

# Untapped Resources: What Veteran Services Officers Can Provide for Probation and Parole<sup>1</sup>

Anne S. Douds  
Eileen M. Ahlin  
Penn State Harrisburg

**THE MOST RECENT** data available on justice-involved veterans suggests that about 9 percent of inmates are veterans (Greenberg & Rosenheck, 2008; Noonan & Mumola, 2007). Surprisingly, there is no comparable data for veterans who are serving time in the community on probation or parole. This lack of data on the magnitude of justice-involved veterans under correctional supervision in the community is paralleled by a dearth of information on veteran-specific resources available to assist them during this time. However, a multitude of benefits and community resources supportive of rehabilitation and treatment efforts and analogous life skills are available to probationers and parolees with prior military service (Blodgett et al., 2013; CMHS National GAINS Center, 2008). Further, opportunities are available through state, federal, and local providers to address the unique challenges veterans face due to problems with post-traumatic stress (PTS), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and reintegration issues (National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, 2014; Federal Interagency Reentry Council, 2013).

One federally funded resource is veteran justice outreach officers (VJOs). VJOs link justice-involved veterans with services and benefits by serving as a liaison for criminal justice agencies, the veterans, and their VA benefits and services. With the advent of the veterans' treatment court (VTC) movement, the demands placed upon VJOs have increased dramatically, and many are finding themselves over-extended and under-resourced. These increased VTC

responsibilities also impede VJOs' ability to provide assistance to veterans who are not participating in a VTC but require services. An alternative resource for community justice-involved veterans and the probation and parole officers who supervise them are VSOs. VSOs are an existing and seemingly underutilized and lesser known support system with substantial potential to assist probation and parole service providers who work with veterans. This article focuses on providing relevant information about this untapped resource and how practitioners in the criminal justice system can capitalize on the range of available services offered by VSOs.

## Who Is a Veteran Service Officer (VSO) and What Do They Do?

Because their identity and function as related to the field of criminal justice are not well-known, we begin with an introduction of the VSO. There are a variety of VSOs who may be employed at the state or municipal level, or at one of the many independent, charitable veterans' service organizations, such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), the American Legion, and Disabled American Veterans. Their free services are available in every state, are not restricted to members of service-related organizations, and are one of the many benefits provided to veterans.

While little is known about how VSOs contribute services to justice-involved veterans on a large scale, on the surface there appears to be an overlap in the types of resources needed by veterans and those offered by VSOs. Further, VSOs could offer invaluable assistance to criminal justice professionals responsible for

supervising veterans on probation or parole. For example, VSOs can represent veterans in claims for federal VA benefits; they can link veterans and their probation or parole officers with state funding and programs; and they can connect veterans and their probation or parole officers with community-based treatment and transportation. While many of these services are also provided by VJOs employed by the VA, VSOs often have a greater breadth of knowledge about state and community-based resources. Their understanding and access to local programs might exceed that of the VJOs, who have more in-depth knowledge about VA benefits. However, there is a lack of knowledge about what services VSOs can provide and how community corrections officers might benefit from leveraging VA benefits for their justice-involved populations. The objective of this study is to examine the emerging role of VSOs in bridging the gap in services typically provided by VJOs to support veterans in need of community-based services while on probation or parole, while also highlighting their available services for community corrections officers.

## The Current Study

Data for this study were collected during a statewide analysis of the characteristics of VSOs, the resources they provide, and how they can assist veterans. The current research is part of a larger Needs Assessment commissioned by the Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA). That project sought to examine the service needs of veterans across the Commonwealth, investigate the role VSOs have in meeting these needs, and identify areas of service delivery

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not being met. The research team comprised the lead author and the Center for Survey Research (CSR) at Penn State Harrisburg, and data collection occurred between May 2013 and December 2014.

The Needs Assessment included four stages, two of which concerned only VSOs and are the focus of the current study: a focus group and a statewide web-based survey of VSOs (see Douds et al., 2014). The Research Team hosted three focus groups among VSOs. The lead author, CSR staff, the DMVA, and the DMVA's external advisory group developed the moderator's guide for the focus group sessions. Discussion topics included communication and outreach, social service delivery, barriers to social service delivery, technology, specific veteran programs, social service effectiveness, veterans' treatment courts, incarcerated veterans, veterans on probation and parole, and suggestions for improvements to veteran services. The Research Team also administered a statewide, web-based survey among Pennsylvania VSOs. That survey was developed through collaboration among the lead author, CSR staff, the DMVA, and the DMVA's external advisory group. The survey also integrated information learned during the three focus group sessions from stage one of the study.

## Focus Group

### *Participants*

The Research Team requested lists of VSOs from the DMVA's Office of the Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs (ODAGVA), from the County Directors of Veterans Affairs, and from the DMVA's database on independent veteran service organizations (IVSOs), including the American Legion, VFW, AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, Military Order of the Purple Heart, and Vietnam Veterans of America. CSR staff contacted each organization and requested a list of service officers or district officers to invite to the focus group. The Research Team then sent emails requesting participation in the focus groups and a scheduling web link. A total of 26 VSO representatives participated in the three focus group sessions. The sessions were held based on professional affiliation for the convenience of the respondents and to facilitate conversation among persons who already were familiar with one another. The ODAGVA session had 12 participants; the County Directors of Veterans Affairs session had 8 participants; and the IVSO session had 6 participants. The participants were mostly male (69 percent).

### *Data Collection*

The focus groups were conducted by CSR staff members experienced in qualitative methods and focus group facilitation. One researcher moderated the discussion while the other served as a note taker. During the ODAGVA session, additional senior DMVA staff members listened to the discussion via speaker phone. The ODAGVA focus group participants were informed that DMVA senior leaders were listening, which may have inhibited their responsiveness. Before each group started, participants were informed of their rights as research participants and were individually asked for both their verbal consent to participate and permission to use direct quotations. CSR staff asked questions and prompted conversation using prescribed prompts in the moderator's guide. The guide was emailed to the participants in advance of the focus groups. The sessions lasted approximately 90 minutes.

### *Data Analysis*

Focus groups' transcript notes were compared to the research questions initially posited by the Research Team, and all data were tagged according to the relevant research question. As expected, additional themes emerged during the focus groups, and additional tags were created for those themes. In the end, the data were divided into six categories: (1) descriptions of veterans' service needs; (2) descriptions of what services VSOs provide directly to veterans; (3) gaps among veterans' service needs and VSO service delivery; (4) how VSOs disseminate information ("information push"); (5) how VSOs collect information from veterans and translate that information into improved services ("information pull"); and (6) how VSOs "connect the dots" for service delivery across multiple disciplines within their communities. This paper focuses on the second and sixth category in order to speak to a seventh research question: How might VSOs improve veterans' experiences with their probation and parole officers?

## Web Survey

### *Participants*

The initial sampling frame for the VSO web survey included 165 VSOs from all subsets of VSOs in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, including VSOs from ODAGVA, County Directors of Veterans' Affairs, and independent VSOs such as the American Legion, AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans,

Military Order of the Purple Heart, VFW, and Vietnam Veterans of America. Nine VSOs were determined to be ineligible for the study due to retirement, death, or change of employment, resulting in a final sampling frame size of 156 veteran service officers for the web survey.

Seventy-eight VSOs completed the web survey, representing three subsets of respondents: ODAGVA, County Veterans' Affairs staff (CVSOs), and independent veterans' service organization staff (IVSOs). ODAGVA staff only account for 14.1 percent of the total sample, but all ODAGVA staff ( $n = 11$ ; 100 percent) completed the survey. Thirty-eight (49 percent) of CVSOs completed the survey, and 29 (37.2 percent) of IVSOs completed it. As a whole, respondent VSOs have been in their positions for approximately 8 years, and over three-quarters work full-time in their positions ( $n = 62$ ; 79.5 percent); 11 (14.1 percent) reported that they work part-time; and five (6.4 percent) work as volunteers. All volunteers were affiliated with non-profit IVSOs.

### *Data Collection*

The Research Team built the web survey based on prior research, data garnered from the focus groups, input from the DMVA, and guidance from the DMVA's advisory board. Once the survey was operational, the Research Team sent pre-notification emails to all VSOs in the sampling frame, followed by a personalized email invitation a few days later. The pre-notification email included an attached copy of the survey instrument so that respondents could review the questions in advance and/or complete the survey on paper. Several of the VSOs in the sampling frame did not have an email address; in these cases, the Research Team contacted the respondents by phone several times to try to get an email address or a fax number to send the pre-notification and survey instrument or to allow them to complete the survey by phone. Reminder emails were sent and phone follow-up calls were made to non-respondents to increase response rates. A total of 78 surveys (50 percent response rate) were completed between May 1 and June 30, 2014; 76 were completed online; one was completed by telephone, and one was completed by fax.

### *Data Analysis*

All completed survey data were extracted into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

(SPSS) software for Windows version 21.0 and verified for accuracy of variable coding. Verbatim text was edited for consistency in formatting before final review by the senior staff of the CSR. Descriptive statistics were generated and are reported.

## Results

The following sections describe characteristics of VSOs and the types of assistance they provide to veterans.

### *Who Are the Veterans Who Receive VSO Services?*

VSOs serve a multitude of populations on a daily basis. The VSOs in our study most frequently assist veterans who are older, having served in the military before 9/11 ( $n = 69$ ; 88.5 percent), male ( $n = 63$ ; 80.8 percent), and white ( $n = 55$ ; 70.5 percent). Over half of the VSOs also serve large numbers of younger veterans: persons in the military after 9/11 ( $n = 42$ ; 53.8 percent). VSO respondents reported that large proportions of veterans they serve every day experience PTS ( $n = 42$ ; 53.8 percent) or are physically disabled ( $n = 37$ ; 47.4 percent). Only 8 (10.3 percent) of the VSOs interviewed reported working with incarcerated veterans regularly.

### *How Do VSOs Help Veterans Access Benefits?*

All VSOs, regardless of where they originate, assist with new and existing VA claims, pension claims, and disability claims. VSOs working for ODAGVA stated that they predominantly provided assistance with five main types of claims: service-connected disabilities, pensions, non-service connected disabilities, state benefits, and death benefits. In contrast, CVSOs and IVSOs assist with these types of claims in addition to a myriad of others, including vocational rehabilitation and GI benefits/education. These types of benefits, and the VSOs brokering the services, are invaluable resources to persons doing transitional and reintegration planning with veterans in five main areas: (1) employment, (2) housing and homelessness, (3) education, (4) transportation, and (5) veterans treatment courts. Below we discuss each of these areas.

**Employment.** The majority of VSOs ( $n = 45$ ; 65.2 percent) link veterans with employment offices; foster relationships with human resource departments in local businesses through in-person meetings and periodic communication; maintain lists of jobs that are available in their areas;

and provide information on the state civil service system, if the veterans meet the eligibility requirements. Some VSOs also take advantage of state-level collaborations among human service agencies, but many VSOs reported that this initiative is unreliable or under-developed. VSOs suggested that veterans would benefit from cross-discipline and cross-agency information-sharing collaborations. Most frequently, VSOs connect veterans to a CareerLink representative ( $n = 43$ ; 95.6 percent), distribute lists of employment opportunities ( $n = 30$ ; 66.7 percent), sponsor or promote career fairs ( $n = 19$ ; 42.2 percent), and provide assistance with employment applications and resume writing ( $n = 7$ ; 15.6 percent).

**Housing and Homelessness.** VSOs perceive housing and homelessness to be one of the most serious and fundamental challenges in the veteran community. In particular, VSOs expressed concern about homelessness among younger veterans and the secondary and tertiary consequences of homelessness, including criminal activity and social isolation. Over two-thirds ( $n = 53$ ; 67.9 percent) reported coordinating with transitional housing organizations to find housing as the top effort taken to assist veterans with residence issues. Almost one-third noted providing temporary financial assistance to help with housing needs ( $n = 25$ ; 32.1 percent). VSOs also provide transportation to shelters ( $n = 11$ ; 14.1 percent), housing vouchers ( $n = 3$ ; 3.8 percent), or other housing services ( $n = 20$ ; 25.6 percent). In addition, some VSOs serve as the liaison to the local VA homeless coordinators. Only 6 (7.7 percent) VSOs said that they did not provide assistance with housing or homelessness.

**Education.** Over three quarters of VSOs ( $n = 57$ ; 78.1 percent) work with veterans to access their education benefits, including the various forms of GI Bill tuition and housing assistance programs (e.g., Montgomery GI Bill, Post-9/11 GI Bill). Specifically, VSOs submit benefit paperwork on behalf of veterans ( $n = 13$ ; 29.5 percent); provide referrals to state department of education or VA education offices ( $n = 12$ ; 27.3 percent); advise on education benefits and the application process ( $n = 10$ ; 22.7 percent); and provide the GI bill hotline phone number to veterans ( $n = 6$ ; 13.6 percent). The VSOs expressed frustration with the frequent changes to the various GI bill programs and difficulties they had arranging for GI assistance across state lines. Nonetheless, they are in touch with colleges and universities to facilitate use of

these benefits, and they are well-versed in the options available under these laws.

**Transportation.** Over half ( $n = 41$ ; 52.6 percent) of VSOs frequently, if not daily, work with veterans on transportation issues. VSOs noted that a lack of adequate transportation impacts veterans' ability to access health care, sustain employment, attend school, and make mandatory appointments related to their participation in probation, parole, and veterans treatment court programs. The services VSOs provide include volunteer shuttles, links to local van services, supervision of home visits, and transportation in personal vehicles. Several VSOs expressed particular concerns about rural veterans. Specifically, they noted that new VA rules about providing access to VA clinics that are more than 40 miles from veterans' residences do not account for traffic, road patterns, or construction delays. IVSOs were most likely to report providing transportation via their organization's vehicle(s) ( $n = 4$ ; 13.8 percent), while ODAGVA staff provided referrals to other organizations that specialized in transportation ( $n = 6$ ; 54.5 percent).

Over two-thirds ( $n = 52$ ; 70.3 percent) of VSOs reported that veterans in their area have access to public transportation. A majority of ODAGVA staff noted that veterans in their area had access to public transportation ( $n = 10$ ; 90.9 percent). Both County Veterans' Affairs and independent VSO staff indicated that about two thirds of veterans in their area had access to public transportation ( $n = 24$ ; 66.7 percent and  $n = 18$ ; 66.7 percent, respectively). When asked about the type of public transportation available for veterans in their area, over one-third of VSOs mentioned buses ( $n = 18$ ; 35.3 percent). Other forms of public transportation mentioned included trains, taxis, trolleys, and volunteer shuttles and vans from organizations such as Disabled American Veterans (DAV).

**Veterans Treatment Courts.** Over one-quarter of participating VSOs indicated that they provided assistance with veterans treatment courts (VTCs) ( $n = 20$ ; 29.9 percent). ODAGVA staff were most likely to facilitate access to VTCs, while CVSOs were least likely to assist veterans with VTCs ( $n = 4$ ; 40.0 percent versus  $n = 8$ ; 25.8 percent, respectively). Almost a third of IVSOs assisted veterans with VTCs ( $n = 8$ ; 30.8 percent). Specifically, over half of VSOs provide "monitoring services" for purposes of VTC requirements ( $n = 12$ ; 60.0 percent). Other VSOs help veterans obtain mental health and social services as required by VTC orders ( $n = 9$ ; 45.0 percent). Additional

assistance for veterans accessing VTCs includes providing reports and feedback to the VTC judge (n = 7; 35.0 percent); referring veterans to a private attorney (n = 7; 35.0 percent); referring veterans to the police department (n = 4; 20.0 percent); and other services such as referrals, processing claims as needed, recruiting and training mentors, and serving on advisory boards (n = 8; 10.3 percent).

## Leveraging VSO Resources for Probationers and Parolees

Persons under community supervision, particularly those who have spent time in jail or prison, often struggle with a variety of health and social problems that may have contributed to their involvement with the criminal justice system. These include being unemployable due to a criminal record, particularly among African Americans (Pager, 2003; Western et al., 2001), barriers to certain jobs (Matthews & Casarjian, 2002), lack of education (Petersilia, 2000), substance dependence or use (Mumola & Karberg, 2006), chronic health and/or mental health problems (Harlow, 2003; Travis, 2005), and limited access to public housing (Department of Housing and Urban Development v. Rucker [122 S. Ct. 1230 2002]). The VSOs in this study demonstrated that they provide support for veterans seeking assistance with these issues. VSOs can also supplement and support the efforts of community corrections officers.

Probation and parole officers are not only tasked with managing the law enforcement aspects of community supervision, they are also charged with supporting and leveraging access to social services that will increase compliance with the terms of supervision. Due to increased focus on the supervision component of community corrections over the past several decades (Bonta et al., 2008; Burnett & McNeill, 2005), probation and parole agents often lack sufficient time to provide or broker the ancillary services that could enhance offenders' attempts to get their lives back on track. Persons on either probation or parole can benefit from resources available through community providers; for justice-involved veterans, there are additional avenues to gaining access to these support systems, such as VSOs.

## Conclusion

This study has raised important questions about the nature of services available to justice-involved veterans. The main goal of the current study was to determine whether VSOs are a viable option to supplement the standard

community corrections experience for justice-involved veterans. The statewide assessment of VSOs and the services they provide to veterans described in this article underscore an untapped potential for supplementing the services currently available through community corrections with those accessible through VSOs. A further study could assess how community corrections officers and VSOs can collaborate to facilitate delivery of social services to justice-involved veterans while on community corrections.

Being limited to Pennsylvania, the current study only provides the first step in examining the potential of VSO resources to assist community corrections officers and the veterans that they serve. Additional investigation is needed to determine whether VSOs in other states have similar capacities to those available in Pennsylvania to provide services relevant to community corrections populations. The focus group data described in this article provide rich, detailed responses; however, the results may not be generalizable to the larger VSO community outside of Pennsylvania (see Krueger & Casey, 2000). The 50 percent response rate achieved in the web survey also contributes to potential non-response bias. Readers should consider whether the information collected here can be transferred or applied to another environment or situation. Nevertheless, these data provide meaningful insights into potential community-level resources and opportunities for collaboration.

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