

NATIONAL CENTER FOR PTSD

National Center for PTSD
Home

For Veterans and the
General Public

- PTSD Overview
- Common Reactions
- Related Problems
- Types of Trauma
- Assessment
- Treatment
- Self Help and Coping
- Family and Friends
- Specific to Women
- Return from War
- In the Community
- Videos
- Web Resource Links

For Providers and
Researchers

- About Us
- Subscribe
- Search PILOTS*
- Get Help for PTSD

Keeping Veterans with PTSD out of the Justice System

In recent years, programs have been developed to keep war Veterans with mental health problems from being put in jail or prison. The programs aim to assist Veterans who become involved in the justice system to get treatment for mental health problems that may exist. This includes the numbers of Veterans returning from Afghanistan and Iraq.

Veterans Treatment Court

In 2008 the Center for Mental Health Service called a meeting. They wanted to look at ways to decrease the involvement of Veterans with the justice system and to provide them with mental health treatment instead. The meeting was attended by members of law enforcement, corrections, the courts, community groups, Federal agencies, and Veterans' health and advocacy groups. Out of this meeting came ideas for what would go into a Veterans Treatment Court.

Veterans Treatment Courts are based on the Drug Courts and Mental Health Courts begun in the 1990s. As in these models, the goal is to keep those with mental health issues out of the traditional justice system. Instead, the courts give them treatment and tools for coping with their problems. Each Veterans Treatment Court is part of a community's justice system. Veterans Treatment Courts often partner with local VAs and Veterans' organizations. Since the first Veterans Treatment Court in 2008, the number of courts has been growing fast. By August, 2010, there were 41 Veterans Treatment Courts in the United States.

How does a Veterans Treatment Court work?

One example of how a Veterans Treatment Court works is the court in Tulsa, OK. When a person is arrested, police officers ask whether he or she is a Veteran. If so, the Veteran's eligibility for Veterans Treatment Court and for VA benefits is assessed. Only Veterans charged with non-violent crimes who are in need of mental health or substance abuse treatment may go to treatment court.

If a Veteran is eligible, the decision to go through treatment court is up to him or her. Veterans who choose treatment court are assessed by a mental health care provider. The provider decides what the Veteran's treatment needs are. Most Veterans receive treatment through the VA network.

Veterans Treatment Court allows the Veteran to remain in the community. A judge regularly checks on progress, though, while the Veteran is in treatment. If the Veteran fails to meet the requirements of the program, the Court will act. For example, if the Veteran fails drug screens or does not obey court orders, the Court will impose upon him or her such things as community service, fines, jail time, or re-arrest back through the legal system.

In 2008 the first Veterans Treatment Court was started in Buffalo, NY. According to a report by its founder, Judge Robert Russell, the Buffalo program provides:

- Medical and mental health treatment.
- Training and help with finding jobs.
- Housing.
- Transportation.

Veterans are also provided with mentors: other Veteran volunteers who provide further support for those in the program. After completing the Buffalo program, many Veterans have had their charges reduced or dismissed. At the time of Judge Russell's report, none of the Veterans who had completed the program had re-offended.

Veterans Justice Outreach

A new VA program provides direct services to justice-involved Veterans, even if they do not live in an area with a Veterans Treatment Court. The program is called Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO). VA has noted that sometimes mental illness plays a role in crimes committed by Veterans. VA believes that both the Veteran and the community are better served by treating the Veteran's mental health problems rather than putting him or her behind bars for a non-violent crime.

Under VJO, each VA Medical Center has named a justice outreach specialist. VJO specialists serve as a link between Veterans, VA, and the local justice system. They provide services to Veterans who are in jail or prison, as well as justice-involved Veterans who have not been imprisoned.

VJO staff work with the courts to help eligible justice-involved Veterans get mental health services. These may include assessment, treatment planning, and referrals to



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- Veterans & General Public
- Providers & Researchers
- About Us

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VA services. Specialists inform officers of the court about whether a Veteran is complying with VA treatment programs. They may also assist in training law enforcement officers about PTSD or traumatic brain injury (TBI). For information and a list of VJO contacts, see [Justice Outreach](#).

Conclusion

Efforts such as Veterans Treatment Courts and the VA's Veterans Justice Outreach program may prove helpful to Veterans who become involved in the justice system. The goals are to keep eligible Veterans out of jail or prison and to make sure they get needed treatment and support. This is important for all Veterans, including those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, who may be in need of treatment for PTSD. For related information, see [Criminal Behavior and PTSD](#).

Sources

Based on a more detailed version located in the "For Providers and Researchers" section of our website: [Veterans with PTSD in the Justice System](#).

Date Created: 08/17/2010 See last Reviewed/Updated Date below.

www.ptsd.va.gov *The National Center for PTSD does not provide direct clinical care or individual referrals.*
FOR MORE INFORMATION on PTSD Email: ncptsd@va.gov or Call: The PTSD Information Line at (802) 296-6300

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Reviewed/Updated Date: September 1, 2010

