

## Pennsylvania Veterans and the Criminal Justice System, Adjustment, Reentry and Associated Problems

### Introduction:

The Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom (OIF/OEF) wars are now the longest in U.S. history. This war has yielded many Veterans that return with incidences of substance abuse, driving under the influence (DUI), domestic violence, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), employment, depression, anxiety, suicidal ideations, redeployment and related problems. Like the Veterans of prior eras, many veterans encounter the Criminal Justice System (CJS) post-deployment or post-discharge and need a treatment alternative vs. incarceration, if deemed applicable. Veterans in this country appear to be overrepresented when it comes to psycho-social problems like, substance abuse, driving under the influence (DUI), higher rates of unemployment, assaults, intimate partner violence (IPV), family conflicts, homelessness episodes, suicides, PTSD and other problems. Tragically, some studies report that Veterans in general are twice as likely to commit suicide. Another study (Wortzel, 2009) also suggests that veterans in jail and prisons face an increased risk of suicide. Most Veterans have had more violent offenses, are usually first time offenders and honorably discharged (Noonan, 2007). A recent 2009 US Department of Labor (DOL) unemployment statistics revealed that veterans have nearly triple the unemployment rate than non-veterans. Some Veterans even astonishingly reported not wanting to highlight being a Veteran on their resumes due to stigma.

### Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Program:

The VJO is new initiative targets homelessness among justice-involved Veterans in contact with law enforcement, jails, and the courts. The primary objective of this program is preventing homelessness among the Veteran population by connecting justice-involved Veterans with appropriate treatment and other resources and then encouraging adherence to treatment over time. Justice-involved Veterans are Veterans who have crisis encounters with law enforcement in the community, are jailed for relatively brief periods of time for offenses that do not result in prison time, and/or are adjudicated or monitored by either local criminal courts or specialty treatment courts, such as drug and mental health courts, usually for extended periods of time. VJO Specialists reach in to the criminal justice system to ensure that eligible justice-involved Veterans have timely access to Veteran Administration (VA) mental health and substance abuse services when clinically indicated, and other VA services and benefits as appropriate. For example, VJOs, such as Butler in FY 10 have had over 250 referrals. Most are males, 5.7% females, 57% homeless episodes, 49% medical, 35% alcohol, 30% DUIs, 27% substance abuse, 17% domestic abuse, 33% psychiatric and a mix of Vietnam, post-Vietnam, Persian Gulf War (PGW) and OEF/OIF era Veterans. These latter 2 eras represent a growing significant minority

Veterans Courts:

In 2008, the first Veterans Court was started in Buffalo, NY by Judge Robert Russell. Since this court started, Veterans Courts have opened in Orange and Santa Clara counties in CA; Tulsa, OK; Rochester, NY; Anchorage, Alaska. Most larger jurisdictions are encountering 100 – 150 Veterans per month. Veteran’s Courts are a growing therapeutic jurisprudent approach within the PA County Court system as well as across the United States. For PA, Veterans Courts are underway in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Scranton; with Montgomery and Chester counties getting onboard and discussions starting in Beaver and Mercer counties. The PA statewide task force on Veterans and the Criminal Justice System in Pennsylvania is co-chaired by Justice Seamus McCaffery, Supreme Court of Pennsylvania and Michael Moreland, Director, Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 4.

This new judicial approach are challenging the traditional roles of Judges, Attorneys, Courts, Jail Corrections Counselor, Warden’s, County Sheriff’s, State Police, Probation Officers, Police Chief’s and Police Officers and VA staff affording unique collaborations, alternatives and sanctions. These Courts are a special docket within the Court system and target Veterans charged with non-violent felony offenses. They are similar to Mental Health, Drug and DUI Courts. All parties are collaborating in this effort to address the needs of military Veterans who turn to various crimes in the aftermath of military service. These Courts address the needs of all Veterans ready, willing and able to abide by the Court sanctions and make the necessary changes in their lives. The need for intervention, services and treatment related to their military service has drastically increased in the last several years, especially with the impact of the OIF/OEF wars amid a turbulent economy. The rationale is based on the combat PTSD, non-combat PTSD (military sexual trauma), economic hardships, substance abuse, domestic violence and readjustment. Most of these Veterans are generally law-abiding, but their problems contribute to criminal behavior among a substantial number of Veterans.

The transition from military to civilian life is challenging and Veterans cope in many different ways whether exposed to combat or not. However, not all Veterans get into trouble with the law. Many systems seem overburdened, lack sufficient resources to meet the needs of those suffering from PTSD, readjustment and other psychological problems, which overall may place Veterans at-risk for a host of problems. Like prior wars, current Veterans are also facing the growing stigma of war. The aggregate of their problems, studies and statistics profile the timeliness and the urgency of VJO, Veterans Courts, alternative and diversion programs, as we face epidemic proportions.

VJO Contacts:

Sites	Contacts	Phone Numbers	Emails
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For supplemental information, please visit the:

Veterans Treatment Court Clearinghouse at: <http://www.nadcp.org/learn/veterans-treatment-court-clearinghouse> and/or the Pre-Trial Justice Institute at: <http://www.pretrial.org/SpecialTopics/Pages/Veterans.aspx>

#### References

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#### About the author:

Bradley Schaffer is the Coordinator, Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) at the Butler VA Medical Center. He has over 24 year's federal service and is a USMC Veteran. He has developed particular expertise with incarcerated veterans & reentry, diversion, domestic violence prevention and fatherhood programs for Veterans. He is a Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW) and Board Certified Diplomat (BCD) in Clinical Social Work. For more information, contact him at (724) 285-2240 and/or email: [Brad.schaffer@va.gov](mailto:Brad.schaffer@va.gov)