

## NVTI Podcast Series

# Serving Justice-Involved Veterans

**INTRO:** Welcome to the National Veterans' Training Institute Podcast Series, where we discuss pressing issues affecting today's veterans.

**Host:** Hello, my name is Brandon Webb, I'm the National Veterans' Training Institute Lead for the Department of Labor Veterans Employment & Training Service. I work closely with our NVTI (National Veterans' Training Institute) team. Welcome to our speakers. Thank you for taking the time to participate in today's podcast, Serving Justice-Involved Veterans. Let's take a few moments to introduce everyone. Guests, will you please share your name, your role, and where you are located? Jose, can we start with you?

**Jose:** Hi, my name is Jose Sandoval, and I am a Local Veterans' Employment Representative, or LVER, from WorkSource Columbia Basin in Kennewick, WA. I am also a former Disabled Veterans' Outreach Program specialist or DVOP specialist.

**Jennifer:** Hi, I am Jennifer Carter, and thank you for the opportunity to be here. I am a Consolidated Position staff member from the NCWorks Career Center of Forsyth County, which is in Winston-Salem, NC.

**Joseph:** I'm Joe Swyrtek, a Jobs for Veterans State Grants or JVSG manager for the State of Michigan. I have previous experience as a DVOP, what we refer to as a VCA or Veterans Career Advisor here in Michigan, and as an Assistant Director of Veterans' Employment and Training, or ADVET, for the U.S. Department of Labor, Veterans Employment and Training Services, or U.S. DOL.

**Host:** Alright, thank you for that, and thank you for being here today; it is great to talk with everyone. As we begin the podcast, I think it is important to start by defining what is meant by a Justice-Involved Veteran. Can you tell us what it means to be a Justice-Involved Veteran? Joe, will you start us off?

**Joseph:** It's pretty much as it sounds. A veteran who is involved in one way or another with the justice system. They could be incarcerated or involved with the courts.

**Jennifer:** I think most people equate justice-involved with the terms "offender, former offender, prisoner, felon," and/or "criminal." These terms are not necessarily wrong, but they can seem limiting, and they often carry negative overtones. I am not in any way condoning law-breaking; however, I do believe labels matter and can be detrimental to one's rehabilitation without proper support systems in place, regardless of the entry point into the legal system. With that said, my definition of a justice-involved veteran is one who served in the Armed Forces and is currently, or has been, a defendant in the criminal justice system. What this definition does not do is parse out any or all complications, barriers, or stresses a justice-involved veteran may face. So, there could

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be those who fit the "definition" but have no desire to identify as such because they navigated the system well with little to no negative consequences and/or do not want to deal with the associated stigma and/or think they may be "stealing" resources from someone more in need. This is why my definition does not specify how one is impacted by their criminal charges and/or convictions.

**Jose:** As for me, I would say that any veteran who has been incarcerated feels their incarceration is a barrier for their employment.

**Host:** Okay, thank you for clarifying and explaining how you define a Justice-Involved Veteran. We know there are many ways a veteran may become involved with the justice system. In your experience, what are some factors that may lead a veteran to become involved with the justice system? Then, once they are involved, what initial resources are available to them to provide immediate help? Jennifer, can you get us started?

**Jennifer:** I believe many issues come from an unhealthy transition from the military, which could come from a variety of reasons. For some, a bad military service experience in which a discharge type may not warrant any or at least few transitioning services. This can include those who develop mental health issues and substance use stemming from trauma. Another situation may be that a service member could get caught up in the excitement of wanting to get out, and then they are not as engaged in the Transition Assistance Program, or TAP. They could miss out on the benefits and services outlined in the program. Sometimes there is a mentality, as I experienced, that all employers love and revere veterans, there will be job offers left and right, and that wages/salaries will be more competitive than in the military. That, of course, is not entirely the reality! A cause might be disillusionment with how they thought civilian life would be and a resulting inability to acclimate. I constantly compared what I had in the military versus what I was receiving as a civilian, including health care, dental, life insurance, steady paycheck, comradery, and purpose. Veterans may also not have enough knowledge of benefits, programs, and services post-military. Perhaps our transitioning programs could be a little like bootcamp but in reverse.

**Jose:** As for me, I cannot speak to this question on how one may become involved other than assisting those involved within the justice system. What I have been told as a DVOP is that post-traumatic stress or PTS can create a "way out" for the veteran to forget and cope with their struggles. I remind the veteran that this coping is called the "Easy Wrong." There are two ways to get ahead once you fall down, and you can either do the "Hard Right" or "Easy Wrong." They know what the "Easy Wrong" is, which we try to avoid. The "Hard Right" is going through the process of finding and continuously asking and seeking help. If we can use active listening skills to help guide our veterans away from their negative self-talk, we can assist with referral to the local VA for counseling and additional guidance or our Vet Center's point of contact. At times, the veteran just

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wants to get heard for their loneliness struggles, so we are their avenue of approach to those resources as a DVOP. When they become involved, some resources remind them that a DVOP can be their segue to other resources upon exit from the justice system.

**Host:** Alright. The Hard Right and Easy Wrong, I like that analogy, thanks, Jose. You both make some excellent points about some experiences that may lead a veteran to make the “easy wrong.” Once a veteran becomes involved in the justice system, sometimes they may find navigating that system difficult. Will you share some services, opportunities, and support you provide to veterans to help? Joe, let's start with you.

**Joseph:** Of course, that question is a whole podcast episode in itself. Numerous things, from crime to mental illness, may contribute to a veteran becoming involved with the justice system. The resources available to them can really vary depending on their location as well. One thing we're doing here in Michigan is trying to make sure that whatever resources are available are made available to these individuals by conducting 'in-reach.' We go into corrections facilities and conduct multi-day workshops for soon-to-be-released incarcerated veterans.

**Jose:** I agree, Joe. Veterans can also leverage a DVOP when they get out of custody for help finding resources. A closed mouth doesn't get fed, so if you don't ask for help, you won't get help, and no one will know you need help unless you ask. Reaching out is key!

**Host:** Will you tell us a little about the Justice-Involved Veterans Network (also known as JIVN), Veterans Trial Court (or VTC), and the Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) and how you can use these programs to assist veterans? Jennifer, let's start with you, please.

**Jennifer:** I have served as a member of the treatment team with the Forsyth County Veterans Treatment Court for the last four years. We are a multidisciplinary court service made up of a judge, coordinator, case manager, and various community partners with the mission of supporting veterans in recovery from mental health and/or substance use issues while under supervisory probation. As veterans participate in VTC, their needs and desires are continually assessed related to not only treatment but also housing, employment, transportation, healthcare, VA benefits, and family/relationships, etc. It is crucial to the veteran's recovery the ability of the team to identify issues within these key components and work closely with the veteran for resolution. As a DVOP, I am able to perform outreach in the community and connect veterans to organizations or agencies not represented on the treatment team. I can also enroll any job-seeking participants in the JVSG program. When they are job-ready, I wear my LVER hat and work with employers to give these veterans with charges/convictions an opportunity. With all of these supports available, it gives veterans a better chance of successfully completing VTC, thereby reducing the likelihood of recidivism. Upon graduation, some charges may be reduced or dismissed based on severity, while others must be pled

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guilty to. The advantage of VTC, above and beyond an amazing support system during initial treatment, is that all fees, fines, probation, and other associated court costs are waived during participation and after graduation.

**Joseph:** In my state of Michigan, our JVSG staff are going into correction facilities prior to these individuals being released from incarceration. We deliver workforce information and programmatic information about programs such as fidelity bonding, American Job Centers, or the AJC employment resources, identifying transferable skills, resume creation, along with preparing them to be successful upon their release. Our DVOPs usually deliver their services within AJCs, but we can also provide them during workshops within the correctional facilities. We target veterans who are within a year of release from incarceration but allow those not so close to exiting as well. By providing these services and information prior to the release of these veterans, we give them a head start and are trying to directly impact or lower the recidivism rate. We're very proud of our team here in Michigan and the work they do every day.

**Host:** Wow, thank you for sharing the work you are doing with veterans to reduce recidivism. In your experience, what programs and supports are offered to veterans while incarcerated or preparing to leave incarceration are the most important and have the most significant impact on the veteran's success once released? Jose, will you start this time?

**Jose:** I always remind them while they are incarcerated to keep hope, stay positive, work, or seek education. Stay productive and use the "if you've got time to lean, you've got time to clean" mentality. Be proactive and try and find any career volunteer that enters the corrections center to prepare for your exit. The old saying is that a man with a plan is ten times better than an educated man without a plan. Some DVOPs, like myself and another CVSRs, do a quarterly outreach to our Corrections Center. If veterans become aware of what is available when they are out of custody, they could start thinking about what they can do.

**Joseph:** The JVSG program and individualized services that DVOPs and LVERs provide are critical. Once incarcerated, many veterans may be without documents or a driver's license, and ensuring all their vital records, such as their DD-214s, or IDs, knowing where the AJCs are located, and resume in hand before release can be a game-changer. We don't want people struggling and trying to figure out what they need when they need it, and it's much better to get in ahead of things and provide services and information before they are released so they have a plan.

**Host:** It sounds like you are really working hard to help prepare veterans to have a plan. Let's talk a little more about how the support you provide to Justice-Involved Veterans

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while incarcerated helps to reduce the risk of recidivism. Please share your experiences with programs that have positively impacted the veterans you work with.

**Joseph:** As I noted earlier, we conduct "in-reach" into corrections facilities across Michigan. That may be an information session with a group in a prison gym for a few hours; other times, it may be a multi-day workshop with homework in a classroom. One experience I could tell you about is a very common one. When working with veterans inside the corrections facility, you quickly discover that they aren't used to people trying to "help" them or talk to them as a regular human being; they are used to being treated as a literal number or as an inmate. Teaching them to remember that they have skills, whether acquired in the military or while they were incarcerated, reminds them that they have value. Helping them recognize that they have value and can be productive citizens again is really needed. Knowing that they have support in place upon their release from incarceration can feel like a lifeline to those who are interested in making changes in their lives. That's not to say that it'll be easy; we're clear that it won't, but they don't have to do everything alone.

**Jose:** I agree, Joe. Support is helpful for anyone. It helps that individual keep hope. I went to a Re-Entry conference and met CAUTION, a justice-involved rapper, and he broke it down for me simply since I have not been incarcerated. He called it the moth or butterfly mentality, so I often share this with veterans when I have entered the corrections centers. CAUTION said, while they were in the streets or doing their thing, they were the little caterpillar in the muck and yuck for life until they got caught. He then said once you are incarcerated, that is your cocoon phase. You can keep that mentality while in that cocoon phase or think of your next positive chapter of life. Now depending on what you choose while you are incarcerated, that is where you will know what you want to be. Do you want to become the ugly moth again, making the same mistakes and then returning to prison or jail in the future, or do you want to rethink the possibilities and grow into a beautiful butterfly when you are out of your cocoon incarceration phase? The choice is theirs, but our veterans have to listen to their options and keep that positive mental state because the walls of incarceration wear you down, from what I have been told. Maintaining a presence in our prisons is key, I think, to veteran success. As a volunteer, I believe it is essential to keep reminding them to have an exit plan and that they have access to DVOP services once they're out.

**Host:** Interesting. Joe, you mentioned your work with in-reach programs. How have you seen them benefit veterans as they transition out of the system?

**Joseph:** Thanks. I view in-reach as a great if unfortunate, opportunity. Everyone is different and has different experiences and things in life, pulling them in different directions. Working with veterans within a correctional facility gives you a captive audience, no joke intended. For some, it may be only now that they are open to the idea

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of making a positive change and really open to listening to how to figure out a path forward. It also could be that they are now physically distant from those who may have negatively influenced them. We help them in identifying and translating their skills, military or otherwise, and help them create a good resume. We show them how to connect to resources upon their release, rather than leaving them to stumble around looking for help on their own. In the past, when I was a DVOP, I would see veterans come to me for assistance in the 11th hour and desperate. We can, and we should do much better and provide them with the resources and tools to succeed as early as possible. This gives them a head start to success. Is it perfect? Will everyone take advantage of the resources? No, of course not, but for those that are ready and really are seeking to improve themselves, we're there, and we lend a hand and provide that direction.

**Host:** Thank you so much for sharing your experiences. As you reflect on your work with Justice-Involved Veterans, can you share some of the initial struggles you have seen veterans face once they leave prison? Have you seen veterans who have overcome these struggles because of your support?

**Jose:** The main struggle I have seen veterans face is housing. Let's be honest; no landlord wants to rent to a "felon." The main questions I was asked were regarding housing and when, as a DVOP, I was informed of the magnitude of the struggle they are facing. Often, I would refer to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supporting Housing or HUD-VASH for assistance or our Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) persons to assist. As much as I would like to help them find employment, it is hard for me to help them find a job when I know they may not have a safe place to sleep later that night. Basic needs need to be met first before anything else.

**Joseph:** Again, there are just so many challenges for a person leaving incarceration. One struggle I'll note, though, is technology. Some of the veterans returning to society have never used a computer. When you talk to them about a website, you are, for all intents and purposes, talking magic to them because they've never navigated a web browser or used a smartphone. They can be scared and intimidated by computers or their ignorance of technology. For others, they may be banned or restricted from legally using a computer. This can be very challenging in today's workforce environment, in which people are expected to fill out online work applications.

**Host:** One thing we know that Justice-Involved Veterans sometimes struggle with substance abuse and mental health issues. How do you approach these concerns with veterans, and what services and support have you found to be successful in helping them not re-offend? Joe, can you start us off, please?

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**Joseph:** The best approach I found is, to be honest and forthright about everything. While incarcerated, veterans receive treatment and medications. Unfortunately, these services are no longer there to support them upon their release. That's why it's so important to make sure all the veterans we talk to know about the VA and how to connect to local resources in their areas. I believe this is one area alone that makes a massive impact on the recidivism rate nationally.

**Jennifer:** I agree with Joseph, it is important for these veterans to connect with the VA, Veteran Service Officer, and even local vet-focused peer groups. In my area, there are many different groups who hold Veteran Coffees. These meetings bring together veterans over a cup of coffee and doughnuts or virtually so they can experience comradery once again while providing a platform for the VA, local providers, and community organizations to educate and connect face to face with the veterans. This has done wonders for not only my community but others across our state because of the option to attend virtually. These Coffees helped spread the word about veterans' benefits, support groups, and veteran-specific events. There are two areas I have seen the most growth in participation: women veterans and Veterans Treatment Court. Which is exciting for me because I am deeply involved with both. Knowledge, resources, and support are key for any veteran and especially those who are justice-involved.

**Jose:** Veterans need a listening ear to help them navigate their struggles, and that's what counseling does. These hidden problems can get fixed, but it does take time. Health is wealth, and the mind needs healing. Just like physical therapy does for the muscles or joints, seeking counseling can benefit veterans even though it can be tough.

**Host:** So, in your time working with veterans, what are the biggest challenges they face due to their involvement in the justice system?

**Jose:** I would say child support, Legal Financial Obligations or LFOs, housing, and employment. Basic housing needs need to be met first, for example, child support arrears that need to be paid or LFOs that accrued interest. Once housing is met, then employment can be sought. Another concern is transportation. As a DVOP, our program does not offer financial assistance, but we know what programs and resources that our veterans can utilize to help out with their needs, so we leverage those to the veterans' advantage. I created a Road Map to help veterans, and I provide that to our correction center for anyone to use, but for veterans, I remind them that 2-1-1 is a national hotline for them to call and seek help. When calling 2-1-1, you will want to be ready with a pen and paper. They will direct you to a call agent who will ask questions on your location and what you need help with. They can help file for food assistance or get information for free phone services if available. For someone leaving incarceration, 2-1-1 can help them to get the services they need quickly addressed and help them to find ways to meet their needs for food, shelter, even a phone, which can help when looking for

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employment. I call 2-1-1 a phone Google so they can get resources in their location. It can help track their situation for employment assistance and ask for questions to match them to programs for help with resources, such as interview mentoring, access to clothes, or tools they may need to help find a job. The veterans can get this assistance when they enroll in the programs.

**Joseph:** I agree with Jose's comments about housing and employment. Also, though there is the stigma of incarceration and/or conviction, it is long-reaching and long-lasting. Our current 'justice system' can be very unjust in that it makes obtaining meaningful employment for some individuals extremely challenging.

**Host:** Really good information. And it is always encouraging to hear that services provided to veterans work. Will you share some success stories of veterans you have worked with? Jennifer, let's start with you this time.

**Jennifer:** I had a veteran who came to me for veteran employment services by way of VTC. His spouse decided one day she wanted a divorce and custody of their children, and instead of seeking counseling, he used drugs as a coping mechanism. He was able to maintain his IT manager position and driver's license for several months before his life spiraled completely out of control with multiple charges of DUI and possession of a controlled substance. This caused the veteran to lose his job, apartment, vehicle, and visits with his children. His court-appointed attorney suggested he give some thought to VTC as a way of getting the treatment and supportive services help he so desperately needed. The veteran was not sure VTC was for him because of its intensity, frequent drug testing, and court appearances, but as he progressed through the program, he began to trust not only the team but himself. He started sharing more of his thoughts and feelings he had held so tightly to because of the fear of rejection or failure. He showed and voiced vulnerabilities which helped us as a team and me as DVOP to understand him and his goals more clearly. I referred him to Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) for his rapid rehousing needs, and he received basic furniture and housewares from a local non-profit and Goodwill's Success Outfitters' donated interview clothing. He worked on his accountability and motivation for change so that he would be able to tell "his truth" with confidence when given an employment opportunity. I worked with one employer in particular who would give him a shot as a technician, but he had to understand the chance she was taking on him. He nailed the interview and was offered employment soon after. Since being employed, the veteran was promoted, graduated VTC, and most importantly, was granted supervised visitation with his children.

**Joseph:** It's always great to see a veteran choose a path other than one leading back to prison. I think Jennifer's example is similar to so many examples I've witnessed as well and is the reason why VTCs are great. I just wish that there were more VTCs. As a



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DVOP described to me, they had a veteran who was struggling to find employment and a parole officer who was very focused on employment. If not for the services of the DVOP, this individual would never have been able to effectively communicate his skills and value to a local welding company. By working with the DVOP and LVER, they were able to locate a felony-friendly employer who hired him and was located near a bus stop allowing for dependable transportation to and from work. This allowed the veteran to stay out of prison, make payments for restitution for his crimes, and support and contribute to his family.

**Host:** So, the goal is always to reduce the number of veterans involved in the justice system. What do you think can be done to help veterans from becoming involved in the first place?

**Jose:** Referrals to Veterans' Court or counseling for first-time offenders with check-ins to their PO, probation officer. Also, reminding veterans that it is okay to seek counseling for that ear to listen.

**Jennifer:** If we work towards reducing the stigma associated with mental health and/or substance use disorders, this may reduce these numbers. Stigma can invoke further feelings of anxiety, depression, guilt, or shame that one may already feel because of their mental health or unhealthy coping habits. This can come by way of educating not only the public but key entities, service members, and veterans come in contact with the most. This includes the military, Department of Veterans Affairs, Veteran Service Offices, Veteran Services Organizations, community colleges, universities, Department of Public Safety, and our own American Job Centers. To do this, we need to implement and/or strengthen existing programs geared toward mental health and substance use disorders. With appropriate funding and staffing, these programs could provide training and awareness. I have been taught, "if you see something, say something." If you don't know what you are seeing or perceiving, you might not know how to respond suitably. I had an eye and mind-opening experience when I took Mental Health First Aid, Veterans Support Specialist trainings, and when I participated as a veteran on a local Crisis Intervention Team training panel. I did not realize how many people, including veterans I come in contact with every day, may be dealing with some type of or combination of trauma, mental health conditions, and substance use disorders who may not have the "look" of someone in distress. These mental, emotional, and physical struggles do not discriminate, and being even a bit aware can be helpful to those of us who work with veterans professionally, like in the JVSG program. The goal is not to be a counselor or take law enforcement into our own hands but to have some working knowledge of Mental Health and Substance Use disorders and service providers so we can make meaningful warm handoffs. The more veterans who can share their positive stories or experiences with getting help for themselves or another veteran could cause a decrease in not only justice-involved activities but also hopefully suicides as well.

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**Joseph:** I agree with both Jose and Jennifer. Mental health and substance abuse services are critical. Everyone knows it, but we haven't focused on the resources really needed to have a more meaningful impact as a society. If a person is able to have access to therapy, or their prescription drug needs or medical needs, then they are much less likely to go to prison. All those things I noted can be provided by ensuring that these veterans have a good-paying job, ensuring our veterans are connected to employment resources as early as possible is great, but it can't be a "one and done thing." When people are exiting the military, they have so much going on that they may miss taking advantage of the available resources until it is too late.

**Host:** This has been so helpful today. One last set of questions, if you will. Given your experience, what is the best piece of advice you have for individuals working with Justice-Involved Veterans? What is the best piece of advice you have for veterans who have found themselves involved in the justice system?

**Jose:** Treat them like you want to be treated. Once they open up and tell you they have justice involvement issues, you gain their trust, don't lose it. If you say you are going to do something, do it. If you don't, you have lost that trust instantly. Also, give them a tangible item like a resume or job lead or a piece of paper with the resources you have in your head because it shows them you know what you are doing. As for the veterans, what you did happen. You can keep that rainy cloud over your head or take a step forward and work at tomorrow and keep growing to better yourself, not only for you but also for those who doubt you. It's a new chapter, so you decide what and where you want to go. I can lead a horse to water but can't make him drink it, so if you come for help, be ready for all the support and resources we DVOPs have, but ultimately you are the one that's going to put in all the work. We are like fitness trainers but for career employment. We can tell you what to do and how to do it, but we are not going to fill out the application or resume or sit in with you on an interview. You will get our guidance and coaching needs, so be prepared. This is what we are here for. Use us to help you get out of that slump you fell into and on to the next uphill or mountain.

**Joseph:** I agree, Jose. Like the slogan or commercial: Just do it. That's why we're here, right? Michigan's JVSG program has some great talent, and it has been very rewarding to see the hope return to the faces of the veterans we work with.

**Jennifer:** The best piece of advice I can give for those working with justice-involved veterans would be to extend kindness. A simple act of kindness may help to motivate and encourage change and help them to continue changing their situation for the better. It can show a veteran that no matter how horrible or traumatic their past is, there is hope and opportunity for better.

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And then the best advice I have for those veterans who have found themselves involved in the justice system is, we cannot change the past and to be successful, we must make peace with ourselves, and the past decisions made. Then we can learn from past and decide what can be done differently in the future to reap happier and healthier results. I also let them know this is now a part of them and to be ready to own it when faced with questions from employers or other service providers. Let them know you were in a bad place in your life and made poor decisions. But now you have learned, grown and want to take the next steps on your path to being a productive citizen.

**Host:** Jose, Jennifer, and Joe thank you so much for sharing these last words and for joining us for this podcast today. To our listeners, if you would like more information about serving veterans, please visit [NVTI.org](http://NVTI.org) to access resources such as this podcast. We are constantly adding new material at [NVTI.org](http://NVTI.org) so check back often. We also invite you to continue the conversation at Making Careers Happen for Veterans: Community of Practice. Thank you all so much.

**Outro:** This podcast is brought to you by the National Veterans' Training Institute whose mission is to further develop and enhance the professional skills of veterans, employment, and training service providers throughout the United States. This program is funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, Veterans Employment & Training Service and administered by Management Concepts. For more episodes, visit the NVTI website at [www.nvti.org](http://www.nvti.org).