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## Veterans are at a High Risk of Becoming Involved with the Criminal Justice System

As a veteran myself (having served 20 years in the Air Force), I was surprised to learn a large number of veterans end up being involved in the criminal justice system. “One in three of the nations 19 million Veterans report having been arrested at least once in their lifetime, and an estimated 181,000 Veterans are behind bars. Former service members make up nearly 8% of those in state prisons and 5% of the federal prison population” ([Too Many U.S. Veterans End Up Behind Bars. We Must Fix That | TIME](#)).

There are a number of reasons that veterans are finding themselves involved in the criminal justice system, including mental health problems, such as PTSD and Traumatic brain injury from combat, substance abuse problems, and homelessness. Most of these issues can cause co-occurring issues, for example, if a veteran is struggling with PTSD, he or she might self medicate with substances. Also, both these issues could cause the veteran to become homeless due to not being able to hold down a job.

On a positive note, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has a Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Program, which was founded in 2009. The VJO Specialists provide outreach to justice-involved Veterans within prisons and the courts. “As of December 2024, VJO Specialist report serving 731 Veterans Treatment Courts (VTCs) and other Veteran-focused court programs across the U.S.” ([Veterans Treatment Courts and Other Veteran-focused courts Served by VA Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists](#)).

The U. S. Department of Justice have committed themselves to ensuring access to justice for Veterans and their family members. As former Attorney General Merrick Garland emphasized, “The Justice Department honors our nation’s Veterans and service members not just with words but also with action.” Here is a link to a fact sheet that the Office of Access to Justice has put together to inform people about their programs: [Office for Access to Justice | Fact Sheet: Access to Justice is Access for Veterans](#).

Our Reentry Coalition has an Alaska VJO Social Worker on our Steering Team, to keep all our members up-to-date on what is happening with Veteran Outreach inside the Alaska Correctional Institutions and what services are offered through the Veterans Court. Alaska currently has a Veterans Court operating in both Anchorage and Fairbanks, and the Anchorage Veterans Court will accept referrals from the Mat-Su.

With May being Military Appreciation Month, we need to acknowledge that there are Veterans out there that are struggling to reintegrate into the civilian community. These individuals who have served our country deserve our support and assistance to help them get back on their feet.

**Barbara Mongar, Coordinator,  
Mat-Su Reentry Coalition**



*Veterans Day parade in New York City on Nov 11, 2024. About 200,000 service members transition to civilian life each year in the United States. Today’s veterans have experienced historically high rates of combat exposure, raising their risk of PTSD and traumatic brain injury, which are linked to criminal justice involvement.  
Robert Deutsch/USA TODAY*

# States Seek Ways to Keep Veterans Out of the Criminal Justice System

By: Carl Smith, *Governing Magazine*, Spring 2024

Nearly a quarter-century has passed since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Since then, 4 million Americans have served in the armed forces, more than half of them in Iraq and Afghanistan. They have been deployed more often than any previous generation of veterans. Most manage the transition to civilian life successfully, but many struggle to emerge from their accumulated stresses and become entangled in the criminal justice system.

Over the past two years, the [Veterans Justice Commission](#) (VJC) has been working to identify ways to keep trouble with the law from becoming trouble for life. “We train our soldiers to do incredible things and they are part of the most lethal killing machine on Earth,” says Army Col. Jim Seward, who directs the commission, which is associated with the Council on Criminal Justice.

Generally speaking, there’s not a lot of empathy for criminal offenders, but veterans naturally elicit more support. Vets may face additional challenges as a result of their service. They often end up feeling anger, hostility, paranoia and defensiveness in waves, says Brock Hunter, an Army veteran and criminal defense lawyer whose practice focuses on veterans.

Too many of them aren’t identified as needing help until they are sitting in the back of a squad car or in jail. The departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs, as well as the criminal justice system, might all be running fairly smoothly on their own, Seward says, but there are policy gaps and misalignment that get in the way of bending down the curve of veterans who end up in prison.

It’s certainly not a new phenomenon for soldiers returning home to be changed by their experiences. The ancient Romans made warriors stay outside city gates for a year when they returned from war. A study after World War II found that a third of the convicts in 11 prisons were veterans. Nonetheless, in previous eras, American vets were half as likely as non-veterans to face incarceration. Now, they’re twice as likely.

A number of factors may contribute to this, among them frequency of deployment. The record among Hunter’s clients is 13 — five-and-a-half years of intense combat exposure over a 13-year career. Some have friends who’ve been deployed more than 20 times. As many as a third of veterans develop post-traumatic stress disorder; more deployments can intensify its impact.

Substance abuse disorders are also common, most often involving alcohol. There have been nearly [350,000 cases of traumatic brain injury](#) diagnosed as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Veterans are only 6 percent of the overall U.S. population but make up 7 percent of those who are homeless, despite programs specifically designed to assist them at all levels of government. There are still yet more risk factors, with research ongoing to understand the ways they all overlap.

## The Spread of Treatment Courts

Doors to help can be shut even before veterans leave the military. Superiors can interpret behavior resulting from a traumatic brain injury or PTSD, such as substance abuse, as a sign of “bad character.” If a veteran leaves the military with less than an honorable discharge, they become ineligible for VA programs designed to treat addiction and other behavioral health problems. Although the criminal justice system is offering more services to keep those likely to offend out of trouble, the military is doing the opposite, denying benefit eligibility to those most at risk. When veterans do leave service with benefits intact, they lose them once they are incarcerated.

Last year, the Veterans Justice Commission published its first set of [recommendations](#) for changes that could help veterans avoid prosecution and incarceration. This begins with identifying veterans as such when they come into contact with law enforcement. Most do not volunteer their veteran status, feeling they have dishonored it. Police rarely ask. VA search services do exist but are seldom used. Confusingly, federal and state regulations and statutes have varying definitions of “veteran.” The commission has called for changes to federal and state policy that could improve identification processes in criminal justice systems and courts.

Many states have diversion programs that offer certain types of offenders alternatives to sentencing. The first [veterans treatment court](#) was established in 2008 in Erie County, N.Y. Today, 600 such courts operate in the U.S., but their guidelines are inconsistent.

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# States Seek Ways to Keep Veterans Out of the Criminal Justice System

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In Minnesota, where Hunter is based, the state public defender ended support for veterans treatment courts in 2017 because of their dysfunction and disparate treatment of veterans. A nonprofit Hunter co-founded, the [Veterans Defense Project](#), got a grant to convene stakeholders and to develop legislation that would standardize court practices.

In 2021, Minnesota enacted the [Veterans Restorative Justice Act](#). The law allows vets to reach plea deals and avoid serving time if they accept treatment for problems such as PTSD and substance abuse disorder and don't reoffend. Last year, Democratic Gov. Tim Walz signed an [update](#) that allows defendants to check their eligibility for the program if they suffer from conditions that were a result of military service.

The Minnesota bill was a valuable resource for a VJC working group as it developed a model policy framework for states. The resulting Veterans Justice Act was adopted as a model bill in November by the influential [American Legislative Exchange Council](#). Proceeding from a clear definition of "veteran," it provides judges with guidelines for programs that can enable veterans to avoid a record of conviction; have charges reduced in severity; and avoid incarceration through treatment and probation. The framework can be implemented in existing treatment courts, but it can also be utilized by any judge.

## An Exceptional Case

One of Hunter's first clients, former Army Ranger Hector Matascastillo, was home from an overseas deployment when an argument with his wife triggered a dissociative incident. He believed he was in Iraq on a mission and began clearing his house, room by room. His wife called the police, warning them that he was a veteran with mental health issues. They responded with guns drawn. Matascastillo came out of his fog when he found himself surrounded by eight police officers on his front lawn. No one was harmed, but he was charged with 14 felonies.

Hunter helped him get into treatment and he responded well. His prestigious military history helped him avoid felony convictions. After completing probation and treatment, he volunteered to return to Iraq and was awarded a Bronze Star. Matascastillo retired after 18 years of service and earned a master's degree in social work. He's now working as a licensed clinical social worker, finishing a Ph.D. in psychology.

Matascastillo's case may be an extreme example, but it underscores the depth of the experience, resilience and leadership skills that veterans can bring to communities if they are given a chance to turn their lives around. Honor is a core value of military service. It's a powerful incentive for veterans to complete diversion programs and avoid being labeled second-class citizens, unable to vote and hampered in their ability to contribute to society.

Some military leaders are concerned that bringing attention to the lingering impacts of combat deployment, and their relationship to future criminal justice problems, is one more barrier to recruiting candidates for an all-volunteer military. But the VJC believes acknowledging risk factors and showing American veterans that there are programs for them if they need help after they come home will improve recruitment and retention. "As a nation, we care about our veterans," says Seward. "Nobody wants our veterans to go to prison."

**Link to Full Article:** [States Seek Ways to Keep Veterans Out of the Criminal Justice System](#)

## Mat-Su Reentry Events:

- **Mat-Su Reentry Coalition Steering Team Meeting**  
Tuesday, May 6, 2025  
9:00 to 10:30 AM

The Mat-Su Reentry Coalition has a virtual Steering Team Meeting on the first Tuesday of each month. All Welcome to attend.

- **Virtual Mat-Su Reentry Services Forum**  
Wed, May 21, 2025  
9:00 to 10:00 AM

The Mat-Su Reentry Coalition and Reentry Case Management Program invites you to join us in a virtual Reentry Services Forum. Service providers, PO's, Case Managers, and anyone interested

**For questions, to sign up, or for zoom links to the above events please contact Barbara Mongar at: [barbara.mongar@valleycharities.org](mailto:barbara.mongar@valleycharities.org)**

## Knik Tribe Events:

- **Knik Tribe Family Culture Nights** — Bi-Weekly, Wednesday, 5:30 - 7:30 PM; Location: 758 Shoreline Dr. Wasilla, AK; Open to All [Compact@KnikTribe.org](mailto:Compact@KnikTribe.org) 907-373-7991
- **Talking Circle**—Tuesday, at 6:30 and Wednesday at 5:30; Same location above; **Contact Ralph Lewis at 907-841-9773**
- **Youth Wellbriety Circle** — Fridays, from 1 to 3PM; Location: MyHouse, Wasilla

## Mat-Su Reentry Coalition

The Mat-Su Reentry Coalition is a collaboration of individuals, community stakeholders, public and not-for-profit agencies, faith-based and business partners who are united and committed to reducing recidivism among returning citizens to the Mat-Su community.

### Our Mission

To promote public safety by identifying and implementing strategies that increase former prisoners' wellbeing within the community and reduce the likelihood of their return to prison through recidivating.

We will accomplish this by:

- Improved communication and collaboration between Alaska Department of Corrections (DOC) and the community.
- Building community partnerships to strengthen local services.
- Identifying barriers for those being released from incarceration and taking an active role in addressing those concerns.
- Promoting community educational and training opportunities for those releasing regarding resources.
- Work in conjunction with Alaska DOC to inform and promote reentry efforts in Alaska.

**Note:** For more information on the Mat-Su Reentry Coalition contact [Barbara.mongar@valleycharities.org](mailto:Barbara.mongar@valleycharities.org) or go to our Webpage at [Mat-Su Valley Reentry Program | Valley Charities Inc](http://Mat-Su Valley Reentry Program | Valley Charities Inc)



## Mat-Su Job Center Update

By: **Amanda Carlson**, South Central Regional Manager

Happy Spring from the Mat-Su Job Center Team! As the summer season approaches, our office is bustling with activity, helping job seekers and employers gear up for success.

**Training Opportunities for Employers** The Department of Labor & Workforce Development offers Incumbent Worker Training for eligible employers. This program provides funds for employees to gain critical skills, enhancing their ability to thrive in their roles or advance within the company. For employers, these benefits translate to increased productivity, higher profits, company growth, fewer layoffs, and reduced turnover. Employees, meanwhile, gain opportunities for advancement, industry-recognized credentials, and transferable skills. Interested in learning more? Contact [dol.iwt@alaska.gov](mailto:dol.iwt@alaska.gov) today!

Recent employment highlights brought promising job growth across Alaska, with 5,500 new jobs added—a 1.7% increase compared to last year. Notable gains:

- Health care & construction: +1,100 jobs each
- Transportation, warehousing & utilities: +1,200 jobs
- Oil & gas projects: +600 jobs
- Professional & business services: +500 jobs

However, industries like retail (-400), financial activities (-200), manufacturing (-200), and information (-100) experienced declines. Government jobs rose overall, with state government leading the way (+600), partly due to hiring at the University of Alaska.

To access more Department of Labor & Workforce data visit the Development's Research and Analysis webpage: <https://live.laborstats.alaska.gov/>, and don't forget to check out the latest Alaska Economic Trends Magazine: [Federal Jobs and Workers in Alaska](#)

Don't miss these upcoming events happening this month at the Mat-Su Job Center:

- **Certified Flagging Courses:** Offered monthly by Northern Dame Construction this month's courses are scheduled for May 14<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup>, call to sign up and for course times.
- **The Municipality of Anchorage Weekly Recruitment:** Every Thursday, 9 a.m.–noon.
- **Employer Spotlight Event:** Connect with local employers and industry pros on the last Friday of each month, noon–3 p.m. For details, contact Faith Woolsey at (907) 352-2523 or [Faith.Woolsey@alaska.gov](mailto:Faith.Woolsey@alaska.gov)

Our office is open Monday–Friday, 8 a.m.–5 p.m., at 877 W. Commercial Drive, Wasilla. We're here to help you succeed!

### Monthly Highlight of Resources in the Mat-Su (May is National Military Appreciation Month)

- **Veteran Assistance (VA) Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Program:** They work with the criminal justice system to identify justice-involved veterans and connect them with VA services. VJO supports Veteran Treatment Courts (VTCs), which offer treatment and support for veterans facing legal issues. E-mail: [samantha.adams-lahti@va.gov](mailto:samantha.adams-lahti@va.gov) or [Mindi.Thomas@va.gov](mailto:Mindi.Thomas@va.gov)  
**Website:** [Veterans Justice Outreach Program - VA Homeless Programs](#)
- **Alaska Warrior Partnership (AKWP):** Alaska Warrior Partnership™ (AKWP) is a veteran-focused, community-led initiative to proactively connect with all veterans and ensure access to quality resources and opportunities available in collaboration with the community.  
**Website:** [Alaska Warrior Partnership | Veteran Non-Profit Organization](#)