

# The Role of Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists in Veterans Treatment Courts

By: Kierra Zoellick, Program Associate



JUSTICE PROGRAMS OFFICE  
SCHOOL of PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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**V**eterans Treatment Courts (VTCs) are the newest iteration of treatment courts in the United States. Begun in 2008, VTCs are a way for veterans who have become involved in the criminal justice system to avoid incarceration and receive treatment for underlying issues such as substance abuse and/or mental health disorders. Unlike other treatment courts, VTCs have a specific team member, the Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) specialist, who connects veterans to treatment and ancillary services, particularly those offered by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). VJO specialists are employed by the VA, and their entire job description is to assist justice-involved veterans (JIVs) in accessing available services; the VTC is just one context in which they work.

## The Veterans Justice Outreach Program

Many veterans are involved in the justice system, whether they have been arrested, are incarcerated, or are involved in adjudication or monitoring. These veterans, commonly referred to as justice-involved veterans or JIVs, are often unaware of or unable to connect, on their

own, to services available to them through the Department of Veterans Affairs. Founded in 2009, the Veterans Justice Outreach Program is designed to fill this gap; VJO specialists are employed by the VA and are the link between services and JIVs. VJO specialists interface with courts and other criminal justice elements to “identify, assess, and link justice-involved veterans to appropriate supports and services.” Ultimately, by connecting JIVs to the services they need, the VJO program aims to reduce recidivism among these veterans and ensure they are able to “pursue and realize a full, meaningful life as a self-reliant, positively contributing member of the community.”

The VA provides a wide range of services to veterans; therefore, the VJO specialist’s first step when assisting a JIV is to determine precisely what types of services they need. Because the VJO program was initially designed to deal with homelessness among JIVs, the VA has several resources that can help veterans find housing. The VA can also provide mental health and substance abuse services, which are particularly important in the context of

## VJO Strategic Goals

1. Increase the identification of JIVs and promote their engagement with VA.
2. Build VJO capacity to serve JIVs through a comprehensive workforce development program that attracts and retains high-quality staff, supports their professional development efforts, and supports succession planning.
3. Match JIVs with the medical, psychiatric, vocational, and social services that will improve health and optimize successful community integration and safety.
4. Optimize community integration for JIVs by removing attitudinal barriers through improving stakeholder understanding of the population.
5. Develop systems for program evaluation and dissemination of knowledge on JIVs.

Source: U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Veterans Justice Outreach Program: VA Could Improve Management by Establishing Performance Measures and Fully Assessing Risks*, GAO-16-393 (Washington, DC, 2016), 7, <http://www.gao.gov/assets/680/676861.pdf>.

VTCs. Often these mental health services include treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder and/or military sexual trauma. The VJO specialist can also help JIVs with navigating the Veterans Benefits Administration and the Veterans Health Administration, utilizing employment resources, obtaining physical medical care (such as for traumatic brain injury), and supporting JIVs' ancillary needs such as help for non-criminal legal issues like child support.

It is important to note that although the VJO primarily links veterans to VA services, veterans do not have to be eligible for VA services in order to receive help from a VJO specialist. All VJO specialists should have a list of resources available beyond what the VA can provide, and he or she should be in close contact with the agencies that provide these services.

## The Role of the VJO in Veterans Treatment Courts

Veterans Treatment Courts were established because veterans often have unique needs compared to others involved in the criminal justice system. Additionally, though many of the resources available to veterans are the same as those available to other individuals, veterans are also able to access VA services. Therefore, in a treatment court environment, the VJO specialist is a crucial team member; if not for the VJO specialist, VTCs "likely would not function and proliferate." Without the link between JIVs and services that are available to them, the work of VTCs would be severely hampered.

The VJO specialist serves several roles on the VTC team, the most important of which is to connect participants to treatment services. To do so, the VJO specialist conducts an initial evaluation to determine: (1) if the veteran is eligible for VA services based on factors such as their discharge status; and (2) what types of services the veteran needs, such as housing, substance abuse treatment, employment, et cetera. With that information, the VJO specialist is able to assist the participant in accessing those services. As a result of this service orientation, VJO specialists within the context of a VTC are concerned first and foremost with clinical compliance rather than the criminal justice components of the program.

That being said, the role of a VJO specialist begins even before a participant is enrolled in the VTC. Because the

VJO is an employee of the VA, the specialist has access to veterans' records beyond those that are available to criminal justice system actors. As a result, the VJO specialist is often better positioned to determine treatment needs, benefit eligibility, and even if an individual is a veteran in the first place.

Because the VJO specialist is not part of the criminal justice system, but is instead part of the military community, he or she can also act as a link between the criminal justice system (the VTC), the VA, and the veteran community for the VTC team. The VJO specialist can educate the rest of the team on veteran culture, the VA system, and other veteran-related topics the team may find helpful. He or she can also assist in data collection, a key component of any successful VTC.

## Challenges

### *Workload*

Currently, VJO specialists are covering almost every operational VTC. As the number of VTCs has increased, so too has the number of veterans served by these court programs. As of June 2016, 463 VTCs were in operation, serving more than 3,900 veterans. To cover these court

programs and to serve JIVs not in veterans treatment courts, the VA employs 261 VJO specialists; each of the VA's 167 medical centers is covered by at least one VJO specialist. Including the 3,900 veterans in VTCs, the VJO program served 46,500 veterans in 2015 (a 72% increase from 2012).

While it is good that more veterans are receiving help from the VJO Program, this increase in

workload has not been accompanied by significant increases in resources; in fact, the VA expects funding and workforce to remain level, even while the amount of work continues to increase substantially. Currently, "VJO specialists are at capacity and are not able to fully address the demand for VJO Program services."

As a result, VJO specialists face tough choices about how to prioritize their time between VTC work and work with other JIVs. On the one hand, VTCs keep veterans from being incarcerated and ensure that they are receiving and are held accountable for treatment. However, working with any one veteran in a VTC takes substantially more time than working with any other individual JIV; the VJO specialist works with the participant longer, they have regular meetings with that veteran, and they

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have their responsibilities to the VTC team.

### *Limited Available Resources*

Veteran Treatment Courts face many of the same resource limitations that other treatment courts face, but because of the unique structure of the VTC, these resource strains often land on the VJO specialist. Availability of VA resources for many of the treatment and ancillary needs VTC participants have ameliorates these strains somewhat, but VTCs still struggle with limited capacity in residential substance abuse programs, limited housing options for sex offenders, and limited public transportation options in some (particularly rural) areas. For more information on some of these issues, see JPO at AU's webinar entitled "The VJO Specialist in Veterans Treatment Courts: The Glue Holding VTCs Together."

### *Lack of Performance Goals*

One major obstacle the VJO Program as a whole faces is a lack of performance goals with specific targets, timeframes, and performance measures. In other words, the goals to which VJO specialists should be striving are unclear, as are the strategies they should be using to address issues the program as a whole may be facing. This is complicated by the fact that VJO specialists in different areas have different problems which require different strategies. For instance, VTCs in rural areas have very different constraints than those in urban areas; VJO specialists covering rural areas will often cover more ground geographically to provide services to fewer veterans. This makes it difficult to standardize performance measures – should success be based on the number of veterans served, the quality of the service they receive, or some other metric? Performance goals would also help VJO specialists prioritize their time as mentioned above, and they could give better guidance to what is expected of them in a VTC and in their work with other JIVs.

### **Conclusion**

The VJO specialist is an integral member of the Veterans Treatment Court team. He or she connects participants to services, serves as a resource for other team members, and helps the treatment program identify veterans. However, VJO specialists do face some barriers in their role as a VTC team member; their workload is already too high and continues to grow, they have no clear goals or performance measures to guide their work, and they face many of the same challenges in finding treatment options for participants that other treatment courts do. Neverthe-

less, by fully integrating a VJO specialist into the VTC, programs can provide justice-involved veterans with the services and resources they need to get their lives back on track.

### **Endnotes**

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## Contact Us

For more information, please contact us at:

justice@american.edu  
(202) 885-2875  
www.american.edu/justice

Justice Programs Office  
American University  
4400 Massachusetts Ave NW  
Brandywine 100  
Washington, DC 20016-8159

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