

Veterans Treatment Court Strategic Planning

Project Overview

In 2019, the Center for Justice Innovation received funding from the Bureau of Justice Assistance to assist five states in the development and implementation of statewide strategic plans for their Veterans Treatment Courts (VTC). The selected states were California, Maine, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

Each state participated in a needs assessment process that included a document analysis and stakeholder interviews. Center staff used the data to identify the strengths, resources, and challenges of each state’s VTC programs and provided guidance on how to support the improvement of current courts and planning for future courts. Following each needs assessment, the Center convened a two-day stakeholder workshop culminating in the creation of a strategic plan. Each state received a \$200,000 grant to help fulfill the goals and objectives from their strategic plans. National trends emerged based on the assessments and strategic plans. Below is a summary of national VTC trends as well as the specific work of each state included in the project.

National Trends from the Five Statewide Strategic Plans

Improve identification and screening of justice-involved veterans

All states recognized the need to improve identification of justice-involved veterans. Barriers to early and broad identification include hesitancy of veterans to self-identify due to stigma, differing definitions of what qualifies as a veteran, and the lack of a systematized approach to screening for veteran status.

Provide training on veteran specific topics

Topics such as military culture, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury, military sexual assault, navigating the Department of Veterans Affairs, and struggles with integration into civilian life were all cited as much needed areas of continued training for VTC team members.

(cont. on page 2)

MAP OF VETERANS TREATMENT COURT INITIATIVES



State	Counties with VTCs	Total Counties
California	47	58
Maine	2	16
Ohio	30	88
Pennsylvania	25	67
Virginia	7	133

Enhance connection and engagement of veteran peer mentors

Veteran peer mentors were cited as integral to participant success in VTC programs. While these findings were anecdotal, all five sites echoed the importance of veteran peer mentor contributions. Issues with recruitment, retention, and training of veteran peer mentors were barriers to program sustainability across the country.

Define eligibility and target population

Program eligibility and appropriate target population were two issues that needed refinement in all five states. Two main issues were delineated. First, the eligibility criteria in some jurisdictions limit participation to veterans who have served in combat, been deployed overseas, served during war time, or had honorable discharge status. Additionally, according to best practice standards, only high-risk and high-need veterans should be deemed clinically appropriate for an intensive program such as a VTC. Many programs were accepting veterans without adequately assessing their clinical needs and based only on their veterans status. Both issues serve to hinder program's ability to broaden and accept the appropriate target population for VTCs.

State Overview

CALIFORNIA



California has the highest population of veterans in the United States. As of 2021, California had 34 veterans treatment courts. Strategic plan priority areas include improving the identification and

screening of veterans, providing information on veteran legal statutes affecting program eligibility, training, funding, and sustainability. In preparation for its annual statewide training conferences held in October 2019, and September 2021, the California Association of Collaborative Courts (CACC) worked alongside the Veterans and Military Families Subcommittee and the Judicial Council's Collaborative Justice Courts Advisory Committee (CJCAC) to plan and develop content for the conferences, which included:

- VTC eligibility
- Diversion for veteran offenders
- The sc339 study
- Post-traumatic stress
- Traumatic brain injuries
- Military sexual assault
- Suicide overdose prevention
- Family support strategies
- Implicit bias and inclusion
- Networking for VTC mentors
- Homelessness

In 2020 and 2021, CJCAC staff hosted a webinar series that included a case study of VTCs. The series addressed veteran identification in the courts, VTC case processing practices, and diversion and probation supervision laws pertaining to veterans.

The CACC, CJCAC, and the VTC planning committee also developed and updated the [Veterans Resource Center](#) (VRC), a portion of the CACC's website devoted to providing information to veterans, their families, and treatment practitioners. Resources and materials featured on the VRC include links to education and employment opportunities, veterans specific legislation, VTC eligibility, and forms used to identify veterans in the courts. The practitioners page includes a flow chart to assist VTCs in identifying decision points for diversion and VTC referrals.

MAINE

Maine has the third highest percentage of veterans in the nation and as of 2021, it has two Veterans Treatment Courts (VTC): one in Cumberland County and another in Kennebec County. Strategic plan priority areas included:

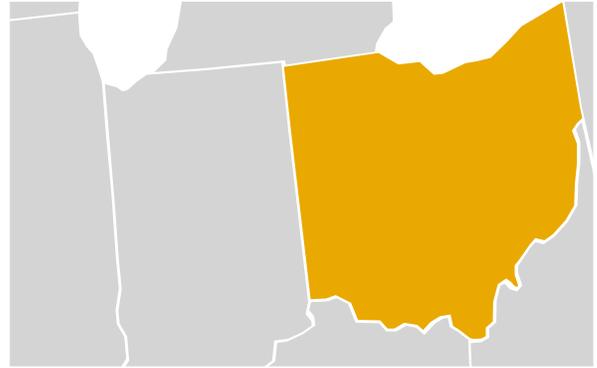
- Implementing new VTCs
- Improving the identification and referral of veterans
- Increasing training opportunities
- Enhancing the veteran peer mentor program



In furtherance of these priority areas, the Maine Judicial Branch seeks to establish a VTC in each of its eight prosecutorial districts. This entails securing support from each District Attorney, working with judicial leadership to establish VTCs where there are existing Adult Drug Treatment Courts (ADTC) as well as jurisdictions without ADTCs, gaining stakeholder buy-in, and creating community education programming in Kennebec County to be used as a model for the state.

To improve the identification and referral of veterans, the Maine Judicial Branch will implement the Veterans Re-Entry Search Service (VRSS) program in each county jail, using unified self-identification questions at all intercept points, adding veteran identification questions to the judge's arraignment questions, and posting flyers with basic public information about VTCs in courthouses, jails, and hospitals. Maine also implemented a training and orientation process for all new VTCs and established continuous training protocols for VTC team members and stakeholders. The Maine Judicial Branch aims to expand and enhance the VTC peer mentor program, including creating criteria and protocols for enrolling new peer mentors.

OHIO



Ohio's veterans make up nine percent of the state's adult population, with 50 percent of that population aged 65 years or older. As of 2019, the state had a total of 24 VTCs. Among the many goals of the Ohio VTC strategic planning initiative, the state prioritized:

- Increasing training and improving awareness for VTCs
- Enhancing statewide communication and data collection
- Improving the identification of veterans
- Enhancing the connection and engagement of veteran peer mentors

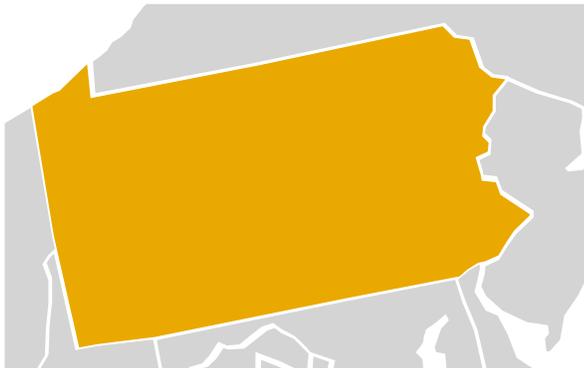
The Supreme Court of Ohio contracted with Justice for Vets to hold regional trainings and hosted a national veteran peer mentor boot camp at the 2019 Specialized Dockets Conference. The state's Specialized Docket Standards have been amended to require team members to regularly participate in training.

A result of the strategic planning initiative was the creation of a mobile app for judges and court staff that provides information specific to Ohio VTCs and information regarding the mission of VTCs across the country. The app was rolled out in November 2021 and will eventually be accessible to the public. Each VTC in the state was also equipped with iPads to make the app easily accessible to staff.

To improve the identification of veterans, the state has decided to work to integrate access to implemented Veteran Re-entry Search Service (VRSS). The Supreme Court of Ohio has contracted with the Government Research Center (GRC) to conduct an impact analysis before employing VRSS to gauge its potential impact on other statewide systems as well as how to best make use of the app.

GRC completed a full review of existing Ohio VTC data and identified additional data elements necessary for evaluations and performance reviews of the courts. Using those performance measures, GRC developed and piloted an online participant survey completed via iPad during status review hearings. The anonymous, real-time feedback will assist the Supreme Court of Ohio's Specialized Docket Section in gauging each VTC's adherence to internal performance measures as well as the National Association of Drug Court Professionals Adult Drug Court Best Practice Standards.

PENNSYLVANIA



Pennsylvania's veterans make up six percent of the state's total population. As of 2021, the state has 25 VTCs. Strategic planning areas included:

- Immediately identifying and providing access to the court, treatment, and services for all veterans
- Providing education and awareness on the VTC model to the leadership of all stakeholder groups

- Establishing consistent statewide leadership for the operation, training, and implementation of VTCs

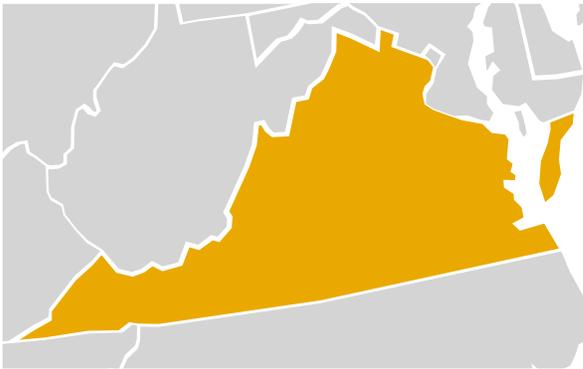
To improve the identification of veterans in the state, the Problem-Solving Courts (PSC) Administrator and Judicial Program Administrator, both of whom operate under the Administrative Office of the Pennsylvania Courts (AOPC), worked to ensure that veterans are flagged as early as possible in their interaction with the justice system. To achieve this, AOPC designed a poster to hang in courthouses and other public spaces to inform justice-involved veterans of services and programs available to them. The poster encourages justice-involved veterans to notify a judge, attorney, or law enforcement officer that they served in the military as they may be eligible for veterans treatment court or another court program to help with service-related issues. It also encourages them to contact their local Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist for assistance in navigating the Veterans Affairs system and to discuss available support options. Posters were printed and mailed to all 512 of the state's magisterial district court judges to hang up in their courtrooms. Another sign was created for magisterial district court staff as a reminder to record military information into the Magisterial District Judge System (MDJS) to help identify justice-involved veterans in the statewide AOPC system.

A symposium was held on May 20 and 21, 2021, to address two areas identified in the project's needs assessment: the need for training and better statewide coordination of VTC resources. Symposium topics included substance use disorder, military and veteran culture, mental health disorders, and the roles and responsibilities of VTC team members.

VIRGINIA

About 11.25 percent of Virginia's population is made up of veterans. Of those veterans, 14 percent are women, five points higher than the national average. As of 2021, Virginia had a total of seven veterans treatment dockets approved to operate. Strategic planning areas included:

- Accurately identifying justice-involved veterans
- Broadening eligibility criteria considerations
- Improving training and education on the purpose of veterans treatment dockets
- Ensuring all veterans treatment docket staff receive adequate training in national best practices for VTCs, treatment, veterans specific issues, and military culture



The Center connected the Office of the Executive Secretary with Justice Speakers Institute, LLC. (JSI) to develop a comprehensive Virginia-specific Veterans Treatment Docket (VTD) implementation curriculum. In addition to working with the Virginia Statewide Coordinator and the Virginia Veterans Strategic Planning Workgroup, JSI consulted with eight state and national experts to inform content and develop the curriculum.

The curriculum, comprising 15 training modules, contains Virginia-specific best practice research, filmed mock VTD staffing sessions, an accompanying workbook with a glossary of terms, key excerpts from the Virginia VTD strategic plan, suggested reading and exercises, and sample forms. The workbook also includes locations of Veterans Affairs Medical Centers, outpatient clinics, and community-based clinics in the state. A “train-the-trainer” session was held for the Virginia team, including a representative from each discipline working on the specialized docket. Currently, three jurisdictions in Virginia are planning a VTD and the new curriculum will be delivered to them in 2022.

The Virginia Specialty Dockets Division at the Office of the Executive Secretary also partnered with the Virginia Department of Veterans Services to deliver the Veterans Reentry Search Services (VRSS) training to local jail staff to assist in identifying veterans. The Veterans Dockets Advisory Committee decided to include the Department of Veterans Services as a required docket team member in the Virginia Veterans Dockets Standards. The Standards were amended to include the newly developed curriculum as mandatory training for all Virginia VTD team members.

For More Information

Monica Christofferson
Associate Director of Technical Assistance
christoffersonm@innovatingjustice.org

This project was supported by Grant No. 2016-DC-BX-K001 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this document are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Justice.

This 2019 Strategic Planning Initiative was led by Center staff, Monica Christofferson, Alejandra Garcia, Kelly Van Develde, Caitlin Flood, and Stephanie Gaillou. This publication was authored by Monica Christofferson, Spencer Geiger, and Najah Magloire. This publication was prepared by Samiha A. Meah and Michaiyla Carmichael.