



**Department of
Veterans Affairs**

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

Fact Sheet

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

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

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

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

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

The Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) initiative formally began with the publication of VHA Handbook 1160.01, Uniform Mental Health Services in VA Medical Centers and Clinics, which states: “VA is committed to the principle that when veterans’ non-violent offenses are products of mental illness, veterans and their communities are often better served by mental health treatment than incarceration.” This was followed by a planning conference in December 2008, with justice system experts and VA’s mental health leadership to develop models for police, jail and court initiatives. Following the December planning conference, there has been significant effort at the Medical Center level nationwide to engage local justice systems in planning for veterans’ justice services.

VA Medical Centers are encouraged to appoint an individual who fills two inter-related roles, both components of the facility’s overall outreach and community education efforts: (1) A police training coordinator, with a commitment to educating law enforcement personnel about PTSD, TBI, and other mental health issues relevant to the veteran population; and (2) A Veterans’ Justice Outreach coordinator, committed to interfacing and coordinating with the local criminal justice system, including jails and courts.

A 2008 inventory of services to justice involved veterans indicated substantial involvement with the community justice agencies:

- 28% of VAMCs outreach to veterans in jails;
- 30% of VAMCs have agreements with jails, courts, DAs, or probation about VA services for veterans;
- 29% of VAMCs are on task forces linking veterans in jail to VA or non-VA services upon release;
- 25% of VAMCs liaison with courts to identify veterans for possible referral to VA;
- 32% of VAMCs educate/train non-VA law enforcement about mental health issues relevant to veterans.

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

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