

Re-Entry for Veteran Identified Inmates

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The Situation

A large Veteran's Administration (VA) Medical Center is located in Miami-Dade County, Florida, and U.S. military veterans have a significant presence in our community. Veterans also make up a notable segment of the jail population—about 10% of our inmates have served in the U.S. armed forces. This proportion is considered fairly typical for large urban jails.

Miami-Dade jail managers have been aware for some time of the significant numbers of veterans in the jail, many of whom have needs that are different from other inmates. We began putting new systems in place about the same time this issue began to gain traction nationally. We used our existing re-entry process to identify veteran offenders, and we have built a strong partnership with the Veterans Administration to help them plan for release. At the front end of the jail stay, a question asking if an arrestee is a military veteran has been added to the intake screening form. Asking this question has started producing results.

The Challenge

Creating effective offender reentry is an enormously complex challenge for local jails, as we seek to harness the efforts of many agencies at all levels within the criminal justice and human services community. People say that all politics is local; this is certainly true about re-entry, which has an important local impact both fiscally and in public safety.

In addition, jail practitioners are being faced with an increasing number of offenders, both men and women, who are veterans. In many cases their behaviors and lifestyles demonstrate a need for intensive services, both in jail and in the community after release. Thus, effective re-entry for veteran offenders in a jail setting is arguably one of the most challenging issues today faced by jail practitioners.

It is clear that South Florida communities need to deal effectively with justice-involved veterans who are released from custody. Our large local populations and high numbers of offenders in custody translate into significant numbers of veterans who need and deserve assistance.

- The Miami-Dade jail system is regularly identified as being in the top 10 nationally in jail population.
- The Florida Department of Corrections has consistently been one of the largest five state prison systems in the U.S. in recent years, coming in at third at the last check.

- Broward County, our neighboring county to the north, has about the same number of jail inmates as we have. Both jail systems are situated in a very large metropolitan area of about 4.1 million people.

The re-entry needs of veterans are the same as for other offenders (e.g., medical and mental health care, legal services, housing, employment, and family issues), but substance abuse treatment and mental health services are perhaps more acutely needed in this population.

Identification and Referral

If veteran offenders were easily identifiable, a major hurdle in serving them would be eliminated as soon as they are booked into jail. That is unfortunately not the case. Identifying arrestees as veterans is possible only if they are asked the question and they choose to answer truthfully.

Miami-Dade County relies on the arrestee's self-disclosure. A lack of resources and the challenge of booking 200 to 300 inmates daily make it impossible for our staff to reliably determine each arrestee's veteran status at intake.

When an arrestee is brought to the jail, booking staff ask him/her an extensive series of questions. Among them are questions about past military service and veteran status. Some arrestees choose not to disclose their veteran status at booking. One reason may be to avoid having their benefit checks stopped, and arrestees also may have other reasons for non-disclosure.

When an arrestee does disclose his/her veteran status, the booking staff notify the jail's program staff so they can alert the local Veterans' Justice Outreach (VJO) Coordinator. The VJO Coordinator will research the individual's background to determine eligibility for assistance and will provide an assessment for the provision of services when the offender is released. The jail regularly sends the VJO Coordinator a list of veterans known to be in the jail population, and the VJO Coordinator comes into the jail to meet with them as time permits. The Miami-Dade County jail system has a good relationship with our local VJO Coordinator. Regrettably, she is assigned to manage services in two additional large counties and is not able to visit our facilities as often as we would like.

Generally, if an arrestee does not disclose his/her veteran status at booking, the next opportunity for disclosure comes as they approach the end of their incarceration. Veteran offenders who have been in jail for some time likely have lost the benefits they had been receiving. They typically will disclose their veteran status when screened for re-entry services. In other words, they now need and want the help and have nothing to lose by sharing the information.

To further develop its re-entry services for offenders, including those who are veterans, the Miami-Dade Corrections and Rehabilitation Department has created a unique opportunity for volunteers to make a difference. The jail offers the position of "Volunteer Re-entry Coordinator," which is usually filled by college students who seek careers in the criminal justice field. Volunteering in this role has proven to be an excellent way to gain real-world experience and satisfy internship requirements. With minimal

training, the volunteers are able to provide a needs screening to offenders who ask for re-entry assistance. Each offender receives a written transition plan that identifies community-based resources that can assist them. Specific target populations, including veteran offenders, receive more intensive services while in jail or are referred to local providers who can begin the process of re-entry planning before release.

Possible Problems and Suggested Solutions

In Miami-Dade County's experience, there are four areas where extra effort has made a big difference in enabling the jail to reach out to and assist veteran offenders:

- Informing veteran offenders about available services;
- Training jail staff on recognizing veterans, behavioral warning signs, and appropriate interventions;
- Confirming the release date to ensure support is provided at release;
- Establishing reliable first contact with the offender after release.

1. Informing veteran offenders about available services

Communicating that offenders who served in the military may qualify for additional services is a challenge in the jail. We are working against the backdrop of a transient jail population, and to spread the word effectively we need to reach a large number of people in both verbal and written formats. We even need to provide the information in several different languages, because people are often better able to understand the message in their primary language.

Solutions

- We have created a Re-Entry Resource Guide with a dedicated section on services for veterans. This guide will eventually be printed in three languages.
- We invite veteran services organizations to participate in Jail Transition Fairs, where they can provide information to and establish direct contact with offenders who are nearing release.
- We post written notices in the visitation areas so that family and friends of veteran offenders are aware of available services and are brought into the process of supporting positive change and linkage with post-release service providers.
- We have placed information about services for veteran offenders on a dedicated television channel in the jail's housing areas—Re-Entry TV. Offenders who are unlikely to engage staff or read a pamphlet may be more inclined to learn about services by watching television.
- We have also established Re-Entry Hotlines, providing toll-free telephone access to agencies that can assist offenders with their reentry needs. The National Center for Homeless Veterans is one of the organizations that offenders can call for information and assistance.

2. Training jail staff on recognizing veterans, behavioral warning signs, and appropriate interventions

Both male and female veteran offenders may fit a profile that is different from other inmates in terms of their criminal charges, how they handle conflict, and how they interact with other inmates and correctional staff. Recognizing these characteristics can be the first step in connecting veterans with the services they need and deserve.

Solutions

- We have begun training program staff to help identify offenders who may be veterans. From an institutional and operational perspective, they tend to fit the following profile:
 - Likely to have shorter but more serious criminal records;
 - More likely to be serving a sentence for violent offenses;
 - Likely to be serving longer sentences;
 - More likely to have high levels of mental health needs and to be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD);
 - Likely to be older than their non-veteran counterparts.¹

On an individual level, they often exhibit recognizable behavioral patterns.

- Veterans may experience hyper-arousal symptoms, such as irritability, sleeplessness, hyper-alertness, or exaggerated startle responses.
 - Veterans may become hyper-vigilant and habitually sit with their back to the wall.
 - Veterans may express their PTSD in a multitude of emotions, ranging from self-blame to survivor guilt, grief, and anger.
 - Veterans with PTSD may also experience health problems, depression, and substance abuse.
 - Veterans may tend to be loners and isolate themselves. They may appear to be cold and aloof and may become anxious when another person walks close or behind them. They may not trust other people.
- Once we identify them, we guide veteran offenders toward the services they need.
 - We have requested assistance for delivering appropriate staff training from the local VJO Coordinator and non-profit organizations that work with veterans in the community.
 - We have taken advantage of information available online, including online webinars that can be used for staff training.

¹ Philippe Bensimon and Rick Ruddell, Correctional Service of Canada, "Research Brief: Veterans in Canadian Correctional Systems," November 2010, <http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/rsrch/briefs/b46/b46-eng.shtml>.

Two sources of online material and training are:

- Military Health System, Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury, monthly and recorded webinars listed at <http://www.dcoe.health.mil/Training/MonthlyWebinars.aspx> and <http://www.dcoe.health.mil/Training/OtherWebinars.aspx>
- Make The Connection, a resource hub provided by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs with information and first-person stories about homelessness and other difficulties faced by some veterans, online at <http://maketheconnection.net>

3. Confirming an Accurate Jail Release Date and Time

Knowing in advance the day an offender will be released from jail is critical to reentry planning and the provision of services. Services upon release often start with an initial appointment at an agency that acts as a “gatekeeper” to the plethora of service providers that a veteran offender may need. Making and keeping that first appointment is crucial.

Offenders have many possible release points from jail as their criminal case moves forward after arrest. Many variables can alter the release date and time, making it difficult even for jail staff to reliably know when an offender will be released. If jail staff cannot alert the local VJO Coordinator or other community-based provider of a veteran offender’s pending release, what hope is there of connecting them with services immediately on release?

Solutions

- We initially focus on working with veteran offenders who are serving a jail sentence and have a firmly established release date.
- We have a process in place for monitoring factors that may affect release dates, such as incentive gain time earned by the veteran offender while incarcerated.
- We provide our re-entry partner organizations with a time frame for each offender’s release. If possible, we finalize that date as early in their incarceration as possible.

4. Establishing reliable first contact with the offender after release

The first few hours after release are critical to linking the offender to the primary provider of services. It is essential to create a climate where the veteran offender knows the answers to the following questions:

- Which agency will serve me the day I am released?
- How will I travel from the jail to that agency?
- Who will I see at that agency?
- What can I expect to happen when I arrive at that agency?

- What requirements do I need to satisfy in order to receive services, and have I met those requirements already?

Solutions

- Our agency assigns a jail staff member to track veteran offenders from booking to release. This staff member helps the veteran offender prepare for release and get the answers to these questions.
- Our agency and Veterans Link-Up plan to coordinate on determining the best method to get veterans into stable housing and mental health/substance abuse treatment services upon release. The process will begin with an in-jail assessment by staff from Veterans Link-Up, followed by continued case management by our agency up to the offender's release. At that point, case management will transfer to the provider agency.
- We have created a process whereby the local VJO Coordinator and key non-profits that provide services to veteran offenders are notified daily regarding inmates who are incarcerated and their potential release dates.

Conclusion

Whether local jail agencies have, or do not have, sufficient resources to create an in-jail reentry program for veteran offenders, at the very least they should have strong ties to any local organization that works with veterans. It is a safe bet that those local providers would gladly come into the jail to assist if invited to do so.

In Miami-Dade County, we are doing our best to connect veterans with services they need and deserve. We hope that these efforts are helping them readjust to life in our communities, but given the large jail population, we do not have data that prove they are staying out of the criminal justice system after encountering it with us.

What matters in life usually comes at the cost of great effort and concern. Our veteran offenders were veterans first, and it is likely that the situation they find themselves in came as a result of their decision to pursue what mattered to them despite the cost to themselves. If effective re-entry for veteran offenders matters, then it is worth great concern and effort on the part of jail practitioners.

Resources

Veteran Justice Outreach Initiative (VJO) — <http://www.va.gov/homeless/vjo.asp>

National Center for Homeless Veterans — <http://www.va.gov/homeless/> or 1-877-4AID VET (1-877-424-3838)

National Coalition for Homeless Veterans — <http://www.nchv.org>

Make the Connection — <http://maketheconnection.net>

Military Health System, Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury — <http://www.dcoe.health.mil>

“Veterans in Prison or Jail.” Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, January 2000. <http://bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/vpi.pdf>

Document available

at: http://community.nicic.gov/blogs/national_jail_exchange/archive/2012/02/02/re-entry-for-veteran-identified-inmates.aspx

The National Jail Exchange is an ongoing electronic journal focusing on providing information to jails practitioners and is sponsored by the National Institute of Corrections (NIC). The contents of the articles, the points of view expressed by the authors, and comments posted in reaction to the articles do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of the National Institute of Corrections.

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