

Virginia Board of Veteran Services
Point of Contact Report
Justice Involved Veterans Program Update

1. Date of Report: November 23, 2020
2. BVS POC: Paige Cherry
3. Service Area/Program: Justice Involved Services/Justice Involved Veterans
4. VDVS Director/Program Manager: Donna Harrison
5. Mission of service area/program:

The VVFS Justice Involved Services (JIS) program provides services and resource connections for justice-involved veterans across the continuum of the criminal justice system from diversion to incarceration to re-entry and community supervision. Each VVFS region has a Veteran Justice Specialist (VJS) that assists justice-involved veterans with connections to housing, employment, benefits, and other community resources.

6. Who does the service area/program serve (i.e. who are the customers)?

Veterans involved in veteran treatment court dockets, incarcerated in jail or prison, and on community supervision (probation and/or parole).

7. How is the service/program delivered?

VVFS Justice Involved Services (JIS) program offers resource connections, care coordination, and support to Virginia's veterans and service members across the diversion, incarceration and reentry continuum of the criminal justice system. The JIS program receives referrals from veterans, families, criminal justice staff, and various community providers. Referrals are received in-person and via a formalized referral process. The JIS program also receives referral through an electronic mailbox. The CJ Director monitors the mailbox and assigns the veteran to the appropriate VVFS Veteran Justice Specialists (VJS) in each VVFS region. The VJS conducts an intake appointment with the veteran either in-person (prior to COVID-19) or by phone.

During the intake process, the VJS conducts a needs assessment (pre-release if incarcerated). The JIS comprehensive needs assessment identifies areas of need the veteran/service member may be experiencing related to behavioral healthcare, rehabilitative support, employment, education, benefits, peer support, and housing. The VVFS Veteran Justice Specialist (VJS) assigned provides direct support and assistance to

the veteran/service member with linkage to resources in the community designed to address those needs.

Case example: The West Region VJS assisted a veteran released from home confinement on federal charges. The veteran secured a job as an HVAC technician, but was later fired with the employer citing poor job performance. The VJS connected the veteran with the Virginia Employment Commission and other community partners on the Blue Ridge Re-entry Council. A few weeks later, the veteran was employed with another company. The VJS is still assisting the veteran with permanent housing due to his barriers related to his criminal offense (sex offense) and lack of housing resources due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

8. How does delivering the service/program help Virginia's veterans?

Providing justice-involved veterans with connections to community resources assists in addressing their needs and helps ensure their successful reintegration in the community. It also could serve to prevent the veteran's future involvement in the criminal justice system. The VVFS VJS connect veterans and families to resources and support to promote emotional and physical wellness. In addition, the VVFS VJS work with a network of community providers to prevent suicide among veterans.

9. By helping the veteran, how does it help the Commonwealth?

Connecting justice-involved veterans to housing, employment, treatment, benefits, and other community resources can prevent recidivism and promote public safety.

10. What is the statutory authority for the service area/program? N/A

11. Where do the resources for the service area/program come from (general fund, non-general fund, donations, etc.)?

The JIS program is a core component of the VVFS program and is funded through the VVFS general fund budget.

12. How has COVID-19 impacted the delivery of services? What service adaptations have been made or planned?

Incarcerated veterans outreach-Due to COVID-19 restrictions, VADOC has suspended all in-person visits for individuals in state prisons. For incarcerated veterans in state prisons (VADOC), the VVFS VJS staff have been conducting intake appointments via phone for needs assessments and re-entry planning. VADOC facility counselors are still available for service coordination and re-entry planning. Phone appointments are coordinated through the VADOC facility counselors.

Intake phone appointments have been more difficult for veterans incarcerated in local and regional jails due to the lack of staff available in the local jails. Most local jails do not have counselors or discharge planning staff to assist with re-entry efforts.

Early releases due to COVID-19 from VADOC facilities have been challenging due to the short timeframe for re-entry preparation. The VADOC Veteran Program Manager and VADOC counselors have been alerting the VDVS Criminal Justice Director of upcoming veteran releases from VADOC facilities, when possible.

There has been little to no notice from local jails regarding early releases due to COVID-19. Outreach has been conducted to the jails by providing JIS program information to the Virginia Sheriffs' Association's list serv. The VVFS VJS have also maintained virtual contact with their jail staff contacts about the JIS program and referral process.

C&P exams for incarcerated veterans- C&P exams for incarcerated veterans in VADOC facilities have been suspended due to COVID-19 restrictions. One VA-contracted vendor conducted virtual C&P exams for psych exams only. The CJ Director continues to monitor the C&P exam process and receive C&P exam requests. C&P exam requests are sent to VADOC for future coordination and scheduling. The CJ Director is tracking on all pending C&P exams for incarcerated veterans in VADOC.

13. What are the biggest challenges facing the service area/program at present?

- ❖ **Housing** continues to be the biggest barrier for this population due to criminal history and lack of financial resources. This need has been exacerbated due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of housing resources in the community. Housing is the number one service request for the JIS program.
- ❖ Recently released individuals from jail and prison continue to have challenges **securing IDs** for housing, employment, and benefits/financial assistance due to DMV shutdowns and limited in-person hours.
- ❖ **Re-entry** for veterans being released from incarceration has been especially challenging due to the lack of housing options, program closures, and limited availability of resources.
- ❖ **Local and regional jail discharge planning gaps and veteran identification.** In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as of 4/17/2020 local jail populations have been reduced by 17%. Jails continue to struggle with discharge planning due to limited reentry staff. Most referrals received from the jails are self-referrals from veterans recently released who normally need connections to housing, benefits, and employment. This will continue to be an issue as the efforts to release more individuals from local jails increases due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Local jails also have issues with **veteran identification.**
- ❖ **VADOC parole grant cases and COVID-19 early release initiatives** have led to increased referrals to VVFS. There are concerns that this could potentially lead to higher caseloads for the VVFS VJS staff. Due to the Governor's recent legislation

regarding good time earning credits on sentences, certain individuals in VADOC will be released earlier. These early releases could also lead to potential caseload increases for VVFS staff.

14. What strategic opportunities are there for the future?

VVFS is aware of the challenges facing justice-involved veterans and continues to work collaboratively with local, state, and federal agency partners to address housing issues for justice-involved veterans. The VVFS VJS staff engage with local partners to coordinate housing services and/or use program housing funds to assist justice-involved veterans in certain situations.

The program collaborates with the VA Justice Outreach program staff to increase the usage of the VA's *Veterans Reentry Search Services (VRSS)* system in local and regional jails. The VRSS system assists criminal justice staff with identifying veterans in their system. The program will continue to train local jails on using the VRSS system in order to increase veteran identification. Veteran identification in local jails will provide future opportunities for service coordination and resource connection for incarcerated veterans.

15. What else do you want the Board to know about this service area?

- The VVFS VJS staff and the CJ Director participate in the Veterans with Special Needs workgroups. This special population has extraordinary barriers to housing and services. The combination of medical and mental health needs with a criminal history presents an additional barrier to housing. These veterans normally need assisted living or nursing level of care. There are currently two workgroups in place to help address discharge-planning issues for veterans with special needs. One workgroup is a case-planning group and consists of the VVFS VJS, VA Healthcare for Reentry Veterans Prison Reentry Specialists, and the VADOC Community Re-entry Specialists. The second workgroup is a management level group to address larger system issues and is comprised of members from local, state, and federal agencies.
- Statewide collaborative quarterly virtual meetings are being conducted between the VA Justice Outreach staff and the VVFS VJS staff. The purpose of these meetings is to provide an opportunity to connect across regions and discuss program updates. This meeting is also used as a forum to discuss current barriers and challenges with justice-involved veterans. The group also shares best practices and solutions to barriers.