

# BONUS: She Wears the Boots: Veterans Justice Programs

**Shawn Liu:** [00:00:00] Hey everyone. Shawn here. We've got a special bonus for you today from our sister podcast, She Wears the Boots.

She Wears the Boots is a VA podcast, sponsored by the Office of Women's Health in the Veterans Health Administration. And as you know, women Veterans are a growing and diverse group featuring professionals, mothers, and retirees of varying ages, racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, and sexual orientations. She Wears the Boots, highlights how VA partners with women Veterans and their health by interviewing experts from VA on numerous topics, representing a broad range of VA programs.

Their February episode featured our very own Sean Clark, national director for Veteran's Justice Programs here in the Homeless Programs Office. During the episode, Sean talks about the VA programs available to justice-involved Veterans, the pathways to access those programs, and what Veterans can expect if they decide to enroll. We're bringing you the episode in its entirety to you here.

So if you like what you hear, we encourage you to subscribe to She Wears the Boots. We'll put a link in the [00:01:00] description, but it's available wherever you get your podcasts.

We hope you enjoy it. Thanks.

**Wendy Fahlgren:** Greetings, fearless listeners. This is Wendy Fahlgren, the host of She Wears the Boots. Today, I'm very excited to be speaking about the Veterans Justice Program with Mr. Sean Clark. Before we learn more about this interesting topic, let's learn more about our guest. Welcome, Mr. Sean Clark. I'm so excited to be speaking with you today.

Can you please share a little bit about yourself with our listeners?

**Sean Clark:** Well, thank you, Wendy. I'm happy to. As you say, my name is Sean Clark. I'm the Director of the Veterans Justice Programs here in the Veterans Health Administration. I've been with VA since 2007 and have been working in one way or another with programs that aim to reach Veterans in the criminal justice system for almost all of that time.

So, I'm very excited about continuing to develop those efforts and, and where things are headed.

**Wendy Fahlgren:** And how would you [00:02:00] like for me to refer to you today?

**Sean Clark:** Oh, Sean, please. It's fine. And, um, he pronouns are, are just fine.

**Wendy Fahlgren:** Great. Thank you. The other question I like to ask is why do you do what you do? And why do you enjoy working with individuals who have served in the military?

**Sean Clark:** Well, I'm, I'm an attorney by training, um, and, but I don't think, um, that you need that training or, or education, uh, to realize that the criminal justice system has really become overused in our country, and in many cases, it's the primary response, uh, that our communities have to people who have needs um, that that system is not well equipped to handle on its own. So, specifically, folks who have, uh, clinical needs that, uh, those resources don't really exist within the criminal justice system. It wasn't really designed, uh, to deliver those, um, but often it finds itself in the position of, of trying to do so.

So, our program, Veterans Justice Programs, exists to improve the experience, uh, for Veterans, uh, who find themselves in the criminal justice [00:03:00] system. And we like to talk about creating off ramps into care, off ramps out of criminal justice and into VA care. Those are important to build for everyone who might come in contact with the criminal justice system, but there's no population more deserving than those who served.

And so that's what motivates me. Being able to put my training and experience to use in service of this population that's done so much for all of us.

**Wendy Fahlgren:** Wonderful. Thank you. So, today's episode will focus on the Veterans Justice Program. So, let's jump in. We're going to start out really broadly. Can you tell us about the Veterans Justice program?

**Sean Clark:** Oh, happy to. So, we are part of the homeless programs in the VA health care system. So, that's where we sit within the bigger organization. We sit there because, um, incarceration and contact with the criminal justice system, uh, in general is a really strong predictor of becoming homeless. So, it raises the likelihood that you'll become homeless if you have contact with the criminal [00:04:00] justice system.

So, we're a part of the prevention approach that VA takes with its efforts to end homelessness among Veterans. And this is a major initiative for VA right now, and we're in the middle of a campaign to put 38,000 Veterans in permanent housing by the end of calendar year 2023. I'm glad to say that we're on track to achieve that, um, but we are a part of that effort very much so, um, for Veterans who are justice-involved, um, but again, the aim is prevention.

We want to, wherever possible, get Veterans connected to care and services to prevent them becoming at risk of losing their housing, um, or if they're unhoused, to help them access the services and the interventions that VA has to offer and that our community partners have to offer, um, so that they can quickly get rehoused, um, and, and sustain that housing over time.

**Wendy Fahlgren:** Sounds like connecting Veterans to stable housing is very important. What else might be considered for justice-involved Veterans?

**Sean Clark:** So, as I mentioned, Veterans in criminal justice are at heightened risk, [00:05:00] um, for a number of negative outcomes, as you would imagine. Um, homelessness is one of those, as I mentioned.

Also, suicide. Um, uh, sadly, so Veterans in general are at heightened risk for suicide compared to the, uh, to the overall population. Um, and adding, um, uh, Criminal justice contact really intensifies that risk. So this is a major focus of our efforts, um, is ensuring that, um, Veterans are able to connect with the services, um, that can help address those sources of risk and build up protective factors to avoid those outcomes.

And fortunately, VA has a wide array of services that are proven to do exactly that. And being connected to VA care is a proven protective factor against suicide risk and of course against homelessness with the housing related programs that we have to offer. So, we do direct outreach in criminal justice settings: prisons, jails, courts, including the Veterans Treatment Courts, if you're familiar with those, and increasingly now with community law enforcement to help Veterans [00:06:00] access VA care at the earliest possible point.

In addition to that direct outreach and linkage to services work, that's defined our program since the very beginning when it started over 15 years ago, we recently expanded into civil legal services for the very first time. And this is a new component of Veterans Justice Programs called Legal Services for Veterans or LSV and these are grants that VA awards to legal service providers in the community to help Veterans who are homeless and at risk who have unmet needs for legal services.

So that's our newest component, but you put it all together. These are a variety of interventions that are targeting Veterans who have some kind of interaction with the justice system, be it criminal or civil.

**Wendy Fahlgren:** So, Sean, it sounds like there's a strong emphasis on outreach in the Veterans Justice Program. Can you share more about your efforts to assist Veterans in this way?

**Sean Clark:** Absolutely. So, outreach is core to what we do, uh, in, in the Veterans Justice Programs. And, and our essential purpose is to help Veterans [00:07:00] who are in contact with the criminal justice system get from point A to point B.

That's the simplest way to put it, where point A is criminal justice and point B is the VA care that the individual Veteran, uh, is going to need and is going to be beneficial to them. We want to do that as early as possible. VA can't provide treatment to Veterans while they're incarcerated. So when we're doing outreach in prison and jail settings, that earliest possible point is going to be post release, and our emphasis there is making sure that there's a smooth transition out of incarceration back into the community, and specifically by getting into the care and services that'll help smooth that path.

The work that our specialists do looks different in different communities across the country, because the criminal justice system looks very different in different communities across the country. We have more than 3,000 county level governments across the U. S. and criminal justice is largely run, operated at the county level.

Um, and there are big differences, um, in how these systems operate and in what our, uh, our specialists do in order to get access to these facilities and maintain [00:08:00] these working relationships with our partners in criminal justice. Um, but, uh, that's as it should be. Um, you know, we want this to be a flexible, uh, intervention, um, and for it to look like the community that it's serving.

Um, and so that flexibility, it really recognizes the fact that we're a guest in every one of these settings where we're doing our work and that we have to be invited in to these prisons, jails, courtrooms, where VA doesn't have a right of access. We don't own or operate these systems, um, but we're coming in and offering services and we share the goal with these criminal justice partners of helping Veterans get connected to them at the earliest possible point.

We've got a fairly sizable footprint in the Veterans justice programs. We have an outreach presence in about 2,000 local jails across the country, more than 900 state and federal prisons, and over 680 Veterans treatment courts and other Veterans folks. Veteran Focused Courts across the U. S. So this is, to put it in perspective, this is work that's being done by just over 500 VJP specialists that we're funding across the country.

So they're [00:09:00] getting a lot of windshield time. They're spending a lot of time getting out there and traveling between these jurisdictions conducting this outreach to Veterans in justice settings.

**Wendy Fahlgren:** Wonderful. Thank you for that. What do we know about women Veterans who have engaged in the Veterans Justice Programs?

**Sean Clark:** So women Veterans are a, um, we're, we're talking about in, when you, we look at Veteran Justice Programs, um, we're really looking at the intersection, uh, of two populations that do largely skew male. So the Veteran population and the criminal justice population, both of which are our majority male, but in FY20, last year, we saw, um, uh, 7 percent of the Veterans who we served in the, in the justice programs were women.

That ratio has increased over time and we expect it will continue to increase as the women Veterans share of the overall Veteran population continues to go up. We do see some differences in the women Veterans who we serve compared to the male Veterans we see in VJP. Women Veterans are slightly younger, but they're broadly similar otherwise [00:10:00] across the demographics that we see as far as urban rural split and the, you know, the other demographic.

Breakdowns. There are some differences that we see in their likelihood of receiving a mental health diagnosis. So, women Veterans who we see in VJP are more likely to receive a mental health diagnosis than their male counterparts. They're slightly less likely to receive a substance use disorder diagnosis, um, than male justice-involved Veterans who we're serving are.

But women Veterans, and this is important, women Veterans who we serve in VJP are more likely to enter, uh, VA primary care as well as mental health and substance use treatment when that's indicated after their contact with Veterans Justice Programs. So, we're seeing very Good success with women justice-involved Veterans as far as getting them into VA care and helping them stay connected to that care over time.

**Wendy Fahlgren:** Sean, you mentioned one of the newer programs within the Veterans Justice Program is the Legal Services for Veterans Program. Can you describe this for us?

**Sean Clark:** I am excited to describe it. It's brand new. Um, this is, as I mentioned earlier, this is a component of Veterans [00:11:00] Justice Programs, but it is a distinct program on its own.

It's called Legal Services for Veterans or LSV, and it is built around VA awarding grants to outside organizations. And these tend to be, uh, legal aid offices, uh, other nonprofit, uh, providers of legal services. Um, we also have several, uh, law schools that are grantees under this program, and so we have law students working under the supervision of a, of a practicing attorney, um, but helping Veterans in certain specific ways.

These grants are intended to serve Veterans who are homeless or at risk, uh, for homelessness. Those are one of, that's one of the criteria. There's also a requirement that our grantees use at least 10 percent of their grant funds to serve women Veterans. So there is, that is built into the legislation that authorizes this program. That is a baseline requirement. So grantees have to make an effort and when they apply to us for funding, um, they have to tell us about how they're going to accomplish this and the outreach that they're going to engage in to make sure that they're reaching women Veterans and that they're [00:12:00] using those funds as they're required to.

The legal services that they can provide cover a very wide range of topics, um, so they're able to assist with housing issues, landlord tenant disputes, eviction proceedings, for example, family law as a category, which can include things like child support, arrearages, custody disputes, a longer list, uh, potentially, but family law is a category that's authorized.

They can help expunge criminal records, depending on the criteria for that in the jurisdiction where the Veteran sits, um, and they can also help with VA and other benefits, um, and also applying for discharge upgrades. That's not a complete list, but I think that gives you a feel for the range, um, that, that grantees are able to assist, uh, eligible Veterans with.

What's so exciting for us about LSV is that it is an entirely new tool, um, that VA is able to use to address a lot of the root causes, um, of homelessness and suicide that health care can't reach on its own. You can't, in a clinical setting, engage with a Veteran's landlord and help resolve a situation that, [00:13:00] um, may have constructively evicted that Veteran from their housing. The



landlord may not be maintaining the property, uh, in a way that, you know, makes it fit to live in. An attorney um, uh, with one of these grantees can do exactly that and can help in many cases resolve those situations very quickly.

So, this is a powerful new tool in our kit that, again, we're very excited about the potential, uh, of this service to help get at a lot of these needs that can really erode, um, a Veteran's stability, uh, in housing and, and, um, and, and their stability in terms of their health and, and, and otherwise.

But that, you know, this is a new type of service that VA is able to offer as opposed to traditional health care interventions. And we think it has enormous potential. This is, I mentioned, this is the first year of the program. So we'll know more soon about how these services are going, how grantees are reaching Veterans who need these legal services and what the outcomes are.

So we're still in the early phase, but again, we see enormous potential in this area.

**Wendy Fahlgren:** [00:14:00] Agreed. Yeah, that is very exciting to hear about. So, if our listeners are interested in talking to staff in the Veterans Justice Program at their VA, what's the best way for them to get connected?

**Sean Clark:** The surefire way to reach out is through our website, which is just a part of the overall VA.gov website. We have a VJO link there where Veterans, family members, folks who are concerned about or seeking services for a Veteran who has contact with the justice system can reach out directly to the specialists in our program who serve their area. So, you're able to see whether it's by state or whether it is by medical center that serves your area.

You're able to directly contact the justice program staff who serve that area. that geography. We do that very intentionally. We want the barriers, um, to getting connected, uh, to, to VJP staff to be as low as possible. Um, so the traditional model, um, is that, um, [00:15:00] our encounters with justice-involved Veterans happen through outreach in these criminal justice settings.

But we don't want to count on that or not to have a backup plan for that. Again, if somebody is a family member of a justice-involved Veteran, is concerned about a justice-involved Veteran in their life, and wants to reach out and find out what may be possible through VA, we want to have another Avenue for that, um, so this, uh, this website, um, is, is what we use.

We, we, we make this publicly available so that there's no barrier to reaching out, getting in touch, um, and finding out what's possible, um, for an individual justice-involved Veteran's situation. So, I'd, I'd highly recommend our website.

**Wendy Fahlgren:** Thank you. Shawn, what can a Veteran accessing services within the Veterans Justice Program expect?

**Sean Clark:** I think the primary difference in, um, you know, getting connected to services through the Veterans Justice Programs, um, and not, is really where you start. Um, so again, what we typically see and, and what our specialists spend a lot of their time doing is going into these criminal [00:16:00] justice settings. Um, having these outreach encounters, these initial, often brief conversations, uh, with the Veterans who they're, they're, they're finding there, um, and helping them determine what they need and the best way to get that as soon as possible.

So that can look like an initial assessment, um, in that jail setting if the Veteran has already engaged with VA care in the past. Our specialists may be able to schedule appointments, uh, post release, um, and may be able to get those scheduled before the Veteran is released. So again, promoting that continuity of care and that smooth transition and whether that is primary care, mental health and substance use, homeless services, uh, that VA has to offer, women's health, you know, the wide array, uh, of services, um, that VA has, uh, in its toolkit.

Specialists are able to help Veterans navigate that and, again, to access those as quickly as possible once they're back in the community. Contrasting that, Veterans who are coming into care who aren't justice-involved and who are, you know, maybe accessing care on their own by applying for [00:17:00] enrollment, you know, presenting at a VA medical center, applying for enrollment.

Uh, on their own or with their help from, uh, another, uh, outreach program or, um, uh, a Veteran service, uh, officer, um, whatever the case may be. Our specialist is really there to serve that purpose and to bring that service to justice-involved Veterans where they are, um, including when that's in a prison or a jail setting, when they're not able to initiate the process themselves.

**Wendy Fahlgren:** Fabulous. Thanks for that information. So, Sean, what is the one thing you would want all folks who have served or are currently serving to know about the Veterans Justice Program?



**Sean Clark:** I think the first thing to keep in mind is that Veterans aren't over represented in the criminal justice system. There are misconceptions to that effect.

The vast majority of Veterans are strengthened by their service, thrive post discharge. So, the existence of our program or any efforts that we make to promote it, It doesn't mean that this experience entering the criminal justice system is representative for the Veteran population in any way. But for [00:18:00] those who do struggle and end up in contact with the criminal justice system, VJP exists to connect with you where you are.

Um, including when that's incarcerated in a prison or jail setting and help you access the wide range of VA services that can prevent the worst possible outcomes, whether that's homelessness or suicide, whatever the case might be, but more importantly, help you build up the resources, the strengths, and the sources of stability um, that are going to help you, um, uh, thrive over time in the future. Um, and so that ranges from housing, uh, to medical interventions, um, and the list, the list goes on. But that's what we're there to do, um, is to help get Veterans from a bad place, that contact with criminal justice, um, in the first place, to a better place using all the tools that VA can bring to bear for the Veterans who've earned them.

And, um, we are privileged, uh, to help, uh, get back on their feet.

**Wendy Fahlgren:** I would like to thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me and our listeners about the Veterans Justice Program. [00:19:00] Sean, are there any last comments you'd like to add before we end?

**Sean Clark:** You know, it's important to know about the specialists, um, who do this work and who see, uh, justice-involved Veterans through outreach, um, every day.

They're highly dedicated. Folks, it is a very special, um, kind of person, uh, who is drawn to working in criminal justice settings. Um, so spending your days in prisons or jails or courtrooms, um, that's not for everybody. And so, uh, it really is a passion and a calling, um, for the specialists, um, who are serving in these roles and in many cases have for a long time.

So I would encourage you if you're listening, if you are a Veteran who has a legal issue that's pending, um, if you're the family member of a person who has such an issue going on um concern about the Veteran in your life who has contact with the criminal justice system. I would really encourage you to reach

out to one of our specialists, the one who is serving your area and find out what is possible um through VA, because again they are highly dedicated, passionate folks um and they [00:20:00] are good at what they do, they are highly effective at getting justice-involved Veterans into the care and services um that can be most helpful to them, so please reach out if that applies to you.

**Wendy Fahlgren:** Thank you for that, Shawn. And thank you for listening to She Wears the Boots. If you're a woman who served in the military and have questions about services available at the VA, please contact the Women Veteran Call Center at 1-855-829-6636. The Women Veteran Call Center staff is trained to connect women, Veterans, their families, and caregivers with VA services and resources.