Jurisdictions that have developed child support initiatives focused on military and/or veteran families recognize military and veteran families often face challenges quite different from the typical civilian family. As a result, they have tried to reduce barriers and increase outreach to improve parent engagement and increase consistent support payments. If your jurisdiction is contemplating an initiative focused on veterans, it is important to clarify the goals of your program to decide who the best partners are, how best to conduct outreach, what barriers exist, and how to address such barriers.

Clarify the Purpose and Scope of Your Program

- Is the goal to help remove barriers that homeless veterans face to housing and employment because of their child support debt? If the scope is limited to homeless veterans, is that scope further limited to homeless veterans receiving services from the VA?

- Is the goal to assist homeless and at-risk veterans, including incarcerated veterans?

- Is the goal to provide outreach services to any veteran with child support arrears?

As noted earlier, the goal of the HHS-VA-ABA pilot sites was to remove barriers that homeless veterans face to housing and employment by reviewing their child support orders and assisting, where appropriate, with modifying their child support obligation and reducing their child support debt. The pilot sites initially targeted homeless veterans enrolled with VA specialized homeless services. By working with veterans enrolled with VA services, the sites had the assistance of a VA case manager who could follow up with the veteran. However, because many homeless veterans do not access VA services, some of the pilot sites expanded over time to serve any homeless or at-risk veteran, not just those receiving VA services.
Location and population may affect your scope. For example, there may be fewer members of any potential veteran group in a non-metropolitan area. And since they are dispersed over a broader geographical region, outreach may be more difficult. There may be fewer agencies and programs with which to partner. For such reasons, an initiative in a more rural region may want to keep the target population as broad as possible.

Agency resources will also determine your scope. If the child support agency lacks resources, it is better to narrow the scope. An agency may start with a limited scope and expand services as staff and financial resources increase.

Many of the participants in the pilot sites recommend that an agency contemplating a veteran initiative consider expanding the scope to include specialized outreach to all veterans with child support cases, not just homeless or at-risk veterans, assuming the agency has sufficient resources. By asking during intake or other communications if the parent has served in the U.S. military, the agency will begin to get a more accurate count of the number of veterans in its caseload. The motivation for expanding the scope to all veterans with child support cases is recognition of the importance of serving those who have served us. It is also an acknowledgment that, in many cases, military service or combat-related injuries may have contributed to noncompliance with support orders. Many veterans in the caseload are older veterans who have arrears-only cases. Often these arrears accrued under support orders that were never modified when it would have been appropriate to do so because of reduced income. The orders may have been established by default, using imputed rather than actual income. One pilot site partner explained why she thought it was important to expand the scope to all veterans, if resources were available, saying, “Once you turn away one person, the word gets out. And you lose your ability to reach even those in your defined scope.” Another partner said, “Word of mouth is so important to this community. You don’t want to get the reputation for turning away someone because he or she didn’t ‘fit’ the program requirements.”

“Take the Temperature” of the Community

Once you have identified your target population, identify the existing service providers. In many circumstances, it may be more appropriate for an existing service provider to be the
“gateway” to child support, rather than for the child support agency to take the lead. You may be incredibly passionate about helping homeless veterans with their child support issues. However, if veterans are not accustomed to working with the child support agency, you will be much more effective working through the agencies or legal providers with whom they already have relationships.

 Identify Partners and Involve Them in the Planning

Each of the nine pilot sites that were established through the HHS-VA-ABA collaboration initially involved the local child support agency, a legal provider, and a VA program or a veteran service provider. The level of coordination and collaboration among the three partners was sometimes complex due to the different missions of each organization and the multiple layers of programs, operations, and regulations that govern each entity. If your agency decides to follow a similar model, consider the following in choosing program partners:

- What is the mission of the partner agency?
  
  Service provider agencies may receive funds that require them to target services to a particular population.

- Is the partner agency supportive of the goals the child support agency has for the project?
  
  - Explain the services that the child support agency offers and how they can be beneficial to all parties.
  
  - The partner agency may be skeptical of the child support agency’s motivation. You must be able to give other partners assurances that the initiative is about more than increasing support collections.

- What services does the partner agency provide veterans? Do those services provide an opportunity to identify veterans with child support issues?

- Does the partner agency have staff resources to contribute to the program?

- Will the partner agency commit to a long-term collaboration, including participation in meetings, cross-trainings, and data collection?
It is important to identify partners at the early stage of program design. Make sure you have enlisted enough partners to be effective. That may mean approaching a potential partner several times. As one jurisdiction representative advised, “Rethink how to describe the partnership so that the benefit to the partner is clear. You have to be persistent in building relationships.”

Be flexible; the most effective partners will vary depending upon the locality.

Learn more about not only their services, but also any constraints they may have. For a collaboration to be effective, it is important that each partner understands the mission and services of the other partners and does not make inaccurate assumptions about the others’ level of participation. Joint ownership of the initiative during early engagement is a driver of success.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Legal Partners May Include:</strong></th>
<th><strong>VA or Veteran Service Provider Partners May Include:</strong></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Legal entity funded by Legal Services or Legal Aid</td>
<td>▪ VA Healthcare for Homeless Veterans Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Legal clinic for homeless individuals</td>
<td>▪ VA Grant and Per Diem Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Legal arm of veteran service provider</td>
<td>▪ HUD-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Local law school clinic, especially one focusing on veterans or service members</td>
<td>▪ Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ State or local bar association providing legal assistance to military personnel (LAMP)</td>
<td>▪ VA Health Care for Re-Entry Veterans (HCRV) Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Network of <em>pro bono</em> attorneys</td>
<td>▪ VA Social Workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Local State’s Attorney’s Office or Attorney General’s Office</td>
<td>▪ Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: VISN staff are leadership partners who can help develop local partnerships between child support and VA medical centers under the leadership of the VISN.

Consider adding an evaluation partner to measure the program outcomes. That partner could include a local university or a partnership with research graduate students.
More information is provided in Section 14, “Legal Partner” and Section 15, “U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and Veteran Service Provider Partners.”

**Determine Whether Any of the Partnerships Need a Formal Memorandum of Understanding**

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) is a formal agreement between two or more parties. Child support agencies often use MOUs to establish partnerships with other government agencies or public bodies. They are a way for agencies to outline terms and details of an understanding between the parties, including responsibilities, without a legally binding obligation.

In Massachusetts, one aspect of the pilot operated pursuant to an MOU between the child support agency and the VA Compensated Work Therapy Program. The other pilot sites did not use formal MOUs. Be aware that execution of an MOU involving a federal agency or program can be a very lengthy process because the state and the federal government may have different requirements. Although Massachusetts was able to complete negotiations between VA and state lawyers in less than six months, other jurisdictions in different contexts have reported that the MOU route derailed their projects altogether because of the length of time it took to get concurrence.

**Establish Relationships with Stakeholders**

Ensure that other stakeholders who interact with veterans know about the initiative. Such stakeholders include public agencies, such as:

- The State Workforce Commission, especially any veteran initiative within the Commission
- State Veterans Commission
- County Veterans Affairs offices
- Mayor’s Veterans Task Force
- Local Housing Authority
The Department of Motor Vehicles or similar entity that issues driver’s licenses

Local courts

County-run Domestic Relations offices or court facilitators

It is also important to establish relationships with nonprofit groups, faith-based organizations, and community-based organizations — such as the Salvation Army, Catholic Charities, and United Way — dispute resolution centers, and veteran advocacy centers or service providers. Inform local colleges and technical schools about the initiative; many veterans take advantage of the educational benefits available to them and the school can serve as a referral source.

Stakeholders should also include providers of legal assistance. Legal assistance is available to all active duty members of the Armed Forces, through offices of the Judge Advocate General or installation military legal assistance offices. Most legal assistance offices will extend that eligibility to reservists and many will extend eligibility to retirees; it depends on the local installation and available legal resources. Reserve and Guard personnel may look to their local command for legal support. Keep in mind that non-retired veterans (those who served for less than 20 years and do not have a medical discharge) are not eligible for military legal assistance provided through offices of the Judge Advocate General or through installation military legal assistance offices. To help serve this part of the veteran population, inform the state and local bar about the veteran initiative, especially bar sections related to family law, military personnel, and access to justice. Other legal stakeholders may include legal services entities, self-help legal organizations, and public service law clinics.

Identify Champions

Securing the buy-in of a judge, prosecutor, or well-known community advocate can help pull needed partners together to ensure veterans are connected to the right resources, including child support.

Tools and Training Resources
4. COMMUNICATION AMONG PARTNERS

Communication among project partners is a priority in an effective collaboration.

Establish a Communication Plan with Partners

☐ Make sure each partner designates a central point of contact for the project.

☐ Hold regular periodic meetings among the partners.

Each of the partners at the HHS-VA-ABA pilot sites stressed the importance of regular, in-person meetings. The meetings provide the partners with an opportunity to share each of their program’s goals, develop a shared mission, identify successes and barriers to the initiatives, and brainstorm about ways to improve services for veterans. Several pilot sites noted that there were many meetings during project initiation, but then the meetings stopped or became infrequent. They stressed the importance of holding regular partner meetings throughout the project.

Partner meetings should include a discussion of:

- Effective project outreach
- Referral procedures
- Barriers or needed improvements
- Strategies to address barriers so that the project partners are providing the most effective services
- Outcomes of partner referrals

Many of the VA/veteran service provider partners and legal partners in the pilot sites expressed frustration that they did not receive much information about the result of their referrals to child support. Confidentiality concerns were not to blame; most of the sites had developed forms for the veteran to sign, authorizing the exchange of case-specific information among the partners. Even if the child support agency was not able to provide results in specific cases, the partners would have liked ongoing information about such
things as how many orders were modified, the average amount of the modification, how many driver’s licenses were reinstated, how many cases were closed, and how much state arrearage was forgiven or written off.

- Share success stories to help keep partners engaged
- Develop a process for quarterly reports that track agreed-upon metrics and note referral outcomes

For more information, see Section 16, “Outcome Measures.”

**Conduct Training among Partners**

Initial training should focus on each partner’s role in the collaboration, as well as the services provided by each partner. Such training will help ensure accurate information about what a partner can and cannot do, and will result in more appropriate referrals.

It is important for the child support agency to provide education to legal and veteran partners about family-centered services offered by the agency to correct any misperception that the child support program is limited to punitive measures.

In addition to initial training, ongoing training is important because of staff turnover. In stressing the importance of ongoing training among partners, the pilot sites emphasized that training should not simply focus on understanding each other’s programs, but also on learning how to engage effectively each other’s programs.

When conducting internal training for staff or volunteers, make sure they are aware that homeless or at-risk veterans who need child support assistance can be any age and come from any service era. Their children may still be minors or may now be adults. Child support agencies need to develop a multi-generational approach to ensure comprehensive services.

For more information on training, see Section 10, “Child Support Agency – Training.”

**Tools and Training Resources**