



A National Center on Veterans Justice

In March 2023, the Veterans Justice Commission published a report calling for the formation of a National Center on Veterans Justice. In January 2026, Congress authorized \$4 million for a national center and President Trump signed it into law.

Background

Assessing how well our nation is managing justice-involved veterans requires determining the size of the affected populations. Unfortunately, data on this issue is scarce. Approximately one-third of veterans indicate that they have been arrested at least once in their lifetime, but that statistic relies on self-reported data. In addition, the most recent estimate of incarcerated veterans comes from 2011; it identified 181,500 veterans in state and federal prisons and local jails. These two findings underscore an unfortunate truth: reliable data on justice-involved veterans and the circumstances surrounding their criminal offending is sorely lacking.

Despite that fact, there has been tremendous growth in the number of organizations dedicated to addressing the problem, and to serving veterans generally. Estimates place the number of veteran support organizations in the U.S. between 20,000 and 60,000. Many are doing commendable work, but duplication of effort, and a lack of structured connectivity, hamper their potential broad-scale impacts. While there have been initiatives to coordinate the efforts of these groups at a local level, the Veterans Justice Commission knows of no national organization with the mission or capacity to facilitate coordination on a broader scale, or between veterans' organizations and federal and state agencies.

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While veteran-specific interventions are few, some that do exist have been widely replicated without the benefit of rigorous program evaluation. Law enforcement Veteran Response Teams, Veteran Treatment Courts (now numbering more than 600), and VA Veterans Justice Outreach (with nearly 400 Veteran Justice Outreach specialists) are examples of veteran-specific programs that have spread across the U.S. over the last decade

but lack proper study. Champions of each of these interventions share powerful stories highlighting the success of individual participants. Many contend that the programs are based on analogous best practices established among a general justice-involved population (e.g., drug treatment courts as a basis for Veteran Treatment Courts). The Commission does not dispute that many positive outcomes appear to flow from such initiatives. But while it makes sense to gradually expand veteran access to these programs, the Commission cannot unequivocally endorse their rapid spread absent validation by research. The Commission found that the lack of coordination between programs for justice-involved veterans results in the duplication of efforts, a lack of proper program evaluation, and an inability to disseminate best practices. As a result, justice-involved veterans seeking assistance often confront a confusing and disjointed network of untested interventions.

Recommendations for the National Center on Veterans Justice

The National Center should act as an independent and stand-alone clearinghouse for all information, resources, and best practices for veterans in the justice system by:

- Holding, organizing, and maintaining for review current information about governmental and nongovernmental programs serving justice-involved veterans. This information should be made easily accessible, allowing justice-involved veterans to identify practitioners and organizations listed by specialty and geographic region.
- Maintaining systems used to identify justice-involved veterans and permitting review by anyone entitled to that information. Establishing practices to allow veteran service programs to coordinate with each other, including greater sharing of data and best practices identified through program evaluation.
- Establishing data sharing arrangements with the VA, DOD, DOJ, SSA, DHS, ICE, law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, jails, and courts.
- Establishing sources of funding for the National Center's ongoing operations, including support from the VA, DOD, DOJ, SSA, DHS, and ICE.
- Providing technical assistance grants to support the innovation, expansion, and evaluation of new and existing interventions for justice-involved veterans.
- Conducting, supporting, and overseeing research on current levels of justice involvement among veterans, as well as evaluations of existing interventions designed to aid this population.
- Coordinating with technical assistance providers to ensure local, state, and federal courts have access to up-to-date and evidence-based practices.

Read the full report: <https://vjc.counciloncj.org/vjc-reports/arrest-through-sentencing>

About the Veterans Justice Commission

The Veterans Justice Commission examined the extent and nature of veterans' involvement in the criminal justice system and developed recommendations for evidence-based policy changes that enhance safety, health, and justice.

Launched in August 2022, the Commission assessed the risk factors that drive veterans' justice-system involvement, the adequacy of transitional assistance for military service members as they reenter civilian life, and the effectiveness of the justice system response when veterans break the law.

The Commission was chaired by former U.S. Defense Secretary and U.S. Senator Charles Hagel and included former Defense Secretary and White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta as well as 13 other leaders representing veterans, the military, the Veterans Administration, community advocates, and various sectors of the justice system.

About the Council on Criminal Justice

About the Council on Criminal Justice: The Council on Criminal Justice is a nonpartisan think tank and invitational membership organization that advances understanding of the criminal justice policy choices facing the nation and builds consensus for solutions that enhance safety and justice for all.