

EVH - S1EP12 - Helping Justice-involved Veterans Get Their "Second Chance"

Sean Clark: [00:00:00] It has to do with risk factors. In particular the fact that involvement with the criminal-justice system is a strong risk factor for a wide variety of negative outcomes: homelessness first and foremost, but also suicide, other forms of early death. And of course we want to prevent that. Access to healthcare itself is one of those protective factors, but there are others as well, like building a sense of social connectedness, coping and problem solving skills, these other good things that can come out of connection to VA treatment and the other, services that VA has to offer.

Shawn Liu: Welcome to Ending Veteran Homelessness, your firsthand look into our nation's efforts to ensure that every veteran has a safe and stable place to call home. From the Department of Veterans Affairs, Homeless Programs Office, I'm your host, Shawn Liu.

If you're a Veteran who's homeless or at risk of homelessness, reach out. Call the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at 877-424-3838. [00:01:00] Trained counselors are standing by to help 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That number again is 877-424-3838.

Hey everyone, it's April, and in addition to being my birth month, April is also Second Chance Month, which is a time to raise awareness, brainstorm solutions, and align efforts to ensure that justice involved Veterans, and honestly all individuals, can successfully reenter society after incarceration.

Now you're probably wondering, "whoa, wait, wait, hold on. Shawn. This podcast is literally called Ending Veteran *Homelessness*. I, or I heard you say Incarceration. Why are you doing an episode on incarceration? And what on earth is justice involvement?"

Those are both really great questions, and why don't we just dive on in?

So to help us learn more about precisely who justice-involved Veterans are and why VA believes it's critical to help them get [00:02:00] their second chances, I can think of no one better to talk to than our next two guests.

First, we have Sean Clark, National Director for Veterans Justice Programs here in the VHA Homeless Programs Office, where he leads efforts to provide outreach and linkage to VA services for Veterans reentering communities after long-term incarceration in state and federal prisons, as well as outreach that serves as the front end of the criminal-justice system.

And today he's joined by Madolyn Gingell, the National Director for the Legal Services for Veterans Program, also here in the VHA Homeless Programs Office.

Sean, Madolyn, welcome to the show!

Sean Clark: Hi, Shawn. Thanks for having us.

Madolyn Gingell: Hi, Shawn. Thank you and happy birthday month.

Shawn Liu: Thank you so much. April 4. So I think I just doxed myself, but that's okay.

Um, so Sean, Madolyn, it's really great to have you on here today. And, just as an aside, Sean Clark, when you and I get together on calls, sometimes people aren't accustomed to having two Shawns. Sometimes I call you Sean Prime. But for the sake of today, let's just do like Shawn Liu [00:03:00] and Sean Clark. That might make things easier, especially if Madolyn is gonna be checking in with us.

Sean Clark: That sounds like a plan.

Shawn Liu: All right.

So you both are with our Veterans Justice Programs and really want to dive into that a lot. It's Second Chance Month, and this is a podcast about homelessness. So it's gonna be good eventually to explain why we focus so much on justice involvement in reentry, in our homelessness programs.

But before we get into those details, why don't you both tell us a little bit about yourselves. Sean Clark, starting with you. Tell us a little bit more about your role as National Director for Veterans Justice Programs.

Sean Clark: I have the privilege of being the Director of Veterans Justice Programs, or VJP, as we call it for short. As you've said very accurately at the beginning, we are here to project VA's, many treatment capabilities, programs,

and services into the criminal-justice system, find Veterans where they are, and help them connect with those services at the earliest possible point because they can be tremendous supports and can, in many cases, be the [00:04:00] difference that prevents a Veteran from becoming homeless in the first place, or helps them rapidly exit homelessness should they find themselves there.

Shawn Liu: And you're basically our national lead for that, so that's fantastic.

Madolyn, can you tell us a little bit about your role on the VJP team?

Madolyn Gingell: As you had mentioned, I am the National coordinator of the Legal Services for Veterans program. It's relatively new components of Veterans Justice Programs. We have like a two-pronged focus. One is through our medical legal partnerships and VA affiliated legal clinics and the other is through our new authority for our grants program.

Shawn Liu: What I'm hearing you talking about is increasing access to different legal services. And I'm sure for a lot of folks listening in, they may not be familiar with the concept of medical legal partnerships or legal clinics and maybe think about legal services primarily in the context of say, like prosecutors and public defenders, and I know we're gonna get into that a little bit more.

But Sean Clark, I want to come back over to you again. The Veterans Justice programs, they're aligned under the [00:05:00] Homeless Programs Office and for many years, I know before I got to work with you and your team, I kind of scratched my head why I was like, "this is, I could kind of see the alignment, but it doesn't quite fit perfectly."

But I know, both then and probably even still now, that I could probably, benefit from a lot of education. So can you share with why is the Veterans Justice Programs aligned under homelessness? What's that intersection all about?

Sean Clark: It has to do with risk factors. In particular the fact that involvement with the criminal-justice system is a strong risk factor for a wide variety of negative outcomes: homelessness first and foremost, but also suicide, other forms of early death. And of course we want to prevent that. So that's why we do what we do and where we do it and really focus on getting into these criminal-justice settings. Of course, not relying on them to raise their hand and seek out services. In many cases, they're physically unable to do that if they are in an incarcerated setting. But the point of outreach is never an end in itself. The

point is helping Veterans who are in those circumstances access the [00:06:00] services that can address their housing and mental health and their other clinical needs directly. But also, over the long term, boost their protective factors that help guard against some of those most negative outcomes. Access to healthcare itself is one of those protective factors, but there are others as well, like building a sense of social connectedness, coping and problem solving skills, these other good things that can come out of connection, to VA treatment and the other, services that VA has to offer.

And in practical terms, what this looks like is outreach visits happening in these criminal-justice facilities across the country every day. Our staff go into state and federal prison facilities, they go into local jails across the country, about 2000 of them. And they also work in the criminal courts, particularly Veterans Treatment Courts, which you might have heard of.

That's all directed at bringing them from point A, wherever that is in the criminal-justice system to point B, which is the VA care and services.

Shawn Liu: Yeah, that's really, really interesting. So what I heard from settings is, jails, which are usually at the local level, prisons, which I guess are probably like states or federal, correct me if I'm wrong.

Sean Clark: Mm-hmm.

Shawn Liu: Um [00:07:00] and then, I think other court settings, so maybe with some like diversionary settings too.

Sean Clark: Exactly.

Shawn Liu: And what I'm hearing from you, and this is jogging in my memory, is a lot of times when we hear, whether it's listening sessions or feedback of people with lived experience, Veterans who are formally homeless, one of the questions that we ask is, "How did you find out about VA services, especially for homeless programs?"

And a theme that comes up a lot is, "Well, it took me so long to actually come to y'all for help because I didn't know you had services to help me."

But correct me if I'm wrong, Sean, what I'm hearing from you though is that you're really taking a proactive approach, going into these settings to help Veterans, identify them and get them ultimately connected to all of those benefits that VA has to offer.

How do you actually identify Veterans in those settings? Are corrections officers just like asking everybody the question and then calling you up?

Sean Clark: That is one of the most important pieces of the puzzle because you can't offer someone services if you don't know that they're there. That is something that we see [00:08:00] some variety among our criminal-justice partners. We're reliant on them. These are not settings that VA controls. We're guests in the prisons, in the jails, in the courts that we're operating in.

There's not a long history in a lot of criminal-justice settings of identifying Veterans in those defendant and inmate populations. So, the concept in many cases is new and wherever we get the opportunity, we want to inform that process as best we can.

We encourage our partners in jurisdictions where historically there may not have been efforts to identify Veterans in defendant or inmate populations asking the question. Making sure that it's asked in the right way, "Did you serve in the US military including the guard of reserves?" And not using the term Veteran, which can sometimes get people to self-select out when they did serve but they may not identify themselves using that term.

And VA has a couple of really valuable and free to use tools that can help with this process and to make sure that this identification happens as thoroughly and accurately as it possibly can. One of which is [00:09:00] called Veterans Reentry Search Service or VRSS. The other tool is called SQUARES, for Status Query Exchange and Response System. These are two free to use VA tools that accomplish the same task. They take information about a defendant, or an inmate, or a group, including a large group that can be submitted at one time, a group of defendants or inmates from a particular jurisdiction, and they answered the question of whether each of those individuals had a record of military service.

So that, as far as were concerned, is the ideal approach because it's a records-based way of ensuring that nobody slips through the cracks in that process. It allows for more thorough and complete identification and allows everybody passing through that jurisdiction or that facility to potentially have the opportunity to connect with VA services if they choose to.

Shawn Liu: We're gonna go ahead and put links to the Veterans Reentry Search Service, or VRSS, as well as SQUARES. I'm actually familiar with SQUARES. We're gonna put links to those into the description of this episode so that if criminal-justice organizations wanna be a [00:10:00] part of it, want to use these

free tools, you can check those out in the links in our description. Sean Clark, this is really, really fantastic stuff.

Let's go ahead and talk about the month now. April is Second Chance Month. Why is it so important to give Veterans their second chance? Like I know the general boiler plate stuff, Veterans are America's heroes, they've served our country, and so some of this may feel obvious, like of course, like they've served our country, we gotta make sure they have their second, third, fourth, eighth chance, all the chances. Right?

But from your perspective, why is it important for us to give Veterans their second chance?

Sean Clark: I certainly second all of the boilerplate reasons that you cited. What we're seeing right now in communities is a broad shift and greater awareness of the processes that make up the criminal-justice system and the way those play out in human terms. One of those I think is a growing focus on what happens after incarceration, what comes next. There's a broadening recognition that getting that process right for the people who would effects directly and setting them up to succeed, it's an end in itself. But it also [00:11:00] benefits communities as a whole. It's important to keep in mind that almost everyone who spends time incarcerated is going to be coming home. There is a release date on the horizon, it ends and you're coming back into the community. That's a critical time for accessing these benefits, services, other supports that can make or break that process and determine whether it's gonna be successful. And that has ripple effects out in the broader community.

Shawn Liu: It sounds like a win for everybody, a win for the Veterans, a win for their families, a win for their communities. Really fantastic stuff.

Madolyn, I want to come over to you next. You're a newer component of the Veterans Justice programs. Can you tell us a little bit about Legal Services for Veterans as a program? It sounds obvious on the surface, but I'm sure there's probably some intricacies and nuances. What is Legal Services for Veterans?

Madolyn Gingell: We're more as that preventative piece of the program office. We have two focuses. One is our medical legal partnerships, so to promote and grow those across VHA and then also our grants. And for anyone who's not [00:12:00] familiar with a medical legal partnership, it's a care collaboration between the healthcare provider or clinician in the VA and our legal service provider. A true medical legal partnership is co-located in the same facility, meaning they're under the same roof on VA property, and it really allows for the

clinical providers to deliver holistic care to the Veteran and for the legal service provider to address the Veterans potentially health-harming legal needs. We have almost 30 actual medical legal partnerships functioning currently. And then we also have VA affiliated legal clinics where our legal service providers offer pro bono civil legal assistance to our Veterans on a variety of different legal matters on a referral basis from VA. We have over 120 VA-affiliated legal clinics throughout VHA. We're really proud of the work being done at the medical centers.

Our other very exciting piece with Legal Services for Veterans are the new grant authorities. Our newest grant program authorizes VA to fund legal [00:13:00] service grants for organizations that provide legal services for Veterans who are homeless or at risk for Homeless. The grants award up to \$150,000 per grant, and we're looking at somewhere around 75 grants will be awarded. These awards will be announced Summer of 2023.

Some of the legal services that will be provided under the grants will be related to housing, family law, income support, or military discharge upgrades. It can also cover some criminal defense matters if it's related to their homelessness or housing instability.

Shawn Liu: We'll also put links to all of that. The links to medical legal partnerships, links to the new Legal Services for Veterans grants. The grants are gonna be really, really exciting.

Sean Clark, I wanna come back over to you.

I'm sure for many Veterans who are listening in who may be experiencing legal issues of their own, they probably wanna know how do we get connected to your team and get some of this support, especially if it's the medical legal partnerships, or the outreach social work staff.

[00:14:00] How do Veterans get connected?

Sean Clark: Getting connected to the Veterans Justice Program staff who work in these criminal-justice settings can be reached directly from our website. We've got it broken out by every medical center across the country. You're able to see who those specialists are and you're able to contact them through our website. You can reach out to them directly.

As Madolyn mentioned, the Legal Services grants, the first of those are gonna be awarded later on this year, and will be announcing the grantees, post those on

the program website. Those grantees will be doing outreach to connect with Veterans for those grant funded legal services. We'll also be working with VA staff to make sure that they're aware that there's a new resource in their community for free legal aid. That's yet to come again, we don't have those grant awards announced yet.

What Veterans can do right now if they're in need of civil legal services? First, checking the list of free legal clinics that are housed in VA medical centers. VA's Office of General Counsel maintains a list of those that's available on their website.

There are also good national resources that I [00:15:00] think are very important to be aware of. The first of those is called Stateside Legal. Stateside is all one word, Stateside Legal. And that is offered by the Legal Services Corporation. That is the the federal entity that funds legal aid offices all over the country. You're able to search by your jurisdiction, by the city or the town that you're in, or by your zip code. And you're able to pull up the information about legal service providers and it also indicates which of those providers offer pro bono or at reduced rates. Statesidelegal.org.

Another resource that works in a similar way, I always talk about them hand-in-hand. It's good to check both because there can be differences in these directories as far as they may have different resources listed for a given community. But this one's from the American Bar Association. Both of them are specifically for Veterans that have unmet legal needs and are looking to connect with a provider.

Shawn Liu: Amazing. This is definitely like the most resource rich episode that we've put on date.

We're gonna put links to all of those in the description, the list of the Veterans [00:16:00] Justice Program staff, the list of the legal clinics that is hosted by VA's Office of General Counsel, Stateside Legal, and the American Bar Association's resources as well. All of those will be in the description of this month's episode. I, I always learn so much when I hang out with y'all.

Can you share a little bit about what some of the plans are for the future? And Sean Clark we'll stay with you for a little bit. Where is Veterans Justice programs headed?

Sean Clark: I think the best way to conceive of the program and the way that it operates with our community partners is following their lead. It really relies on

their decision to serve Veterans in a focused way and their openness to the partnerships that make this happen at a local level. What is exciting to me is this focus and this awareness of Veterans in criminal-justice populations moving back earlier in time, to intervene as early as possible, and develop ways to intervene with Veterans before they have sustained or intense contact with the criminal-justice system of the type that generates the [00:17:00] risk that I talked about earlier.

What we are seeing in a growing number of communities, and VA is privileged to be a partner in these efforts, the umbrella term to use is called deflection. These initiatives look very different. They are led by different agencies. But the concept is deflection and it's different than diversion. Deflection, as the term suggests, bouncing someone out, figuratively speaking, of the criminal-justice system entirely, rather than creating a different path for them within the criminal-justice system itself. That offers such tremendous potential: the ability to deliver services to Veterans before these negative collateral consequences have the chance to pile up and to complicate the picture for someone.

That to me is what's really exciting about where we can go from here.

Shawn Liu: It sounds like I need to have you back at some point in the future to learn a little bit more about deflection. That does sound really exciting.

Madolyn, any sneak previews that you can let us know what's on the horizon for Legal Services for Veterans?

Madolyn Gingell: We do have a second grant program that we are in the process of standing up. We're working with our regs [00:18:00] office right now and it's really focusing on assistance with access to VA programs for former service members. Really looking at how we can help these former service members with either access to benefits, discharge upgrades. It's a pilot, but we're hoping that we will have more information out on our website within this year. We'll have a lot more information out on that, so very exciting, very exciting times.

Shawn Liu: For folks who may be interested in applying for those grants, again, we're gonna put links to all the things, including the Legal Services for Veterans program so that you can check back regularly, especially when the Notice of Funding Opportunity comes out for that.

Okay. This, I've learned so much today. This is fantastic.

Gonna start winding us down and end with a tradition on our show - ending with "why." I myself am not a Veteran, but I know that whenever I've worked with Veterans, one of the most important things, in addition to like them feeling confident that I would get them from homelessness to housed, is [00:19:00] understanding where my heart was.

Was I here for the mission or was this just another job?

Sean Clark wanna start with you. What is your why for this work? You could be repping for any other subpopulation or organization.

Why are you here with us at VA repping for Veterans who are justice-involved?

Sean Clark: I, likewise am not a Veteran, but the privilege of serving folks who have made the sacrifices that the Veterans we serve have and have given so much of themselves, selflessly, for the benefit of the rest of us is just an opportunity, a constant motivator, and an honor. That to me, is what it's about. We have the opportunity to deliver such powerful services for folks who in many cases face a lot of barriers, need a hand figuring out what the next step is.

The potential that these services, that our system, and the people who make it go can help these Veterans unlock, is just so tremendous. When you hear the success stories you hear, what's possible for a Veteran who has the right access to the right [00:20:00] tools at the right time, whether that's coming from a legal aid attorney, a social worker in our Veterans Justice Programs, a clinician and one of the other VA treatment programs that we help Veterans get access, to the possibilities are so exciting for the type of impact that those connections can have.

Shawn Liu: Madolyn I'll give you the last word. What's your why for this work?

Madolyn Gingell: Earlier on in my career, it was actually summer of 2010, I attended a social work conference and just happened to go into a session where there were two VA social workers presenting and they were from North Florida / South Georgia VA Healthcare System. And I was in awe of their passion, dedication, commitment to the work that they were doing. And just like the bigger picture of it, right? I came into social work wanting to give back, wanting to serve, but to serve those who have truly served is probably the most humbling and fulfilling thing that I could ever imagine doing.

And then just to have an opportunity to do it with such an amazing team in the Veterans Justice Programs and the Homeless Programs Office [00:21:00] is truly a privilege.

Shawn Liu: Sean Clark is the National Director of Veterans Justice Programs, and Madolyn Gingell is the National Coordinator for the Legal Services for Veterans program.

Sean, Madolyn, thank you so much for the gifts of your time.

Madolyn Gingell: Thank you.

Sean Clark: Thank you for having us. Really appreciate it.

Shawn Liu: If you want to know more about the services that VA provides to Veterans experiencing homelessness and housing instability, visit us online at www.va.gov/Homeless. And if you're a Veteran who's homeless or at risk of homelessness, reach out. Call the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at 877-424-3838. Trained counselors are standing by to help 24 hours a day, seven days a week. That number again is 877-424-3838.

That's all for this month. We hope that you found this time to be valuable and that you feel empowered in our collective work to ensure that every Veteran has a safe and stable place to call home.

Take care. [00:22:00]