

Episode #:	39
Guest:	Matthew Stimmel, PhD
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Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Welcome to the PTSD Bytes podcast, where we talk to experts about post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health and how technology like mobile mental health apps can help. This is your host, Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport, clinical psychologist at the Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD. I'm joined today by Dr. Matthew Stimmel, who is the National Training Director for the VA's Veterans Justice Programs. He's also a clinical instructor at the Stanford University School of Medicine Department of Psychiatry. Welcome Dr. Stimmel.

Dr. Matthew Stimmel:

Thanks. It's great to be here.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

What do we know about criminal justice involvement in the Veteran population? Are the rates of arrest higher among Veterans compared to civilians?

Dr. Matthew Stimmel:

Actually there's been a really positive trend. Historically that was the case. Veterans were more represented in jails and prisons, but for the last 10 years or so, the overall number of Veterans who are incarcerated is reducing, which is obviously great to see. So, they are not actually overrepresented or there aren't more Veterans in jails or prisons than there are in general community. That said, Black and American Indian or Alaska Native Veterans are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, which is similar to their civilian counterparts. And also Veterans who have other than honorable discharges are overrepresented in jails and prisons. It's important to note because for Veterans of color and LGBTQ+ Veterans, they're more likely to have received other than honorable discharges. It's not about necessarily the number of Veterans who are incarcerated but which Veterans are incarcerated that remains a really important issue to be aware of when we're trying to improve access to care for all Veterans in the legal system.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And how does having a PTSD diagnosis affect the likelihood of being involved in the criminal justice system at some point?

Dr. Matthew Stimmel:

In general, there are a lot of individuals who are incarcerated, both Veteran and non-Veterans, in the legal system who have post-traumatic stress disorder or who have trauma exposure of some kind. And PTSD-related symptoms and behaviors are also often criminalized in our society, which can lead to an increase in risk for arrests and other kinds of legal problems or legal system involvement.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

On the flip side, how does having a criminal arrest or conviction affect the likelihood of developing PTSD?

Dr. Matthew Stimmel:

There are a lot of potential trauma exposures or traumatic events that can happen to someone while they are incarcerated. For example, people often experience violence or witness violence when they're in jail or prison. People can feel the experience of racial trauma based on how they're treated by the system. I think another impact though that doesn't get spoken about quite as much and may not lead directly to having PTSD or having a PTSD diagnosis still have a really big negative impact is how someone is treated if you have to disclose, I've recently been in jail or prison, or I have an ongoing court case. In fact, things like getting a job or maintaining a job, getting an apartment or maintaining an apartment, staying close or connected to your family. When we lose those really important aspects of our lives, it creates its own sense of loss, and we can see that really having a negative impact kind of after the fact. And so, it's not just what you might experience while you're incarcerated or going through a criminal trial of some kind, it's the impact that it has later on you. I like to mention it because it can be really traumatizing and not really spoken about. If someone is listening and has had that experience, just know, we know that can happen and we want to help you feel validated and welcomed into care at the VA and we're here to support you in doing that.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

I so appreciate you talking about that time of transition because I think that is really important. And in your experience, once an arrest is made, are PTSD diagnoses taken into account during legal proceedings? I'm wondering if it makes a difference for conviction or sentencing.

Dr. Matthew Stimmel:

You know, it's interesting, I don't know overall the impact of having a PTSD diagnosis might have on those kind of very specific aspects of someone's legal system involvement or, court process in general. But what I will say, which is really exciting and encouraging to see is that more and more communities across the country are developing courts that are known as Veterans treatment courts. And basically what any kind of treatment court is, is a different path that someone is on in the system to have their case considered in the context of a substance use disorder or a mental health diagnosis, including of course PTSD. And so, Veterans treatment courts take that approach just having only Veterans on their docket. And the team that works with that court team is a collaborative team of different legal professionals including the judge, defense attorney and the prosecutor and probation. And really importantly excitedly including Veterans justice outreach specialists who work on the team to meet with Veterans, link them to care at the VA, get them connected to whatever services they needed. And what's cool about Veterans treatment courts is most of them have a Veteran mentor component. So it's not just that a Veteran has to go to treatment at the VA and then show up to court, they're often paired with a mentor from the community who served, many of whom may have had substance use issues or mental health issues in their past, many of whom may have served in combat, or other kinds of military experiences. The Veterans connected to care is brought into a family of support in the legal system, which is typically not what happens. And through that process, if they successfully complete treatment, stay out of trouble, they can get some really great legal benefits.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Are Veterans treatment courts available everywhere?

Dr. Matthew Stimmel:

There's a wide range of courts across the country in terms of charges they'll take, how many Veterans they'll accept, all sorts of different things including the benefits that they might reward Veterans with who successfully complete. But they include things like expungement of a record, dismissal of charges, avoidance of jail time or prison time, the reduction or elimination of fines. Going through court can be really expensive for Veterans and some really good benefits to going through that process. A lot of states are moving towards making that required as an option. So even if you live in a county where there's not a court, you can get access to a Veterans treatment court in a different county. Again, this varies a lot state by state. But the point is there is a lot of support even within the system that takes into account what a Veteran might be struggling with, whether it's posttraumatic stress disorder or other kinds of mental health or substance use conditions related to their service. And in addition to Veterans treatment courts, we've really been trying to move further upstream in the process, meaning we want to get to Veterans earlier, even before they're arrested so they don't even have to wind up in a Veterans treatment court. We work a lot with local law enforcement and first responders in the community to educate them about VA resources, to educate them about the kinds of symptoms that come up for Veterans who have PTSD, who have other mental health conditions or substance use disorder, to what military culture is like and what deployments can be like so that if they encounter a Veteran in the community and understand they might be at risk for PTSD, instead of arresting them and putting them in a system that often makes the problem worse, they can get them into care earlier and work with the local VA mental health services or substance use services because ultimately that's our goal, right, is to prevent contact with legal the legal system and making people go through court at all, even the Veteran's treatment court.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Yeah, I appreciate that point because prevention is so important. And I'm wondering to that end, what other resources might be available for Veterans with PTSD who have been arrested or convicted of a crime?

Dr. Matthew Stimmel:

There are Veterans justice programs or VJP specialists at every VA medical center in the country. If you or someone you know is a Veteran who's either incarcerated or going through criminal legal proceedings, please reach out to your local VA medical center and the VJP specialist will work with you to link you to appropriate care and resources either in the community or at the VA. And we really encourage anyone who thinks they could use the benefit of our program to reach out. Even if you're unsure of your eligibility status or you're not sure of how to even connect to care the VA in the first place, we'll help you in terms of accessing care. Our specialists can link you to PTSD clinical teams or the mental health clinic or substance use disorder services at the VA. We're always trying to do as much outreach as possible. We're in over 2000 jails across the country and over 1000 prisons. We work with over 700 treatment courts and we're always looking to expand that recently our program has been able to expand to helping Veterans with civil legal services. We have a program called Legal Services for Veterans where we provide grants to civil legal providers, so attorneys, lawyers in the community who want to do good free legal work for Veterans and they help with all of those kinds of issues like family law, housing law, discharge upgrades, really encourage everyone to reach out, to get connected to those services too.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

It's so fantastic to hear that VA is providing that kind of help for a wide host of problems. I'm so glad to hear that that has expanded. Switching gears a little bit though, I want to just mention since we're a

technology podcast, are there any digital mental health resources that you can recommend for Veterans or others with PTSD who are either in prison or facing criminal charges?

Dr. Matthew Stimmel:

So yeah, so there are actually a couple of tools for those who work in law enforcement or legal system. They're two very accessible and free technology tools that VA developed for community partners including legal system entities like courts, probation, jails, prisons, et cetera. And those tools can help identify Veterans who are in those systems and alert VA to the fact that the Veterans are there so that we can go and do outreach with them. The first one is called the Veterans Reentry Search Service or VRSS and that's more of the legal system entities. And it pairs information on the Veterans who are in those systems against their DOD records to see who in the jail or the prison or on the court docket may have served in the military. And the VJO specialist working with that legal system partner gets a report of those Veterans and can go out and see them. And then the second one is called Squares, which started as a way of helping homeless service providers identify if someone in the community is a Veteran and link them to VA care but can be used with other first responders like community behavioral health teams, it can be used by police departments or other law enforcement. It's another way of trying to identify Veterans because a lot of times a Veteran might not self-identify for a variety of reasons when they come into contact with a community provider or a legal system entity. And so, we know these tools improve the identification, and if we don't know Veterans there, we can go see them and help them.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Great, we'll be sure to link to those videos in our show notes.

Dr. Matthew Stimmel:

Excellent. And in general, I've also always been impressed on the individual level with VA mobile apps and so I highly recommend utilizing those including PTSD Coach. And what's great about those apps is they're available for everyone. Anyone can really benefit from them whether you have legal system involvement or not. I also really like the ACT Coach or the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Coach. If you don't have those tools, they're free to download. And I really encourage folks to do that.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Fantastic. Well, I think that's all we have time for today. Thank you so much for joining us, Dr. Stimmel.

Dr. Matthew Stimmel:

Yeah, my pleasure, it's really great to be on. Thanks for having me.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And as a reminder to our listeners, the Veterans Justice Outreach Program is open to all Veterans and operates under the VA's Homeless Program. You can learn more about this program at www.va.gov/homeless/vjo.

Dr. Andrea Jameson:

Hello, this is Andrea Jameson and I'm the executive producer of the PTSD Bytes podcast. Catch new episodes by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Show notes and more information are on our website, www.ptsd.va.gov/podcast. Thank you for joining us.