

Deflection for Veterans at Veterans Sequential Intercept Model Intercepts 0 and 1

Catching Up With COSSUP, October 2024

Data from a 2021 U.S. Department of Justice review estimated that one in three veterans reported having been arrested at least once in their lifetime.¹ Involvement in the criminal justice system can severely impact a veteran's ability to secure employment and housing and to access U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefits.² Deflection,³ an upstream and preventative approach that avoids justice system involvement, can help mitigate these consequences through linkages to treatment and services at the point of contact with law enforcement and other first responders.

Substance Use, Mental Health, and Homelessness Among Veterans

A 2015 study reported that up to two-thirds of justice-involved veterans experience alcohol or substance use disorders (SUDs).⁴ Although research findings vary, most find that mental health disorder diagnoses are also prevalent among this group⁵ and even more so among justice-involved veteran women.⁶ Statistics from the VA have shown that justice-involved veterans face a higher risk of suicide than other VA patients.⁷

Veterans are also disproportionately represented in the U.S. homeless population, constituting 13 percent of the homeless⁸ compared to 7 percent of the general adult population.⁹ Justice-involved veterans face even greater risks of homelessness, though estimates vary across studies.¹⁰ From a clinical perspective, the needs of justice-involved veterans are consistent with those of veteran adults overall, namely, mental health and psychosocial

supports.¹¹ However, these and other statistics specific to justice involvement underscore the need for specialized responses and interventions.

Specialized Intervention and Prevention Strategies

One of the most researched interventions for justice-involved veterans is veteran treatment courts (VTCs).¹² Although not an upstream deflection intervention, this is a resource for veterans to receive tailored support in which the emphasis is on treatment instead of incarceration.¹³ And while VTCs are indeed well-researched, lack of consistency in policies and practices, small sample sizes, and a wide range of recidivism rate findings make statements of efficacy about them difficult to support.¹⁴

The Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) program¹⁵ is a parallel to both the Active Outreach¹⁶ and the First Responder and Officer Referral¹⁷ deflection pathways. VJO specialists work at every VA medical center in the country and serve veterans engaged with local courts and jails, or who have encountered law enforcement, by providing linkages to VA health care and other supports.¹⁸ One study found that of the 36,000 veterans who received outreach visits from VJO specialists between 2010 and 2012, 88 percent attended an in-person VA health care appointment afterward.¹⁹ Of that group, nearly all of the veterans diagnosed with mental health disorders or SUDs accessed VA behavioral health care services.²⁰ These findings are promising for veteran-focused first responder deflection initiatives.

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Finally, in 2023, the VA, in partnership with the Police, Treatment, and Community Collaborative (PTACC) launched a national deflection training program for its VJO specialists and VA police. This program formally introduced veterans' deflection into the VA system and encouraged each VA medical center to reach out to its local community to introduce veterans' deflection into existing deflection sites. The fruit of this groundbreaking work will be a greater number of veterans being identified early and before any arrest or crisis occurs.

The Veterans Sequential Intercept Model (V-SIM)

The Sequential Intercept Model (SIM) is a framework used to represent points of encounter—intercepts—across the general criminal justice continuum, starting with community and law enforcement contact and continuing through to reentry to the community following incarceration.²¹ Deflection and pre-arrest diversion sit at Intercepts 0 and 1. The Veterans SIM (V-SIM), *right*, created by the National Institute of Corrections Justice-Involved Veterans Network and published in 2023, concentrates on the specific challenges and needs of justice-involved veterans.²²

It is important to prioritize screening for history of military services to ensure proper identification of a veteran. This can be as simple as law enforcement asking everyone they encounter, "Have you served in the U.S. military?"

V-SIM Intercept 0 focuses on identifying veterans in crisis, or at risk of crisis, and deflecting them to community-based resources.²³ These resources can include health care, SUD treatment, VA health services, residential treatment, transitional housing, outpatient treatment, and suicide prevention services.²⁴ Peer support is another component of this intercept.²⁵ Veteran-to-veteran connections are

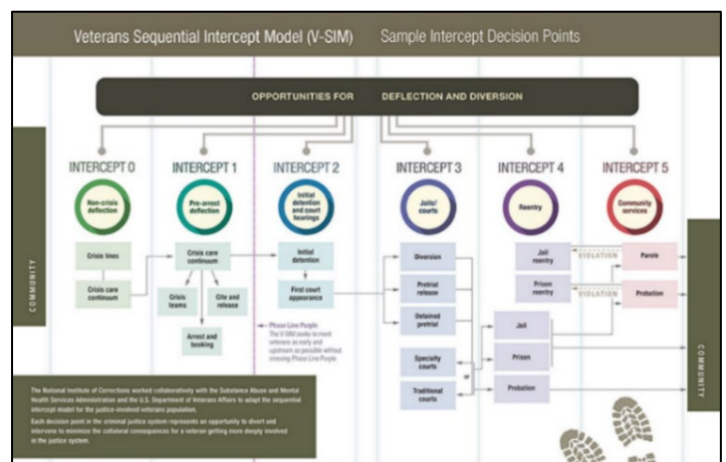
crucial and can be especially useful for women veterans and veterans who are black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), "who have been historically excluded from participation in main-line veterans' groups and benefits."²⁶

V-SIM Intercept 1 involves proactive engagement with veterans experiencing mental health disorders or SUDs.²⁷ This includes law enforcement's role in warm handoffs to community-based services and deflecting cases away from the criminal justice system before they escalate.

Of special note on the V-SIM is an innovative visual addition that does not exist in the original SIM: Phase Line Purple. The idea of this line, that sits just to the right of Intercept 1, is to indicate the shared goal of keeping as many veterans as possible to the "left" of Phase Line Purple, i.e., within their communities. The color purple symbolizes all branches of the military.²⁸

Proposed is V-SIM Intercept 0-Military (0-M), which considers preventative supports for active-duty, justice-involved members of the military.²⁹ This addition would take into consideration the impact that the type of discharge from active-duty services can have on eligibility for federal veteran health care and other benefits.

Veterans Sequential Intercept Model (V-SIM)



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Individuals who are involuntarily discharged, possibly because of justice-involvement, have a higher risk of adverse outcomes, including mental health issues, substance use, homelessness, and challenges with maintaining employment.³⁰ Ensuring that they receive transition services from the U.S. Department of Defense can help maintain their eligibility for veterans' benefits, which is crucial in mitigating these risks.

Conclusion

While VA services are essential, they are limited in their capacity to address all factors that may contribute to a veteran's criminal justice involvement.³¹ Comprehensive support for justice-involved veterans requires collaboration with community organizations that support individuals beyond the need for substance use and mental health services, including providing services such as housing and legal assistance. Specialized deflection strategies for veterans are an emerging and growing practice in the field that can reduce the cycle of criminal justice involvement and homelessness among veterans. By homing in on early intervention, veterans can be better supported to navigate their challenges while minimizing unnecessary criminal justice system contact.

Thank you to colleagues in the VJO program at the VA for their contributions to this article and for the work they do to promote the health and safety of friends, families, and neighbors who have served in the U.S. military.

Resources for Veterans

To identify your local VJO specialist, visit <https://www.va.gov/homeless/vjo.asp>.

To reach the Veterans Crisis Line, call 1-800-273-8255 and press 1 or text 838255.

To reach the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans, call 1-877-4AID VET ([877] 424-3838).

Resources on Veterans Deflection

National Institute of Corrections, Justice-Involved Veterans Network, 2022, *Veteran Intercepts in the Criminal Justice System: Minimizing Collateral Consequences for Veterans in the Criminal Justice System With Deflection, Diversion, and Intervention*, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.nicic.gov/Library/033665.pdf>.

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Endnotes

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