

Led by two former defense secretaries, the 15-member commission calls for risk assessment, joint transition centers, and other actions to cut the number of justice-involved veterans

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WASHINGTON, D.C. – The nation’s defense and veterans agencies are not identifying and adequately supporting vulnerable service members as they transition from military to civilian life, leaving many with untreated conditions that increase their risk of criminal behavior and other negative outcomes, the [Council on Criminal Justice](#) (CCJ) [Veterans Justice Commission](#) said in releasing its [second set of recommendations](#) today.

The Commission, chaired by former U.S. Defense Secretary and U.S. Sen. Chuck Hagel and including former Defense Secretary and White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta and other top military, veterans, and criminal justice leaders, called for creation of a lead transition office within the Department of Defense (DoD), adoption of evidence-based interventions for at-risk service members, and expanded access to VA health benefits.

Despite recent efforts to strengthen programs aimed at easing the stress of reintegration, the DoD does not prioritize transition, the Commission said, leading to a fragmented and under-resourced system that leaves too many troubled service members ill-prepared for post-military life. Once discharged, veterans face a complex process to obtain benefits; this creates gaps in health care that can exacerbate service-related conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury, and mental health challenges. In too many cases, the Commission said, that leads veterans into contact with the criminal justice system: 33% of veterans [report having been arrested](#), and more than [181,000 were incarcerated in state and federal facilities](#) at last count.

“Veterans returning home face multiple challenges as they leave the structure of military life and reintegrate with their families and communities, and many of those challenges are directly related to their service to our nation,” said Hagel, a decorated Vietnam veteran and former Deputy Administrator of the VA. “All of our veterans should be leading healthy, productive civilian lives. It is unconscionable that so many land in our criminal justice system,

in large part because we aren't doing more to help manage the legacy of their military deployments."

Saying "urgent" action was needed, the Commission issued three recommendations with its new report, *From Duty to Dignity: Supporting Service Members in Their Transition to Civilian Life*:

- To improve delivery of services and create accountability in a single office, Congress should establish an Under Secretary of Defense for Transition, and the DoD should make successful transition a core priority mission. The DoD should develop and implement a validated risk-needs assessment to identify service members at the highest risk for criminal justice system involvement, and should create residential Joint Transition Centers to provide a full range of therapy and other care, as needed, for certain service members prior to discharge.
- The DoD should adopt rehabilitative, evidence-based practices for its management of performance issues and certain military justice cases. These practices should be consistent with those common in civilian accountability courts (e.g. drug courts), such as the use of case planning, treatment, and supervision, and the establishment of joint transition centers across the four branches of military service.
- The President should direct the VA to revise regulations and extend benefits eligibility to all veterans Congress intended the VA to serve, in alignment with the 1944 GI Bill. Noting that only 44% of veterans receive VA-provided health care, the commission also urged Congress to mandate automated, nationwide enrollment in VA care for all eligible transitioning service members.

Many veterans never receive benefits because the VA has incorrectly implemented the 1944 law governing who is eligible, the Commission said. Under the VA's application of that law, the vast majority of the approximately 750,000 veterans assigned an "other than honorable" discharge since the Vietnam War [have been excluded from VA's system of care and other benefits](#). For some, this means that PTSD and other invisible wounds of war have gone untreated, elevating their likelihood of criminal offending.

Roughly 245,000 service members transition from the military each year, and while most succeed, more than one in four veterans struggle with housing insecurity, health issues, financial difficulties, and other problems. Among post-9/11 veterans, a significantly higher proportion—44%—experience readjustment challenges, the Commission found. This new generation of veterans underwent historically high rates of multiple deployments and combat

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exposure, experiences linked to PTSD and traumatic brain injury. They are also [more likely than non-veterans to end up in prison](#), distinguishing them from previous generations of veterans, who were less likely than their civilian counterparts to become incarcerated.

CCJ launched the three-year Commission in August 2022 to assess the extent and nature of veterans' justice-system involvement and recommend improvements. Support for the Veterans Justice Commission comes from The Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation, the Just Trust, LinkedIn, the National Football League, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, T. Denny Sanford, Southern Company Foundation, and the Wilf Family Foundations as well as the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation and other CCJ general operating contributors.

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