veterans. Computers and clothing are available on site, as well as classes on computer skills, financial literacy, domestic violence, and entrepreneurship. Also helps women veterans cultivate mentoring relationships with young community members.

<http://nwvu.org/military-women-veterans-center-2>
872-731-2150

KENTUCKY

Kentucky Women Veterans Database

The Women Veterans Coordinator maintains a database of women veterans in Kentucky to distribute information of interest to women veterans, including resources and upcoming events.

womenveterans@ky.gov
502-564-9203

Lady Veterans Connect — Winchester

Maintains a transitional healing home to help end women veteran homelessness. Also works to connect the larger women veteran population with comprehensive services to address PTSD, MST, and other service-connected issues.

<https://lv-connect.org>
859-806-4297

MISSOURI

Veteran Women of Influence (VWI) — Saint Louis

Provides women veterans with transitional housing and partners with local organizations to connect women veterans to classes, vocational training, and behavioral health services.

<http://www.veteranwomenofinfluence.org/index.htm>
314-652-7932

NEW MEXICO

Regaining Balance — Ojo Sarco

Hosts free retreats in which women veterans diagnosed with PTSD and women partnered with veterans with PTSD can learn skills to help reduce post-traumatic stress.

<https://www.regainbalance.org/index.html>
505-218-7836

NORTH CAROLINA

Combat Female Veterans Families United

Advocates for women veterans at a local, state, and national level and offers peer support, connection to veterans resources, financial assistance, and military transition programming to women combat veterans.

<https://www.cfvfunded.com>

Pamlico Rose Institute

Offers a discussion series, retreats, classes in fitness, gardening, and woodworking, and an artist residency to veterans to address the effects of trauma and ease

the struggle with social and community reintegration during military transition. Focuses on women veterans in particular.

<https://www.pamlicorose.org>

805-320-2967

OREGON

Red Feather Ranch – Philomath

Provides online support groups for women veterans and offers nature-based in-person retreats where participants can engage in skills training for sustainable agriculture and food production, as well as foraging and naturalist skills. Works to promote the healing of women veterans from trauma, whether it be sexual, combat-related, grief-related, generational, or childhood trauma.

<https://www.redfeatherranch.org>

541-248-1942

PENNSYLVANIA

Women Veterans Empowered & Thriving – Allentown

A reintegration program that utilizes writing and performance to help women veterans adjust to civilian life. Programming includes workshops, performances, and panel discussions focused on empowerment and creative expression.

<https://www.womenveteranempowered.org>

TENNESSEE

Women Elevated – Clarksville

This group is focused on preventing women veteran homelessness by providing women veterans with acute shelter, mentorship, counseling, peer support, and life skills training in areas like financial literacy, resume writing, and interview preparation.

<https://womenelevated.org>

TEXAS

Texas Veterans Commission Women Veterans Program

Boosts public awareness of women veterans and advocates for legislation to ensure that women veterans' needs are met.

<https://www.tvc.texas.gov/women-veterans>

832-728-3624

Grace After Fire

Provides community resource navigation services, financial basic needs assistance, peer-to-peer support, group programming, social events, and annual retreats for women veterans and their families.

<https://www.graceafterfire.org>

210-864-2959

The Pink Berets

Offers therapeutic services focused on PTSD and MST, including individual, group, and family counseling, as well as yoga and equine, art, and outdoor therapy. Also hosts retreats and women veteran-specific events.

<https://thepinkberets.org>

210-912-7564

WASHINGTON

Forward Operating Base Hope – Seattle

Distributes sleeping bags, tents, socks, toiletries, jackets, hats, gloves, and more to homeless veterans in the Seattle area. Also helps the graduates of the women veterans group at Washington Corrections Center for Women and Mission Creek Corrections Center for Women through the first week of reentry by providing supplies and transportation help.

<https://www.fobhope.org>

253-970-4431

Compendium Conclusion and Moving Forward

By Greg Crawford

SINCE THE EARLY 1980S, the United States has seen an increase in its prison population by more than 500 percent. Some 10 million people cycle through our local jails each year, 4.5 million under some form of community supervision. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, at yearend 2019, we had a total correctional population near 6.5 million people. With numbers like these, particularly when broken down to local and regional jurisdictions, it is no wonder criminal justice professionals and policymakers alike talk routinely about the need for criminal justice reform.

Policymakers and criminal justice professionals have largely begun to embrace the use of promising, innovative, and evidence-based practices to mitigate not only the fiscal effect to communities of the over reliance on incarceration, but also the damage and stigma that incarceration places on an individual with justice-system involvement.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reports that veterans account for about 7% of the prison population. Veterans are **not** overrepresented in the criminal justice system, but we have started to see a shift in the way that criminal justice agencies across the continuum approach working with them. In an era of mass incarceration, policymakers and advocates have been seeking, and for the most part implementing successfully, programs that divert justice-involved veterans from lives dominated by future crime and further interaction with the criminal justice system.

Initially, focus was on younger veterans returned to their communities following traumatizing deployments to a combat zone. The basis for this may be traced in great measure to 1980, when the American Psychiatric Association acknowledged the behavioral realities of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) by adding it to the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which doctors use to classify and define mental illnesses. This recognized trauma as a diagnosable mental health condition that can have debilitating effects on day-to-day living for individuals dealing with their experiences in a combat zone.

Soldiers have struggled to deal with trauma in every conflict throughout history as they have tried to adapt from a combat zone back to civilian life. No matter what it is called—exhaustion, nostalgia, soldier’s heart, the effort syndrome, shell shock, PTSD by any other name can wreck lives. This

is why the programmatic veteran-specific efforts we have seen have been so instrumental to the many successes of veterans who come into the criminal justice system and re-enter our communities. This work is illustrated throughout the five volumes of the National Institute of Corrections Veterans Compendium Project.

In our first volume, *A Second Chance for Vets Who Have Lost Their Way*, we shared the story of Judge Robert Russell, whom we dubbed the “Godfather” of veterans treatment courts for establishing his specialty court for veterans back in 2008. He recognized the value of bringing all eligible veterans together under a single assigned docket where they were given structure, support, and a tailored treatment plan to address any underlying issues of PTSD, traumatic brain injury, or other mental health issue related to their military service. This effort was the catalyst for all points of the justice system to try to find ways to work more effectively with veterans who become justice-involved. Whether through law enforcement, jail, community supervision, or prison, veteran-specific programming has proven to be an exceedingly worthwhile innovation.

SOLDIERS HAVE STRUGGLED to deal with trauma in every conflict throughout history as they have tried to adapt from a combat zone back to civilian life.

In *Barracks Behind Bars*, we showed how veteran-specific housing units in prisons and in jails have also demonstrated promise. They give incarcerated veterans the opportunity of housing in a pod (or wing, floor, or dorm) away from the noise and violence of the general population.

Also in *Barracks Behind Bars*, first responders in places like Harris County, Texas, were shown to have been pioneers in training mental health professionals to accompany police responding to a report of an armed veteran posing a threat to others. Having served in uniform doesn’t give someone a free pass for legal transgressions, so enlightened policymakers and administrators in the criminal justice system are seeking innovative yet effective methods of punishment for veterans who break the law, understanding that the veterans’ acts might derive from the demons with which they grapple.

POLICYMAKERS AND ADVOCATES have been seeking, and for the most part implementing successfully, programs that divert justice-involved veterans from lives dominated by future crime and further interaction with the criminal justice system.

For any local, state, and federal agency across the entire continuum of criminal justice that identifies a need to do better to help the justice-involved veterans in their populations, here are some suggested next steps:

- **DEVELOP** a set of key performance and outcome measures at all intercepts of the justice system.
 - Law Enforcement: Identify veterans you come in contact with and track referrals to the Veterans Affairs (VA) office and/or other community-based resources; track the number of referrals in lieu of arrests; and document the cost savings to taxpayers vs the cost of incarceration.
 - Jails/Prisons: Use the Veterans Reentry Search Services to identify veterans at booking, track the number of veterans in your care, refer them to veterans dorms within your facilities/institutions, and create measures and outcomes to report to jail administrators and wardens.
 - Veterans Treatment Courts: Develop performance and outcome measures for your program, track successful outcomes, violations, graduation rates, recidivism, etc.
- **EDUCATE** all personnel in your jurisdiction about military culture, PTSD/traumatic brain injury/mental health conditions related to military service and help them identify resources available through the VA and the local community that serves veterans who are both eligible or ineligible for VA benefits.
- **DEVELOP** community-based resources and partnerships where law enforcement/jails/veterans treatment courts (and probation departments) can make referrals at the lowest level possible to minimize the collateral consequences of justice-system involvement.
- **DEVELOP** policies and procedures that promote diversion whenever possible in lieu of arrest/incarceration.
- **CREATE** Law Enforcement Veterans Response Teams and jail pods/dorms/units for veterans/veterans treatment courts all working together in one community in partnership with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs/veterans justice outreach specialists and community-based treatment providers.
- **CREATE** prison pods/dorms/units for veterans and partner with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs/Health Care for Reentry Veterans and community-based treatment providers to ensure successful transition from incarceration to the community.
- **REMEMBER** that reentry starts on day one in any criminal justice setting. Identify veterans, use (or develop) a validated risk/need/assessment tool, implement case-planning, engage with the VA and other resources in the community, and help veterans plan to return to their communities with the skills and resources necessary to succeed.

For the professionals who work in these veteran-specific programs, to be able to provide a path in their court, or jail or prison for veterans that actually has meaning, makes a difference, and has proven to be effective, is both personally gratifying and positive in an atmosphere that often is overwhelmingly negative and traumatic.



Resources

ACCESS AND MANAGE YOUR VA BENEFITS AND HEALTH CARE (VA)

<http://www.va.gov>

CENTER FOR JUSTICE AND MENTAL HEALTH PARTNERSHIPS (CSG)

<https://csgjusticecenter.org/resources/justice-mh-partnerships-support-center>

CIT INTERNATIONAL

<http://www.citinternational.org>

EASTERSEALS MILITARY & VETERANS SERVICES

<https://www.easterseals.com/our-programs/military-veterans>

INTRODUCTION TO PUBLIC SAFETY DE-ESCALATION TACTICS FOR MILITARY VETERANS IN CRISIS

<https://copstrainingportal.org/project/introduction-to-public-safety-de-escalation-tactics-for-military-veterans-in-crisis>

JUSTICE FOR VETS

<https://justiceforvets.org>

JUSTICE-INVOLVED VETERANS (NIC)

<https://nicic.gov/projects/justice-involved-veterans>

JUSTICE-INVOLVED VETERANS NETWORK (NIC)

<https://info.nicic.gov/jiv>

LAW ENFORCEMENT-MENTAL HEALTH COLLABORATION SUPPORT CENTER (CSG)

<https://csgjusticecenter.org/resources/le-mh-collaboration-support-center>

MILITARY ONESOURCE

<https://www.militaryonesource.mil>

MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA

<https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome/index.asp>

NATIONAL CENTER FOR PTSD (VA)

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov>

NATIONAL CENTER FOR PTSD: POLICE OFFICER TOOLKIT (VA)

<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/care/toolkits/police>

NATIONAL DRUG COURT RESOURCE CENTER

<https://ndcrc.org>

NATIONAL REENTRY RESOURCE CENTER (DOJ)

<https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org>

POLYTRAUMA/TBI SYSTEM OF CARE (VA)

<http://www.polytrauma.va.gov>

**SERVICE MEMBERS, VETERANS, AND THEIR FAMILIES
TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE (SMVF TA) CENTER (SAMHSA)**

<https://www.samhsa.gov/smvf-ta-center>

SUICIDE PREVENTION RESOURCE CENTER (SAMHSA)

<https://www.sprc.org>

VA'S HEALTH CARE SERVICES FOR MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA (MST)

https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/VAHCS_MST_October2014.pdf

VA HOMELESS PROGRAMS (VA)

<https://www.va.gov/homeless/reentry.asp>

- Health Care for Re-entry Veterans Services and Resources
- Videos:
 - Support for Incarcerated Veterans
 - Assisting Justice-Involved Veterans
 - A Second Chance for Justice-Involved Veterans
 - Preventing Suicide Among Justice Involved Veterans
- HCRV Specialist Contacts: State Contacts
- Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) Contacts

VAMOBILE BEYOND MST MOBILE APP

<https://mobile.va.gov/app/beyond-mst>

**VETERAN INTERCEPTS IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM WITH POPUP RESOURCES
AT EACH INTERCEPT (NIC)**

<https://info.nicic.gov/jiv/node/113>

VETERANS CRISIS LINE

<http://veteranscrisisline.net>

This website provides information for veterans who have issues readjusting to society and who are in a state of mental or emotional confusion and upset, and who may have suicidal thoughts. Call the veterans crisis line, toll-free, at 1-800-273-8255, then press 1.

The toll-free number to reach the VA is 1-800-827-1000. Other helpful VA numbers include:

- Debt Management Center: 1-800-827-0648
- Homeless Prevention Line: 1-800-424-3838
- National Caregiver Support: 1-855-260-3274
- Women Veterans Call Center: 1-855-829-6636
- Vet Center Combat Call Center: 1-877-927-8387
- Health Benefits Customer Service: 1-877-222-8387
- Education Benefits: 1-888-442-4551
- Inspector General Hotline: 1-800-488-8244

VETERANS FAMILIES UNITED

<https://veteransfamiliesunited.org>

VETERANS JUSTICE OUTREACH PROGRAM (VA)

<http://www.va.gov/homeless/vjo.asp>

VETERANS RE-ENTRY SEARCH SERVICES (VA)

<https://vrss.va.gov>

VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA

<http://www.vva.org>

Leave No Veteran Behind



NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF CORRECTIONS

www.nicic.gov