**Leveraging the VA in Identifying Veterans in the Criminal Justice System ft. Katherine Stewart
July 25, 2024**

*[Scott Tirocchi]*
All right, well, hello everyone. Today is July 25th, 2024. My name is Scott Tirocchi and welcome to our Justice for Vets webinar. Um, I am the Division Director for All Rises’ Justice for Vets. Cindy League, joining me today, is our training coordinator. She will be assisting with technical support and webinar logistics.

The Bureau of Justice Assistance is sponsoring today's event, and Katie Stewart will be the guest speaker on Veterans Justice Programs, “Leveraging the VA and Identifying Veterans and the Criminal Justice System.” Now, before Katie begins her presentation, and before I share her brief bio, I'd like to review some administrative notes.

Okay. Your microphones will be muted during this session. This presentation is 60 minutes long with 45 minutes dedicated to subject content and 15 minutes to Q questions and answers. Please place all questions in the Q and A function. Please recognize that your immediate questions may be addressed throughout the webinar and that Katie will do her utmost to address all remaining questions during the Q and A period, we ask that you please refrain from discussing or commenting on anything in the Q and A function that detracts from the speaker's presentation.

Although a copy of the PowerPoint will not be available, this webinar in its entirety, including the transcript, will be uploaded to our website during the week of August 5th. Again, this webinar in its entirety, including the transcript, will be uploaded to our website during the week of August 5th. Now that covers the administrative notes. I'll now introduce Katie Stewart.

As National Coordinator, Veterans Justice Outreach, US Department of Veterans Affairs, Katie contributes to the development of national policy, provides guidance to the field on operational matters, and represents the VJO program with internal and external audiences. Prior to Katie's work in VA central office, she spent nine years in the field serving as a licensed clinical social worker at the Charles George VA Medical Center in Asheville, North Carolina. She began her VA career in 2009 as a local suicide prevention case manager, then suicide prevention coordinator.

In 2011, she joined the Healthcare for Homeless Veterans Program, where she served as the Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist building and growing the local program until 2018. Throughout Katie's tenure serving as a Veterans Justice outreach specialist, she was instrumental in the development of the Buncombe County Veterans Treatment Court in Asheville, North Carolina. Katie, we are so very honored to have you here today.

And without any further ado, I'm gonna turn it over to you.

*[Katherine Stewart]*
Great. Thanks so much, Scott. I appreciate that warm welcome, and I appreciate you all having me on this webinar today.

Um, as Scott mentioned, my name is Katie Stewart and I am the National Coordinator of VA's Veterans Justice Outreach Program. Today, we're gonna spend quite a bit of time talking about the title of this webinar, leveraging the VA and Identifying Veterans in the Criminal Justice System.

Um, that's gonna be kind of this second part of what I'm talking about. Um, just to get us all on the same page for the first several slides, I'm gonna be going through a brief overview of, um, the needs of justice-involved veterans in our program broadly but be assured that that is as an introduction and we will spend most of our time talking about the identification.

So, as I mentioned, these are our objectives. We're gonna discuss the needs of justice-involved veterans and how efforts at VA are working to address those needs. We're gonna spend a lot of time talking about resources available to identify veterans within the criminal justice system. And then we're gonna make sure that you all know how to connect to your local Veterans Justice outreach specialist staff at your nearby VA medical center.

So, unfortunately, we don't have as much information as any of us would want about things like how many veterans are in the criminal justice system, where are they, who are they, what facilities are they in? Um, and that's why it's incredibly important that you all are here today and we're gonna talk about how you can really resolve that data issue at a local level. And the way you can resolve that data issue at a local level is using two tools we'll talk about later.

One of them, you don't have to use them both, VRSS or SQUARES, because that can solve your data problem at a local level that can answer it for you guys, for your community, um, for your local criminal justice system. Answering that question nationally, um, is much more difficult and will be much more difficult. The information we have is limited. The best information we have is from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, which is a part of the Department of Justice that periodically do surveys, surveys of inmates and prisons and jails. Um, and in some of those surveys, they asked the question, have you ever served in the United States military?

So, the most comprehensive of these reports, um, looks at data from 2011-2012. So, it's old. So not only do we not know much, what we know is quite a bit older, um, but what we know from the data from 2011-2012 is that, um, veterans represent about 8% of the jail and prison population. Um, that in the preceding years, as you can see there in the seventies and the eighties and a little in the nineties, um, that veterans were overrepresented in the jail and prison population.

The good news is that over time, that has shifted. Um, the bad news is that we still have veterans involved with the criminal justice system, but the good news is, at least, um, according to this 2011-2012 data, is that it's generally on par with the general public. That according to this data at that time, that veterans were not, not overrepresented in prisons and jails. Um, we know that of veterans in prisons, um, most of them had about four arrests prior to the arrest leading to their incarceration in that prison stay.

Something I've asked you all to think about is we're thinking about where we might have the best opportunity to intervene with veterans, um, and perhaps help them adjust their trajectory out of the criminal justice system instead of further into it. Um, we also know that during this time period or at this time period, that veterans reentering from jail and prison tended to be older, um, than their counterparts in the general pub, general public.

We know a little bit more information about what we think about kind of the clinical or psychosocial needs of justice-involved veterans. Um, one data point that's true veteran or not, is that incarceration as an adult male is the single highest risk factor of ever being homeless. And this is true, um, veteran or not. This is true for a long period of incarceration or a short period of incarceration. Um, VA remains committed to ending homelessness among veterans. That absolutely includes veterans who, um, are involved with the criminal justice system, are at risk for involvement with the criminal justice system.

It's also, I think, really reiterates what we're here to talk about today. If we're not robustly and exhaustively identifying all veterans who are coming in contact with your criminal justice system, um, we don't have the opportunity to reach every single veteran who is then at high risk for homelessness. Um, they're also likely at high risk for some other adverse outcomes as well. Um, but really where the story begins and ends, if we are not screening for veteran status, if we are not doing that in a consistent and reliable way, it's a huge, missed opportunity to get those veterans connected to treatment, housing, other responsive services.

Um, for veterans that we're seen in our program, we're gonna talk specifically about what our programs are here in a moment. About a third of them were homeless or in a homeless program, 27% of incarcerated veterans reported homelessness in the 12 months before arrest. So, there's, unfortunately, a very reciprocal relationship between incarceration and homelessness. Um, so our job is to interrupt that cycle to identify veterans as early as possible in the process and work to increase their protective factors, reduce their risk factors, get them connected to housing, get them connected to other services that reduce their risk for criminal justice engagement.

We know that most veterans seen in our programs have a mental health or substance use disorder diagnosis or both. Um, so that means if you engage with a veteran through a criminal justice system apparatus, that it's likely that they have significant treatment needs. And unfortunately, we know that justice-involved veterans are three times more likely to have attempted suicide in their lifetimes as compared to non-justice-involved veterans.

To share a bit of information that is probably of particular interest to those of you on the call today, if you work with treatment courts or, um, other sorts of the criminal justice system with the goal to connect folks to care. Um, when we looked at veterans that were served by our programs in 2023, a little under half of them, um, connected to VA services, were diagnosed with one or more substance use disorders. Um, and you can see the leading diagnoses there were alcohol use disorder by far, um, followed by cannabis use disorder, amphetamine use disorder, cocaine use disorder, and then we have opioid use disorder and other drug use disorders there as well.

Um, you know, we, we start the presentation with the bad news. We start the presentation with why we're here, the changes we really want to affect. Um, so unfortunately, some of that bad news is, like we mentioned a bit already, justice-involved veterans are at significantly increased risk for suicide. And the 2023 National Veterans who suicide prevention annual report, um, justice-involved veterans were identified as one of the heavily impacted groups in 2023. The others of those groups were Native American veterans, women veterans, um, essentially low-income veterans, and homeless veterans.

Um, so we also know there can be a lot of overlap in those groups, especially among our justice-involved veterans. Um, the suicide rate for recipients of VA justice program services was 10% higher in 2021 than it was in 2020. Um, and that, that increase resulted in justice-involved veterans having the highest risk of any of the subgroups that were looked at, at this report.

It is unfortunate news. The good news is we have tools and resources to identify veterans and respond to their needs. And the other good news is, is that the risk profile for things like homelessness, things like overdose suicide, and criminal justice involvement, um, have a lot of similarities. There's a lot of overlay among those risks. So, if we're working together to connect to veterans to responsive services to reduce their risk for homelessness, to reduce their risk for suicide, to reduce their risk for overdose, we're going to reduce their risk for further criminal justice engagement.

And for our visual learners here, this is just a visual representation of what we just went over. The blue line at the bottom is other veterans, which we know they have an increased risk as compared to the general population. And then that really unfortunate red line, which just brings in to stark contrast, the really significant needs of justice-involved veterans and why we absolutely have to bring every resource to bear to make sure we're identifying them and getting them connected to services. This is, this really isn't optional. This really isn't a nice thing to do or a good thing to do. This is if we want to prevent veteran suicide, we absolutely have to be working with our community partners, community partners. We need you to identify the veterans in your population and help us get connected to them, help them get connected to us.

This is a brief video, which I am not going to share today, but I did want to bring some awareness to it. Um, there is a link to it, which maybe Scott or Cindy could share, share a link in the Q and A.

Um, and this is just a very brief video that you could share with your communities. Watch in A VTC court staffing watch at a steering committee meeting. Um, and just really brings home what we just talked about in terms of the risk factors for veterans, um, that may lead them to having a risk for suicide and what their resources are and how we can connect veterans to services that can support them.

So, we've talked about the bad news. We've talked about the needs of justice-involved veterans. We've talked about, you know, the adverse outcomes that can exist. Um, what we wanna talk about are the resources, what we can do as a solution, what we can really do to help our communities be responsive.

So, at VA, we have Veterans Justice programs. And our Veterans Justice programs, our mission is to identify justice-involved veterans. See, identify is the second word in our mission, and that's exactly why we're here today. And contact them through outreach to facilitate access to VA services as soon as possible at the earliest possible point. Our programs accomplish this by building and maintaining partnerships with the VA and key elements of the criminal justice system.

Many of you are represented here today, and our vision is that every justice-involved veteran would have access to the care services and other benefits to help them maximize their potential for success and stability in the community, including by avoiding homelessness and ending their involvement in the criminal justice system. And like we mentioned, we know that the risk profile for things like homelessness and criminal justice involvement are very similar to the risk profile for things like, um, death by suicide or overdose. So, we have the opportunity to really make a meaningful impact when we identify justice-involved veterans and get them connected to responsive services.

So, what are the things that VA can and can't do for veterans who are specifically incarcerated? So, for incarcerated veterans, VA can and does provide outreach, assessment, referral, and linkage to services upon release from custody. Um, and we provide treatment for justice-involved veterans who are not incarcerated. Um, typically, um, a veteran's criminal justice history or current justice involvement does not affect their eligibility for VA care. Um, but VA is not allowed to provide, um, direct care or hospital and outpatient care for a veteran who's a patient or inmate of an institution, of another government agency, something like a jail or a prison.

I shared this one slide, not to get deep in the weeds of it today, but just to orient us to the sequential intercept model and to orient us to the space in which we're talking about justice-uninvolved veterans. Um, I want you to look at these intercept points and I want you to know that VA is active and engaged at every single one of them. And VA wants to partner with you in your communities to identify veterans at each of these intercept points, um, as early as possible and get them connected to VA services.

So, as we're thinking about the sequential intercept model and where VA may engage with veterans, that involved with the justice system can talk about our program. So, I'm the national coordinator of our Veterans Justice outreach program. As Scott mentioned, I was a Veterans' Justice Outreach Specialist for many years at a medical center in North Carolina, a licensed clinical social worker by background and training. And in our Veterans' Justice outreach program, we have specialists at every VA medical center in the country. Um, we have over 500 specialists and we have 140 medical centers, 140 ish. Um, so as you can tell, there's typically more than, uh, one specialist at each medical center. There's typically a team of specialists and increasingly peer specialists on those veterans justice outreach teams.

So, the jobs of those specialists as it relates to the jail, their local community jail, are to work with the jail administrators to gain access. Again, identify veterans, you're gonna hear that a few times. Um, and help those veterans determine their eligibility, outreach, assessment, case management, and providing coordinated training for law enforcement personnel linked to BA community services mentioned. We have a little over 500 staff doing this work across the country. Um, and in the last fiscal year, or actually, I think even more recently than that, the numbers that they were outreaching in over 2000 jails.

So, one, I wanna thank many of you on this call as you represent your local jail and detention facilities. We cannot do this work without you welcoming us into your facilities, without you being incredible partners. Um, we count on you. We rely on you to identify the veterans in your criminal justice system in your jail. Um, many of these jails are doing that. I think through asking the question, have you ever served in the United States military? Which is great! And, we wanna offer some better solutions to that today, and, in fiscal school year 23, we served well over 41,000 veterans through our BJO program.

We also have our Healthcare for Reentry Veterans Program, and this is our Prison Outreach Reentry Program. Um, again, we are entirely reliant on our partners in state and federal departments of corrections, the Bureau of Prisons, um, which allow us into your facilities, thank you, which work hard to identify veterans in your facilities, prisons. You're doing a much better job, thank you, than our jails in terms of, um, utilizing our Veterans Reentry search service. Um, we know that the infrastructure is certainly different among the prison system, the jail system. Um, but we're very grateful that you, the state DOCs and the federal BOP is typically a pretty robust user of VRSS, which is what allows for this incredible outreach that's done by our HCRV specialist. Um, they are in a little over a thousand state and federal prisons, um, and saw over 8,000 veterans through that outreach and reentry work last fiscal year.

Um, we are on the call with All Rise today who I think are known best for their work with adult drug treatment courts, with veterans treatment courts. And if you know your local VJO Specialist, it is likely from a veterans treatment court. Um, I certainly don't need to tell you all what veterans treatment courts are. I think many of you're very familiar with them.

Um, our staff report in serving, um, in upwards of 700 VTCs across the country. Um, and the number of how many veterans treatment courts are there certainly varies. We use a very broad definition when talking to our staff about it. So, we ask them to report on the veterans treatment courts they're serving in and other veterans focused court. So, it may be a mental health court with a veterans track, a drug court with the Veterans track. Um, so we ask them to respond to that question broadly.

Um, on the team, our specialists are on the treatment team. They're in the court when court is happening. Their primary goal across all of these intercepts is to link veterans to healthcare services at VA Medical Centers. And I think you all know, but always important to reiterate that VA does not establish fund, operate or set eligibility rules for VTC.

And a question we get very often is, how can we recruit more veterans for our court? How can we make our court processes interesting to veterans? And the first piece of that is absolutely identification. If your local criminal justice system is not using VRSS or SQUARES, I can assure you, you are not identifying all of the veterans in your jail, in your criminal justice system. So, you are missing out on potential participants for your report if you're not using one of these two systems.

So, we've talked briefly about the role of the VJO Specialist in a VTC. There are a number of slides here. Like I said, I am gonna move through these quickly because I wanna spend a lot of time on VRSS and SQUARES. But I do think it is always helpful to orient, um, you know, attendees on webinars like this, other presentations about what VJO specialists are and what they, they're independently licensed clinicians, um, who work with the court system to support the establishment of VTCs or other criminal justice interventions for veterans.

Um, upon your invitation as a community, they actively participate in creating VTCs and inform their policy and procedure. They are active team members. Um, the goal is for them to attend all VTC staffing and sessions. Um, again, we keep seeing this theme. They work with their criminal justice stakeholders to establish processes for identifying veterans and subsequent referrals for evaluation. With the veteran's permission, and appropriate release assigned, they provide updates to the treatment team on the court.

Um, they can work to confirm a history of military service and VHA eligibility. They assess veterans to help establish treatment plans, facilitate referrals to indicated treatment programs and services, provide updates to the courts, identify resources for the veterans in your programs. Um, advocate on behalf of justice-involved veterans for access to appropriate treatment. Um, that's always an important distinction we make, that our specialists are advocates for treatment, not for any particular legal disposition. Um, and they are that liaison among the veteran, the court and the VA providers.

They collaborate with judges and specialty courts to connect veterans to treatment. They can provide information to your community about veterans and VA services. They are available to provide training and education to your court team, to your jail staff, um, to criminal justice stakeholders and community about veterans veteran specific needs and resources. Um, and they provide case management services to justice-involved veterans, including those in veterans treatment.

And increasingly, our program is focusing more on deflection and law enforcement-led diversion, really thinking about what that earliest possible point to intervene is. And identification remains just as important. Um, when we're thinking about intercept zero and one, when we're thinking about early encounters with law enforcement, and as we're talking about the available tools today, um, community partners, criminal justice stakeholders may choose to use a different tool based upon the intercept in which they are interacting with individuals.

Um, speaking a little bit about deflection, um, we return to the primary goal of the Veterans Justice Outreach specialist is to identify veterans, work with partners to identify veterans and link justice-involved veterans to responsive services. And that remains consistent among each intercept that the staff person may be working at. So, in a deflection program and a law enforcement-led diversion program, your VJO and VA, um, are there as your team of providers to connect veterans to services that are responsive to their needs.

All right, so this is the main event, right? We know veterans exist in criminal justice populations. The stat we have from 10 ish years ago is about 8% of the jail and prison population. VA has outreach programs to respond to the needs of those veterans. So how do we find the veterans and how do we make that connection?

So, the lowest barrier, the easiest process to implement, though I'm not saying it's not without its challenges, is simply the criminal justice agency, jail, prison court system, law enforcement agency, probation pretrial, asking the most inclusive question of every male you encounter. Not every male, every adult.

Um, and bias is certainly a part of who we asked the question to. You noticed that the first word that came to my mouth was male. And that can be our bias at times as we're thinking about who to ask this question to. Um, so that's why we really encourage the use of our technology-based systems, um, because they don't have that same bias.

Um, so what we suggest asking of every adult your programs encounter, your agencies encounter is, have you ever served in the United States military? Um, or even better use a free VA web-based tool called the Veterans Reentry Search Service.

Gonna show a short video. And Scott or Cindy, if you could let me know if, um, if the video is not playing, if you can't hear it.

Um, and actually, I'm going to take a brief pause, stop sharing, and go back to sharing because I think I did not click the share sound. So I will be back briefly.

All right, thank you for bearing with me there.

All right, so I'm gonna share this short video, and like I said, Scott or Cindy, if there are any problems hearing or seeing, please let me know.

*[VIDEO NARRATOR]*
Every day in the field of criminal justice, you have the power to change lives. What if I told you there is a tool that can make your job easier while allowing you to change the lives of veterans? The Veterans Reentry Search Service or VRSS is an easy-to-use VA-supported tool that can strengthen partnerships between your facility and VA. It alerts VA staff to veterans in your population so they can provide them with important services that assist with their re-entry.

As a veteran who has worked in the criminal justice system for 22 years, I have had the opportunity to use the Veterans Reentry Service. I wanna, I recommend it to all of my colleagues. It's extremely easy to use, and I have personally witnessed the good it can do for veterans. No matter if you're serving in a correctional setting or the court system. VRSS is a free, encrypted web-based portal that requires no downloads or special training.

You simply drop a single file with your population's information into VRSS, and it does the rest supplying you with all the information you need to find veterans and help them connect with services that will help them plan for their reentry. At its core, VRSS is designed to make your job easier by giving you a better understanding of who you are working with.

And by allowing VA to target its outreach to veterans and your population that help your veterans access needed services make a difference in a veteran's life by using VRSS and connecting them with the VA.

Visit vrss.va.gov to help a veteran today.

*[Katherine Stewart]*
All right, so I shared that video with you, one, because I think sometimes seeing it in that format helps us put the pieces together a bit more in terms of what exactly VRSS is and what it does. I also share that to say that is on VA's Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist public-facing website. Please share that video with everyone you know. Um, it's on YouTube. It's intended to be shared very broadly because we want the word about VRSS to get out and to continue to get out.

You know, we've had it for about a decade, um, but unfortunately, we have not had the uptake that we would really, um, hope to see, like I said, particularly among our jails. Um, so if you know a jail administrator, please, if you are a jail administrator, please share that video. Um, share this webinar when it's available, reach out to us and ask questions, um, and see what we can do to help really increase that adoption of VRSS.

So, VRSS is a web-based tool that allows VA to offer its criminal justice partners an improved method of identifying veterans within their defendant or inmate populations. Um, it is a part of our major initiative to end veteran homelessness. And we've talked about the why behind that. Um, and it's designed to enable outreach specialists involved with our programs, both HCRV and VJO to identify veterans as early as possible and get them linked with services.

Because what happens is, as you as a jail, you as a court, you as a prism, you upload through a simple Excel file, um, the entire census of your population, you upload that to a website. It really is as simple as taking a spreadsheet and uploading it to a secure government website that then matches that data across, um, uh, databases that have histories of military service and sends you a response back, essentially a yes or no. “This person has a history of military service.” Then, it also alerts your nearby local VJO or HBRV specialist that says, “Hey, Katie Stewart is in this facility, and she has been identified as having a history of military service.” I don't personally, using myself as an example.

Um, and then that gets, that message gets communicated automatically to your local VJO specialist. So yes, it does require some work on the criminal justice side in terms of creating the spreadsheet and uploading it, but it does remove work in terms of alerting your local specialist that there's a veteran in your facility.

Um, so yes, there is some investment on the front end, but it is with returns and it does take out part of the work on the backend in terms of, you don't have to call your specialist, you don't have to email them, you don't have to alert them in any special way because VRSS is doing that work for you. And we've talked about, that many of you are asking the question, ‘Did you serve in the US military?” And thank you, thank you for doing that. Um, and we know that if that is the tool we're using, and it's a good one, um, but unfortunately, we're not reaching every veteran in your system. Um, like we mentioned that the VJS estimate that about seven to 8% of the prison and jail population are veterans.

Um, when we were first piloting VRSS, um, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation was a very generous partner in that process. Um, prior to VRSS, through self-report, through asking the question, which they were doing diligently only about 2.7% of veterans identified the inmates identified themselves as veterans. Once they started piloting and using VRSS, that increased to 7.7%. Um, and for that huge system that was a gap of 5,000 previously unidentified inmates, um, for your systems, you know, they may not be as large as the CDCR, um, but I can assure you, if you're simply asking the question, which again, thank you for doing, um, you're very possibly missing about 5% of the, the veteran population in your system.

Talked about VRSS as a free online tool. It's created to be as low barrier as possible. Like I mentioned, it is simply uploading a spreadsheet to a website. There can be a little bit of work in terms of getting your, um, information management system to create the file in the way that it is required. Um, it's a simple spreadsheet. It's about seven required fields. Um, but they'll work on the criminal justice partner end is essentially getting your information management system to, um, you know, spit out that data that you need to populate the Excel spreadsheet. And it does require, um, typically a manual upload of that spreadsheet to the website.

We're asked about the frequency for which that, uh, these uploads should happen. Um, and I think that is, that's an individual decision for your facility. If you're someplace like a prison that has a lower turnover, um, you know, once a month is probably wholly adequate versus if you're in the jail or the court system where, you know, there is a much higher turnover in your population, you likely would want to run it much more frequently.

So, the information that VRSS provides to the criminal justice stakeholder is, like I mentioned, basically a yes or no, um, of the individuals that you have submitted, um, that have a history of military service. Um, and the reason that information is so limited is that veteran status is not protected information. So, VA can answer that question. Um, that basically anything else about that person or their history, um, is protected information. So, we can give you the yes or no through VRSS, um, excuse me, um, but are limited, um, without other agreements in place in terms of what else can be released.

Uh, but it's important to note, there's no restrictions on you as a VRSS user, as a criminal justice stakeholder in sharing your results with partners in your community. So, you as a criminal justice system in your community, if the jail is, um, routinely and thoroughly running VRSS, the court system probably doesn't need to because the jail can share that information with their partners at the court. Um, so I encourage you to really think about this as a criminal justice system-wide process, um, not limited to one agency at a time. 'cause we all wanna work, um, smarter, not harder, right?

Um, and to apply for VRSS, um, to learn more about it. Um, again, we can share the link in the chat, um, but there's a very easy, straightforward website where you can learn more, look at the terms and agreements, look at the agreements that VA is making about how we will protect any data that you share with us.

The second tool, um, we love our acronyms. We love letters of the VA, so we've talked about VRSS, the Veterans Reentry Search Service. Now we're gonna talk about SQUARES and I couldn't even tell you what that stands for. Um, but we're gonna watch another video, um, about SQUARES and learn about what resources it is able to provide.

And again, you are probably gonna have to bear with me, my technology, um, ability, but we'll, we'll try to make this work for us.

[VIDEO NARRATOR]

So many people, they have an idea of what led someone to experience houselessness and people think that it's crime or it's drugs, or it's a choice, and that's really not accurate. You realize that there's so much trauma in their lives, there's so much mental or, or physical, uh, challenges that they're facing that it makes just doing everyday tasks so much more difficult. How do you go to a nine to five job to pay your rent when you're struggling? We have to see homelessness as a life-threatening situation. And we cannot have in one sentence, homelessness and veterans.

Within the last 10 years, we have decreased homelessness for almost 50%, but any given night, we have over 37,000 veterans that are homeless on the street. We should have none. The sooner you can get a person connected to resources, the better the chances are that they will successfully exit homelessness. The tough part is getting systems to work collaboratively so that individuals who are homeless can easily exit.

Transition Projects is a nonprofit in Portland, Oregon. Each year we're able to help over a thousand people make the transition from literal homelessness to housing. When someone calls in, we ask them, Hey, are you a veteran? They're like, I am, but I have nothing to prove it. It's like, alright, we can look you up. But it can be a process. If they're calling in the middle of the crisis, they don't have time for a process with SQUARES, we can type in their information and it instantly shows us this person's eligible for your program. You can start helping them right now. They're a veteran.

SQUARES is a VA web-based service that identifies veteran status and the homeless services they're eligible to receive. The community provider now have direct access to that information through SQUARES to assess what is needed next for that veteran and engaged them right away.

Over the past year with the pandemic, so many veterans are reaching out for services for the very first time. Just yesterday, I was able to work with a veteran and he had experienced some injuries earlier this year and got laid off from his job, wasn't able to work and is facing eviction. He called in and he said that he and his family were planning a fake camping trip so that his, his kids wouldn't know that, that they were homeless. We gotta enroll him into services. Uh, we're gonna be able to prevent that eviction, help him get back on his feet. Him and his kids actually get to go camping knowing that they have a safe place to go to when they're done.

When you've helped a veteran to get their lives together, the gratitude that they express, that's enough to just like it's all worth it. It is a parade and will continue to be a priority onto, we have no veteran that is homeless on the street and that they have a safe place call home.

This is the most noble mission in government. And so it makes me proud that we can be a part of actually saving people's lives and really giving them a shot at really, at really being able to get themselves.

Yeah. Yeah.

*[Katie Stewart]*

So, you may be asking, why am I showing you a video about an identification tool for Veterans Experience home experiencing homelessness? Um, it's a great question. Uh, this tool was initially created for homeless service providers in the community serving veterans. But as you can imagine, we quickly found that other stakeholders had a, had need to know for this information as well. So, SQUARES' usership has been increased to include, um, criminal justice partners to include, uh, you know, law enforcement, first responders, other folks that may need to have this information, and that can be our court partners as well.

There are some differences between SQUARES and VRSS. VRSS was designed to have essentially the lowest barrier signup process as possible. SQUARES does require some things like a data use agreement and some other steps in the process to include a VA endorser, which your local VJO specialist can be. Um, and that's because SQUARES does provide quite a bit more information than VRSS to the user, which would be someone like a court system, law enforcement agency. Um, so you can learn more about the Veterans criminal, uh, veterans history of military service, the veterans, um, what their eligibility may be for VA healthcare and other services and programs.

Another difference though, is that SQUARES does not automatically alert your local VJO specialist in the way that VRSS does. So, if you choose to use SQUARES, and it's totally up to you and your system as to what works best for you, you do need to ensure that you have a system in place to alert your local specialists so they can close the loop so they can make that outreach contact to the veteran. And if the veteran is interested and accepting, get them connected to all the services that they might need.

Um, again, that video I just showed you is on YouTube, so please share that broadly. Um, and to apply for access, you simply go to the SQUARES website, which, um, we can share in the chat has a ton of great information about SQUARES. It has training modules. The website can really answer basically any question that you have, and you can start the process of applying for access. Like I mentioned, it is a little bit more of a process in VRSS, and that's because the information you get back as a user is very different.

Uh, just promoting a great resource that we worked on with our partners here at Justice for Vets. Um, it's an entire article really going into the weeds about the things that we've covered today about identifying veterans. What tools are available to you both VRSS and SQUARES, the advantages of those, the differences. Um, so please go to All Rise's website, um, and pull down this resource and share it broadly among your colleagues, among your stakeholders, um, and really help us further the goal and mission.

And at the end of the day, what are we connecting veterans to if we're getting them connected to VA services? Well, on the healthcare side, VA is the largest integrated healthcare system in the country. We manage over 1300 healthcare facilities, including 140, 170. It depends on how you count medical centers and more than a thousand outpatient clinics across the country.

And VA provides the full range of care, primary care, mental health care, substance abuse treatment, housing support, employment services, and other types of specialty care. And when we talk about healthcare at VA, it is that broad definition in VA housing is healthcare in VA, things like employment supports. And, um, you know, other types of services that are responsive to the social drivers of health are healthcare.

So, when you're getting a veteran connected to VA healthcare, it's a little different than just getting them connected to a, a community primary care doctor or, um, you know, community substance use disorder treatment program. Um, all of those things are great and wonderful, and it is always the veteran's choice about where they receive care. Um, but we really pride ourselves on VA about providing the full range of services and really responding to all of those social drivers of health. And right now, we have about over 9 million veterans enrolled in VHA programs.

A new and exciting program, um, which is not directly connected to the identification piece we're talking about today, but I want you to know about is our legal services for veterans. So, this is VA's first opportunity to fund grantees for the provision of civil legal services. Um, the first of these programs specifically for veterans experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. Um, so please, we'll share this link in the website, um, but if you'd like to learn more, please go to that website. Um, I just can't talk about our programs without talking about one of our newest and most exciting.

And what do we know? If we ask you guys to go to the work of identifying veterans in your systems, letting us come in, helping us connect with them, what happens? Is it any good? And fortunately, we find that that answer is yes. Um, that when our staff, specifically our VJO staff, so, the ones that you probably know, um, go into your jails, work with your law enforcement, work with your courts, and connect veterans to healthcare services and outreach them. Um, veterans are getting connected to care.

So, we found that in 2023, within one year of a VJO outreach visit, 73% of veterans diagnosed with a mental health disorder received mental health treatment through VA averaging 10 visits in that year. Likewise, at about 40% of veterans with a substance use disorder diagnosis, had at least one visit in that following year, averaging seven visits in that year. So, thank you. The work is working. Um, as you're identifying veterans helping us get connected to them, then they are getting securely connected to services. There's work still to be done. Um, but, but it's not without vain what we've done so far.

All right. And if you don't already know your local VJO Specialist, please change that today. Please go to this first link again. Um, we can share that in the chat. Um, and this link, scroll down kind of the bottom half of the page. You'll find every single VA medical center in the country listed, and you'll see names next to those medical center names in blue that directly hyperlinks you to the Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist at those facilities. So go to the website right now. If you don't know your local VJO Specialist, click on their names, send them an email, and introduce yourself. And say, “Hey, I wanna start better identifying veterans in our criminal justice system. Um, what are our next steps? Tell me more about VRSS and SQUARES.”

All right, so this is our leadership team. Feel free to reach out to any of us at any point.

Um, and Scott, I think we are entering into our question and answer period.

*[Scott Tirocchi]*
We are there. Katie, thank you very much. That was absolutely fantastic. I, every time I listen to you, I learn something new.

Um, the, uh, questions, we have a few, several questions, and also I want to provide a couple of resources. Um, wanna thank, um, looks like Phil Turner out at, uh, yes, Phil. Purdue University program out there, right? Measuring communities is a great resource.

Uh, so the question or comment was that, uh, are you aware states and all counties can access some data from the, um, measuringcommunities.org website? So please folks, take a look at that.
Thank you very much, Phil. It's a wonderful, um, resource to share.

Um, some questions. Uh, specifically how do we access VRSS information? My VJO has issues with this pro process. Our jails uploads something, but when I try to open up, there isn't anything there. Are we missing a piece somewhere?

*[Katie Stewart]*
Sure. Yeah. So, uh, please reach out to me. Um, we have a second-tier technical support help desk that can work with you and your jail partners to determine if there is an error somewhere in there when everything is working well and the specialist opens the file or the jail opens the file, and there's no one listed. That means that no veterans were identified. Um, but we know that there can be glitches in the system.

So, if that is consistently happening, if you're doing large uploads, um, please know that, you know, we can, uh, get you connected to our specialty technical support and they can work with you and your local partners to determine what may be happening.

*[Scott Tirocchi]*
Excellent. Thank you. Um, comment. Our VJO is amazing.

*[Katie Stewart]*
We know it and we love to hear it. Thank you.

*[Scott Tirocchi]*
Um, Another question. There are about 506 VAs or VJOs, I think you mentioned, you know, presentation. Um, do you know if there's gonna be any increase in the future plans for increasing the number of VJOs in the country?

*[Katie Stewart]*

We certainly know that we need more. Um, and as the budget allows, um, we will be able to add additional staff, um, so that that is budget dependent, but we certainly know we need more.

*[Scott Tirocchi]*
Who can we email to get more specific information to work with our actual homeless veterans?

*[Katie Stewart]*
Sure. So, I think the best, um, resource I can send you to today is our, um, National Call Center for Homelessness Among Veterans. Um, and I will need to quickly Google to find that number, but that will get you directly connected with the homeless program at your local VA Medical Center. Um, and it's a national call center, not dissimilar to our veterans crisis line. Um, anyone can call it. You don't have to be the veteran yourself.

Um, and it, with your permission, it generates a referral to the homeless program at the medical center nearest you. Um, and you'll get a, a direct connection that way and they can, um, connect with you to talk about what resources or needs you have there locally.

*[Scott Tirocchi]*Excellent. Thank you. Katie, if you could put up that slide again with all the contact information, I think was your second to last slide. That's a request from a few folks.

*[Katie Stewart]*
Mm-Hmm.

*[Scott Tirocchi]*

Um, also regarding the webinar itself, folks, um, the recording along with the transcripts will be available, um, August 5th on the Justice Web Justice Vet's website. Um, the actual PowerPoint presentation is not available. You'll see there's plenty of links. And the, the one thing we really want to encourage your folks to do is to really go to Katie's website.

Go to the VA VJP website, but a lot of these resources in greater detail. Um, also what we have here? Um, does VRSS also pull up those with under honorable or other than honorable discharges?

*[Katie Stewart]*

Yes. So I'll tell you, the Veterans Reentry Research Service is a little bit of a misnomer. We could have added more letters and made it history of military service, search service. Um, because what VRSS does is it pings against, um, D-O-D military records. So, it produces a positive response, meaning the facility will get an indication back that this person has a history of military service. Um, so that includes all discharges, all links of service. Um, so not everyone that is produced on VRSS kind of results file, um, is a veteran as defined by VA for the purposes of VA services.

Does my answer make sense there, Scott?

*[Scott Tirocchi]*

It did. It did. But you know, that's just me. I don't know what that means, but no, it did.

Um, I'm just rolling up a couple of questions here into one right now. Um, starts with Jennifer asking about VRSS and is it VRSS, um, Criminal Justice Information Services compliant as far as the information uploaded on the site? Um, so CJIS compliant. And what is the information needed in the, in the actual Excel spreadsheet, like name, date of birth, anything else?

*[Katie Stewart]*

So, what I would encourage you to do in response to your first question, because I am not familiar with the system you're referring to or its standards, is that you go to the landing page for VRSS. Lemme pull up that link. Um, because on that landing page, let's see, I can do it right.

Yeah. Um, it lists all of our terms and agreements, um, and that's really far more about VA's protections, um, on the data than what we're asking the community to do. Um, so this is all of those assurances about the use and handling of the data. So, I would encourage you to look at that and you can compare that to the standards that you have mentioned.

Um, there are some states which have said that, um, you know, their attorneys have advised them that they cannot use VRSS. VRSS does require a Social Security number. Um, so I know that that is what can trip up some systems. Um, I'll say that's one of the differences between VRSS and SQUARES. VRSS does require the Social Security number, SQUARES certainly encourages it. You'll get better results if you use it, but you are not required to have the Social Security number to run a search in SQUARES.

Um, these are the fields that are included in VRSS. I think seven of them are required, um, and resources that we can share with you, Scott, resources that you can email me and get, we have a user's manual for VRSS, which goes into great detail about, um, all the required elements required fields. We have a sample Excel file that shows how the file should be set up, what the required elements are, um, and other resources that, um, we are happy to share with anyone that emails us and asks for.

*[Scott Tirocchi]*

Excellent. Uh, thank you. Um, Katie, if you could type in your email in the chat, I'd be super appreciative.

Um, another question I, and, and really now that we have the screen that we're all looking at, um, just kind of wrap it up, roll it up, I should say, is that, um, VRSS uh, identifies folks that are either in the law enforcement, in the court structure or in the prison structure jail structure. What about folks that are actually in community behavioral health? Can they use VRSS?

*[Katie Stewart]*
Um, I think that's a conversation we can certainly have with the individual agency. Um, I suspect that they would prefer to use SQUARES, um, and there's absolutely no question about their ability to use SQUARES. Um, and they may prefer to use SQUARES for a number of reasons.

One, SQUARES is set up a bit more like a Google search in terms of, um, it's ease of use and being able to type in a name, a date of birth, and get an immediate response. VRSS is not set up in that way. VRSS is set up as we've described. You upload an Excel file, sometimes you wait a couple of hours and then you get your response back.

Um, so we think, especially for law enforcement, first responders, folks in community behavioral health settings that, um, you likely will prefer to use SQUARES, that there's probably more ease of use for you, um, in the SQUARES system.

*[Scott Tirocchi]*

Excellent. Thank you. Thank you.

Um, a lot of, uh, shout-outs to VJO specialists in the field that everyone's proud of. Um, it's great to, it's great to see. I'm just kind of going through it here.

Um, a lot of thanks while it being very informative, especially from VA leadership. Um, there's an indivi, uh, one, one question here is that, um, could VRSS be used with the Sims Task Force committees?

*[Katie Stewart]*

Um, I'm assuming by Sims Task Force committees, we're talking about like sequential intercept model? community-wide initiatives? If that's the case, um, I, I think so.

Um, again, SQUARES may be the preferred tool, um, but you know, if you are a lead agency in one of those organizations and wants to reach out, uh, please reach out to me and we can talk about that and we can talk about, um, you know, what may be the better tool for your setting.

*[Scott Tirocchi]*Excellent. Thank you, Katie.

Um, there's question here around peer support or peer mentor mentorship program, et cetera. Katie, who do we have for a point of contact that this person or folks can reach out to at the VA? The director of peer support specialist? Do we have that person's contact?

 *[Katie Stewart]*

Yes, we do. So, we have Tony Harris, who's our National Coordinator of Peer Services and Veterans Justice Programs.

*[Scott Tirocchi]*
Shameless plug, Tony Harris is actually on our Justice Vets podcast. It's… see how I did the setup there, speaking about that program in greater detail as is, uh, Katie Stewart on right now speaking on our Justice for Vets podcast also. Um, and Madeline's gel of all people too. Look at that. We have a lot of you folks, uh, speaking to the audience these days and we, we really appreciate that, Katie.

*[Katie Stewart]*
You're making us famous, Scott. We appreciate it.

*[Scott Tirocchi]*

Um, another resource, Veterans and Visions, uh, just kind of someone threw that out there. Just wanna share. Um, and, and, uh, what else do we have?

Uh, we talked about that, and talked about that. Apologies. Uh, oh, are VJOs allowed to go to family court yet? Question mark?

*[Katie Stewart]*

Um, I think it depends on what you're asking, um, in terms of the word allow. Um, you know, our staff, their goal is to support veterans who are involved with the criminal justice system to get them linked to services. Um, so, you know, VA has many services that can support the needs of veterans. Um, you know, we have social workers, um, all across our systems and many, many, many settings.

We have, um, you know, our caregiver support program. We have, um, our, um, intimate partner violence prevention program. Um, so, you know, I think the best step if you were working with family court and you are identifying veterans who have service needs, um, is feel free to initiate a conversation with your VJO Specialist, um, and talk with them about the services that are available at the local medical centers and talk with them about the best process to get veterans referred to care.

Um, you know, our VJO Specialists have a very robust, um, presence in VTCs. Um, and that is not, um, a design, um, at this point in time for all family courts across the country. Um, but your VJO Specialist is certainly there for you as a resource and can absolutely work to be sure that you are very well informed about the referral process to get veterans into care. Who need care.

*[Scott Tirocchi]*

Excellent. How many times have I said excellent, Katie? A few.

Hey, um, I wish, I really wish that we could, um, here I am there. I'm, hello everyone. Um, I really wish that we could, we could respond to some more of these questions. Some of these questions are questions beyond the scope of this presentation. Doesn't mean anything, just means that we're not gonna be able to address them all.

Um, folks, please, what I think we can do is I'm going to type my email right in the box here if you don't have it. Um, let me just put that in right now. But, um, please write to me directly for follow up on some of these questions because, um, as you can tell, we have Katie as a fantastic resource and the rest of our VA partnership folks. Um, and we can get the ans- we can get the answer to you.

So stirocchi@justiceforvets.org. There I am.

Um, that being said, unfortunately, because of our time constraints, uh, Katie, thank you very much. Again, it was an honor. Uh, we really appreciate you dedicating some of your time to reach this audience. We had a lot of attendees on this particular, uh, webinar.

And, um, without any further ado, I also want to thank, oh, I'm sorry, Cindy League for also being there for logistical support.

Um, so folks, thank you very much yourself for taking the time out to be with us today, and we hope that you get a lot out of it. And even more importantly, we hope that you're able to apply this knowledge in the field to enhance the treatment of our justice-involved veteran population.

So again, thank you very much and until next time, we'll see you then.

Bye-Bye.