5. CHILD SUPPORT AGENCY – STAFFING THE VETERAN INITIATIVE

In all of the HHS-VA-ABA pilot sites, the child support agency played a critical role since the goal of the collaboration was to help remove barriers that homeless veterans face to housing and employment by addressing their child support issues. If your jurisdiction is considering a veteran initiative, the staffing arrangement will depend upon resources available, as well as the level of involvement of other partners. At a minimum, name a dedicated project coordinator/manager to lead the initiative. Effective veteran outreach requires more time and attention than is possible if the initiative is simply an additional duty within the person’s workload.

**Project Coordinator/Manager**

For the agency, it’s not just a question of, “Are we going to do this?” It’s also a question of, “How do we do this the right way?” Identifying the right person to take the lead is a crucial first step.

Military experience is desirable, but not essential. Less than 7 percent of the population serves in the military, so it may not be possible to select someone with a military background as project coordinator. If the coordinator has not served in the military, it is helpful for the coordinator to have some connection with the military through family members or friends who have served.

The quality that every pilot site identified as key for filling this role was passion: It is important to have a project coordinator who is passionate about helping veterans and willing to go the extra mile.
Select someone who has a long-term commitment to working with veterans. As a staff person from one pilot site noted, you need someone who has “staying power.” Equally essential, the coordinator has to be honest and not overpromise outcomes.

The coordinator needs to understand how to work with other government agencies and community service providers. It is also important for the project coordinator to be familiar with the child support program, and know whom to contact within the agency for needed policy clearances.

The coordinator should be the one point of contact for project partners, providing case-specific information for the veteran cases. This resolves the problem of partners having to interact with numerous different caseworkers. That means there may need to be flexibility in agency rules regarding “case ownership.”

**Other Staff Positions Recommended By Pilot Sites**

The child support agencies at most of the pilot sites lacked resources to staff the project with anyone other than the project coordinator. If a child support agency has the resources for more expansive staffing, the pilot sites recommend the following additional positions:

- **Case Manager/Navigator**

  Having a case manager or case navigator will help ensure that the veteran does not get lost during the process. A case manager or navigator follows up to make sure the veteran understands what forms or documents are needed, helps with completion of forms if needed, explains what to expect in proceedings, and helps address any barriers the veteran may face such as transportation. Such assistance is often critical when working with homeless or at-risk veterans. Having a military background helps, but is not essential. The most important requirement is a commitment to helping veterans. If the child support agency lacks resources to provide a case manager/navigator, see if one of the project partners can designate someone to fulfill this role.
Outreach Coordinator

According to one partner, the overwhelming need in a child support veteran initiative is outreach — ensuring that both veterans and veteran service providers are aware of how the child support agency can help veterans address outstanding child support issues that may be creating barriers to obtaining housing or employment.

Administrative Support

Most of the pilot sites lacked an administrative person to assist the project coordinator. As a result, it was difficult to track referrals and outcomes. The pilot sites recommend that the project coordinator have administrative support, even if that staff person has shared duties.

Other Models for Staff Positions

Each child support agency starting a veteran initiative will need to determine staff allocation based on resources and caseload. For example, in some jurisdictions, the veteran team does not carry a caseload but assists the caseworker assigned to the case. In other jurisdictions, there is one or more child support professionals specifically assigned to veteran cases. The examples from the two jurisdictions below highlight different ways to use staff resources effectively:

Texas

The Texas Attorney General’s HEROES project began under a federal 1115 grant and is coordinated through the Child Support Division in the Office of the Attorney General.

During the grant period, the team included a project manager plus three dedicated HEROES assistant attorneys general. After the grant ended, the attorneys moved under the Child Support Division’s Field Operations structure, with each attorney responsible for continuing project management duties (logistics and networking). HEROES Assistant Attorneys General are located in San Antonio, Temple/Killen, and El Paso, but serve as a resource to the entire Child Support Division. The HEROES Project has a telephone hotline number and maintains an email address (heroes@oag.texas.gov). Project coordination continues to be based out of Field Operations in the central State Office in Austin.
Washington

In addition to the Seattle pilot site, the Washington State Division of Child Support has eight field offices throughout the state with a designated veteran/military case manager liaison(s) in each office. These 13 experienced support enforcement officers are a resource to the military and veteran community and help them access child support services. If case issues are not getting resolved, these liaisons can intervene and troubleshoot.
6. CHILD SUPPORT AGENCY – GETTING STARTED

Keep in mind that the scope of the child support agency’s veteran initiative should depend, in large part, on available resources. It is better to start small and expand later, than to overpromise. At any scale, however, certain initial steps are key.

Identify Veteran Status

Identification of veteran status can be difficult. Veteran parents rarely self-identify.

☐ Ask custodial and noncustodial parents if they have ever served in the U.S. military, as part of your intake or interview.

Do not ask, “Are you a veteran?” The word “veteran” has different meanings for different individuals, even for federal and state government programs. For example, a person may not self-identify as a veteran because the person did not receive an honorable discharge, or is not receiving VA services, or did not serve in combat.

☐ Use resources offered by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement that disclose the receipt of veterans benefits to help identify a parent’s veteran status. Such resources can also identify active duty service members.

- Federal Parent Locate Service
- State Services Portal

Be aware that the Department of Defense (DoD) does not notify the Department of Veterans Affairs when a member separates from service. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will only have information about veterans who seek assistance from the VA or apply for VA benefits.
Toolkit: Child Support Collaborations to Engage and Assist Veterans

- Develop a procedure for identifying veterans and service members in your statewide system.
  - If you can identify veterans, you can be more proactive about providing information and services.
  - If you can identify active duty status, you can be more proactive about providing information about modification services that may be helpful when the service member deploys or separates from the service.

Learn About Your Target Population

- Military Families

  Because the United States has an all-volunteer military, many civilians are unfamiliar with military culture in general. A basic knowledge of the values, structure, acronyms, and expectations of the military can improve the interaction between child support staff and service members and veterans. An excellent resource is A Support and Resource Guide for Working with Military Families, published by the National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ofa/msp.pdf.

  Military experience varies greatly from service member to service member. The types of jobs and levels of responsibilities a veteran may have had while in the military will be based in part on whether the person was enlisted personnel, a non-commissioned officer, or a commissioned officer. Many service members, reservists, and National Guardsmen have deployed overseas; some may never deploy overseas. Many veterans have experienced combat; other veterans have not.

  Although most veterans transition well into civilian life, a small percentage does not. For those who do not, an understanding of the veteran’s military experience and possible transition difficulties can help inform a caseworker’s interaction with the veteran.

- Veterans Suffering from PTSD, TBI, or Depression

  Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a mental health problem that can occur after someone goes through a traumatic event like war, an assault, an accident, or a disaster.
The number of veterans with PTSD varies by service era. According to the National Center for PTSD, Department of Veterans Affairs:

- **Operations Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Enduring Freedom (OEF):** About 11 to 20 out of every 100 veterans (or between 11 and 20 percent) who served in OIF or OEF have PTSD in any given year.

- **Gulf War (Desert Storm):** About 12 out of every 100 Gulf War veterans (or 12 percent) have PTSD in any given year.

- **Vietnam War:** About 15 out of every 100 Vietnam Veterans (or 15 percent) were currently diagnosed with PTSD at the time of the most recent study in the late 1980s, the National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study (NVVRS). It is estimated that about 30 out of every 100 (or 30 percent) of Vietnam veterans have had PTSD in their lifetime.

Another cause of PTSD in the military is military sexual trauma (MST). This is any sexual harassment or sexual assault that occurs while the person was in the military. MST can happen to both men and women and can occur during peacetime, training, or war. Among veterans who use VA health care, about:

- 1 in 4 women and 1 in 100 men, when screened by their VA provider, responded “yes” to having experienced MST.⁷

- 23 out of 100 women reported sexual assault while in the military.

- 55 out of 100 women and 38 out of 100 men (or 38 percent) have experienced sexual harassment while in the military.

Veterans may also suffer from a Traumatic Brain Injury. The DoD and the VA, by consensus, have defined traumatic brain injury (TBI) as any traumatically induced structural injury and/or physiological disruption of brain function as a result of an external force that is indicated by new onset or worsening of at least one of the following clinical signs, immediately following the event:
- Any period of loss or a decreased level of consciousness
- Any loss of memory for events immediately before or after the injury
- Any alteration in mental state at the time of the injury (such as confusion, disorientation, slowed thinking)
- Neurological deficits that may or may not be transient
- Intracranial lesion

For a veteran suffering from PTSD or a TBI, it may be difficult to follow through on detailed instructions about completing child support forms and bringing supporting documents. The veteran may also have trouble successfully navigating the IV-D child support system or court system.

- Homeless Veterans

Data collected during the annual Point-in-Time Count in January 2016 revealed that fewer than 40,000 veterans in America were experiencing homelessness; 33 percent of those veterans were on the street rather than in sheltered locations. This number of homeless veterans represents a decline of 47 percent (or nearly 35,000 people) since 2010. Although the decrease is good news, thousands of veterans remain without shelter today.

If your program targets homeless veterans, you need to understand the dynamics of individuals who live in the shadows — whether or not that isolation is by choice. Child support workers need to understand that the veterans may be drug dependent. They may have alienated their relatives. A child support attorney at one pilot site explained, “It’s like an onion. You have to take the time to peel back the layers.” Many at-risk veterans, especially homeless veterans, cannot present issues to a caseworker in a well-organized, concise manner. It may take a while before the homeless veteran will tell you all of his or her child support or family issues. Building trust is fundamental. The veteran has to believe that you are sincere in wanting to help meet his or her needs as well as those of the veteran’s children.
Additional Information

General Information about Working with Service Members and Veterans

A Support and Resource Guide for Working with Military Families
This guide is designed to help service providers and other stakeholders integrate healthy marriage and relationship education into their services for military service members and their families.

Source: National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families

Veterans and Military Families
This page of the SAMHSA website lists a number of resources on veterans and military families.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Information about PTSD and TBI

National Center for PTSD
The National Center for PTSD is dedicated to research and education on trauma and PTSD and works to assure that the latest research findings help those exposed to trauma.

Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration

This monograph presents the findings of RAND’s comprehensive study of post-deployment health-related needs associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, major depression, and traumatic brain injury among veterans of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Source: RAND Center for Military Health Policy Research

This report presents statistics regarding U.S. military and civilian casualties in the active missions Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS, Afghanistan) and Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR, Iraq and Syria), as well as operations that have ended, Operation New Dawn (OND, Iraq), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF, Iraq), and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF, Afghanistan).

Source: Congressional Research Service
**Traumatic Brain Injury (2010)**

This independent study course was produced by the VA Employee Education System and presents an overview of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) issues that primary care practitioners may encounter when providing care to veterans and active duty military personnel.

**Source:** U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration

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**Information about Homeless Veterans**


This report outlines the key findings of the 2016 Point-In-Time count and Housing Inventory Count conducted in January 2016. It provides 2016 national, state, and local level estimates of homelessness, as well as estimates of chronically homeless persons, homeless veterans, and homeless children and youth.

**Source:** U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

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**Ending Veteran Homelessness**

This website describes the VA’s efforts to end homelessness among veterans.

**Source:** The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

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**Homeless Incidence and Risk Factors for Becoming Homeless in Veterans (2012)**

The VA Office of Inspector General Office of Healthcare Inspections conducted this study to estimate incidences of becoming homeless (the newly homeless) after military separation, identify risk factors for veterans becoming homeless, and describe utilization of VA-specific homeless services by homeless veterans.

**Source:** U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of the Inspector General

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**National Coalition for Homeless Veterans**

NCHV is the resource and technical assistance center for a national network of community-based service providers and local, state and federal agencies that provide emergency and supportive housing, food, health services, job training and placement assistance, legal aid, and case management support for homeless veterans.

**Source:** The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans
Veterans and Homelessness (2015)
This report discusses a range of issues related to homeless veterans, including attempts to estimate the number of veterans who are homeless, the demographic characteristics of homeless veterans, overrepresentation of both male and female veterans in the homeless population, and federal programs and initiatives to address homelessness among veterans.

Source: Congressional Research Service

Tools and Training Resources
Accurately Inform the Veteran about Child Support Services

The Child Support Program cannot offer the veteran release from an order to pay support. However, the agency can review the case and help explore options with the veteran. This is an opportunity to help the veteran understand that ignoring a child support problem will not make it go away.

One pilot site participant said, “I tell the veteran, ‘This is not about that big arrearage number.’ For a homeless or at-risk veteran, that number can be overwhelming. Rather, I tell the veteran, ‘Let’s see what we can do.’”

Child support agencies can find ways to work with the veteran by asking questions. Can the agency temporarily restore a driver’s license so that the veteran can get a job and establish a payment plan? Is the veteran eligible for any arrears management program the state may have? Can the agency and veteran establish a payment plan so the veteran’s professional license can be restored?

Make Sure the Child Support Agency Supports the Mission

Child support offices need to ensure that all staff who may receive a referral are thoroughly trained on veterans’ issues and understand the project’s mission. Any entry point for the veteran needs to be an effective provider of services.

IMPORTANT!

Make Sure Your Reach Does Not Exceed Your Capacity to Deliver

- **Credibility** is critical with homeless and at-risk veterans, who are often distrustful of the government.
- When you consider starting a veteran initiative, **make sure** you have considered whether and how it **can be sustained**.
- Establish an **incremental** project.
- Don’t promise something you cannot **deliver**. If you overpromise, word will spread quickly within the veteran community. For example, be realistic about what options your state offers for arrears management.
- If you offer legal clinics, make sure they are held **consistently**.
Establish Trust with Agencies/People Already Serving Veterans

Veterans often trust those with whom they already have established relationships, such as their VA counselors, VA social workers, veteran advocates, and veteran service providers. It is critical that the child support agency build partnerships with these individuals, establish credibility about the goal of the child support initiative, and gain their trust. Creating such partnerships can help increase referrals for veterans to child support agencies.
8. CHILD SUPPORT AGENCY – CONDUCTING OUTREACH

A child support agency developing a veteran initiative needs to include an outreach plan and outreach activities in its program to find eligible veterans within the targeted population. The outreach plan needs to include a combination of strategies:

1. Seeking referrals from other public and private agencies that have contact with the target population;

2. Establishing visibility at community events that may be attended by the target population; and

3. Coordinating with other outreach programs in the community.

Conduct Outreach Based on Your Target Audience

☐ Homeless Veterans

If you are focusing on homeless veterans with child support issues:

- Make sure that not only VA homeless coordinators, mental health workers, and social workers know about the initiative, but also VA medical centers and non-VA providers of services to the homeless. The latter includes: homeless shelters, private service providers like the Salvation Army, the faith-based community, and legal service providers serving low-income individuals and the homeless. Homeless veterans are usually not going to see a newspaper article about the latest child support initiative. To increase the number of homeless veterans you serve, you need to seek referrals from groups that already provide services to homeless veterans.

- Establish visibility at events homeless veterans attend, such as Stand Down events. Additional information about Stand Down events is in Section 13, “Child Support Agency – Participating in Stand Down Events.”
Establish visibility at events focused on homeless individuals, such as Project Homeless Connect and Homeless Resource Days, which many cities host. These are events that connect those in need with appropriate providers and hard-to-access resources — all in one place at one time.

Coordinate with other outreach programs in the community that target homeless or at-risk individuals.

25 Cities Initiative
In March 2014, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs launched the 25 Cities Initiative to help communities with high concentrations of homeless veterans to intensify and integrate their local efforts to end veteran homelessness. This was a joint effort by VA, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, and local community partners (city government, housing authorities, community providers) to identify by name all of the remaining homeless veterans in their respective communities and work together to find permanent housing solutions for these veterans and chronically homeless individuals. The initiative concluded in September 2016, with an overall 22 percent reduction in veteran homelessness in those 25 cities. If your city was one of the designated cities, explore whether the participating agencies are interested in partnering with the child support agency to continue the important work of removing barriers to housing. For example, if an identified homeless veteran has a child support case with outstanding arrears that are affecting his or her ability to obtain housing or employment, the agency can help the veteran by reviewing the case if the order was issued locally or by making an appropriate referral if it is an interstate case.

Homeless Continuum of Care
A Continuum of Care is a regional or local planning body that coordinates housing and services funding for homeless families and individuals. Every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and Guam have Continuums of Care. According to HUD, a Continuum of Care (CoC) “includes action steps to end homelessness and prevent a return to homelessness.” Outreach is one of the necessary elements of a continuum. A child support agency may want to present information
at a CoC monthly meeting about the impact of child support debt on a person’s ability to obtain permanent housing.

- **State or Local Interagency Task Force on Homelessness**
  Child support agencies are encouraged to establish a relationship with their state or local Interagency Task Force because of the impact child support debt can have on a person’s ability to obtain housing or employment. The federal government has established such relationships at the federal level. The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) is an independent agency within the federal executive branch, composed of the heads of 19 federal departments and agencies. USICH partners with these 19 agencies, state and local governments, advocates, service providers, and people experiencing homelessness to achieve the goals outlined in the first federal strategic plan to prevent and end homelessness, *Opening Doors*. For more information, visit [http://usich.gov/about_us/](http://usich.gov/about_us/).

- **Incarcerated Veterans**
  If you are focusing on incarcerated veterans with child support issues:
  - Work with the VA Health Care for Re-Entry Veterans Program to ensure that child support issues are addressed in a veteran’s re-entry plan.
  - Make sure that your local VA Veteran Justice Outreach program knows about the initiative so that, where appropriate, VJO representatives can refer veterans facing criminal charges to the child support agency to proactively address their child support issues. VJO representatives can also serve as resources to the child support agency when a veteran has mental health or substance abuse issues.
  - Establish visibility at correctional facilities by providing information on child support services, including on-site information sessions.

- **All Veterans**
  If your scope expands to all veterans with child support issues, you need to have a broader outreach strategy.
Go directly to veterans.
- Consider outreach through public service announcements.
- Participate in radio interviews.
- Post information at local colleges and educational institutions.
- Develop an outreach strategy for younger veterans, like those who served in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). An outreach strategy for these veterans will have components that differ from those for older veterans, such as Vietnam-era veterans.
- Develop an outreach strategy for women veterans.
- As part of your outreach, explain to veterans how working with the child support agency can help them positively address their child support issues.

Seek referrals from other public and private agencies that serve veterans, including:
- VA social and mental health workers
- State Department of Veterans Affairs and County Veterans Services Offices
- Veterans Service Organizations
  For a list of veteran service organizations, visit [http://www.va.gov/vso/](http://www.va.gov/vso/).
- VA liaisons at colleges and educational institutions

Establish visibility at local community events that are targeted toward veterans.

Participate in legal clinics targeted to veterans.
- Information about legal clinics is provided in Section 12, “Child Support Agency – Participating in Legal Clinics.”

Coordinate with other Outreach Programs in the community.
- Place information in the State Veterans Affairs newsletter, which goes out to all veteran service providers.
- Develop an outreach and referral plan with state Department of Veterans Affairs and county Veterans Services Offices.
- Participate in any local Veteran Service Provider Consortium.
- Participate in Task Forces and Work Groups that focus on veterans. Increasingly there are Mayor’s Task Forces and other regional work groups focusing on veterans, as well as city/county initiatives to address homeless
veterans. It is important for child support to be at the table in developing these types of initiatives.

**Provide Child Support Information to VA Programs and Veteran Service Providers, Including Homeless Shelters and Legal Providers Who May Interact with Veterans**

Get to know their mission. In many cases, addressing child support issues benefits the veteran parent while also upholding the organization’s or program’s mission. You will also be in a better position to appropriately refer veterans and their families to the ancillary services they need. These services may include assistance with employment or substance abuse, which is outside of the child support program’s direct services but may be related to the veterans’ difficulties in meeting their support obligations.

**Develop an Outreach Plan That Includes Entities Providing Services to Low-Income Individuals**

For example, if the county law library provides services to low-income individuals by helping them draft documents for court, library staff should know about your program. There may be legal referral entities that provide free or reduced fee legal services to low-income individuals. In other areas there may be a calling center that provides free legal counsel for low-income individuals. In the pilot site of Cook County, Illinois, the Coordinated Advice and Referral Program for Legal Services (CARPLS) provides free legal counsel for low-income residents.¹⁰ Call center staff can be a source of referrals or an avenue for outreach if they know about program services for veterans.

**Ensure Your State and Federal Legislators Know about Your Program**

Most offices have a staff person who deals with veterans issues. If that person is aware of your program, he or she can refer constituents to the project for assistance with child support issues.
Ask Each Program Partner to Assist with Outreach

“As a member of the Outreach Unit, I began to look for ways to connect with, and help, local veterans with child support issues. An internet search led me to the Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. I asked for a meeting, and within a month our collaboration began with a monthly child support workshop at the San Francisco VA Downtown Clinic. The child support workshop at the VA Downtown Clinic takes place on the third Thursday of each month. The VA helps advertise the workshop by sending out announcements to VA staff, who then tell their clients and patients about it.”

-- C. Sachs, Child Support Professional, Outreach Team, San Francisco Department of Child Support Services

Conduct Outreach to Active Military

☐ Provide child support information to military installations in the area.

Although your initiative may be focused on veterans, it is important to be proactive and reach service members before they separate. In the military, “separation” means that the service member is leaving active duty. It typically occurs when someone reaches the date of his or her Expiration of Term of Service (ETS). However, the service member may still have a military reserve obligation. A separating service member may need his or her support order modified if there is a change in income.

A service member must complete a mandatory pre-separation counseling no fewer than 90 days before separation. However, a service member is authorized to begin pre-separation counseling up to 12 months before his or her separation date. The Transition Assistance Program provides information about medical insurance, relocation assistance, separation pay, reserve affiliation, life insurance, VA benefits, and unemployment insurance. Depending upon the branch of service, there may also be a mandatory employment workshop.

Because of the amount of information a service member receives during the six months prior to separation, it is important for the child support agency to establish an ongoing relationship with installations in the surrounding area. If service members are aware of
the importance of notifying the child support agency about their current address and of any change in income affecting their ability to pay support, they are more likely to reach out to the child support agency when they need assistance.

On the military base, there are a number of offices and individuals who frequently interact with service members. It is important for them to be familiar with the child support program. Such offices include:

- Judge Advocate General/Legal Assistance office
- Military and Family Life Counselors
- Military Family Advocacy Program, including a branch’s Community Service Program and Family Readiness Center
- Military Family Readiness Programs
- Air Force Integrated Delivery System
- Domestic Violence Unit
- Social workers on base/post

Provide Child Support Information to Activated National Guardsmen and Reservists

Proactive outreach ensures that National Guardsmen and Reservists know how to contact the child support agency and helps them understand the importance of seeking timely modification of their support orders, when appropriate. If they know to seek a modification when their incomes change, they are less likely to accrue arrears.

- Participate in Yellow Ribbon Reintegration pre-deployment and 30-day reintegration briefing events.

Join Your State Finance Alliance, a Group Facilitated by Army OneSource

Army OneSource created state-level alliances to improve services and support for service members, veterans, and their families. Alliance members are state agencies and
associations, educational institutions, and first responders. They provide education, prevention workshops, and resources that establish lifelong responsible financial behavior. As an agency that promotes personal and family responsibility, it is appropriate for a child support agency to provide information on child support obligations.

**Additional Information**

*Child Support Fact Sheet Series, No. 8: Military Services and Child Support Partnerships (2011)*

This fact sheet focuses on how the child support program and military and veterans organizations can work together to help parents who serve our country meet their responsibilities to their children and be the parents they want to be.

**Source:** Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement

*Dear Colleague Letter, DCL-13-25: Assisting Veterans in the Child Support Caseload (Nov. 2013)*

This Dear Colleague Letter discusses how child support agencies can help military families as they transition to civilian life and can assist older veterans who may have large child support debt. It also highlights resources that child support agencies may find useful.

**Source:** Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement

*Northwest Justice Project - Veterans*

The Northwest Justice Project (NJP), Washington’s publicly funded statewide legal aid program, provides free legal help to eligible low-income persons and groups facing certain types of civil legal problems including child support. This page of the website describes free legal information available to veterans, as well as links to additional resources.

**Source:** Northwest Justice Project

**Tools and Training Resources**
9. **CHILD SUPPORT AGENCY – PROVIDING SERVICES**

A jurisdiction’s laws will impact the services that a child support agency offers veterans. A collaborative project will also be governed by partner policies and procedures. In addition to recommendations already discussed, the following are suggestions that the HHS-VA-ABA pilot sites and other jurisdictions with military/veteran initiatives offer as promising practices:

**Identify Who Is Already Providing Services to Veterans, in Addition to the Program Partners**

- Provide education to service providers regarding child support services.

**Make the Process as Accessible as Possible**

- How will you reach veterans who do not have access to the internet?

- Are telephone hearings possible for homeless veterans who lack funds to travel to a hearing or for veterans who suffer from a disability that affects their mobility?

- Can you provide services on-site at a VA facility or homeless shelter?
  - If homeless veterans are your target population, follow-up will rarely happen if they have to get on a bus or subway to come to your office.
  - Pursuant to a 2011 VA directive, a number of VA facilities now host non-VA legal service providers. Ask the VA facility in your area if it will allow you to hold a child support clinic in conjunction with a legal partner.
  - Shelters often have mandatory meetings for their residents. If the goal is to ensure the residents receive basic child support information, ask if the shelter will allow agency representatives to speak in conjunction with a mandatory meeting.
Include Information on the State Child Support Agency Website That Is Specific to Service Members and Veterans

- Highlight procedures for the modification of a support order.
- Include links to federal and state agencies that provide services to veterans or the military community.
- Include information that helps veterans locate employment and educational opportunities.
- Include links to existing resource material that informs veterans of federal and state benefits to which they are entitled, depending on their veteran status.

Develop Brochures or Checklists Specific to Child Support Services That May Be of the Most Interest to Veterans

- Include information about modification, arrears management, reinstatement of driver’s license, employment, and financial counseling.
- Keep materials simple.
- Use plain language.¹¹
- From the agency website, provide a link to any brochure or other material targeted to service members and veterans.

Proactively Review Any Case Involving a Veteran to Determine Whether It May Be Appropriate to Adjust the Order to Reflect the Veteran’s Current Financial Circumstances

A review is particularly important if the veteran was recently separated from service or is receiving disability compensation.
Be Proactive with Active Duty Service Members in the Caseload

If service members understand the importance of modifying their orders when their incomes change, they are less likely to accrue large arrears.

Join the Veteran and Military Liaison Network by Contacting OCSE

In 2012, OCSE helped coordinate a veteran/military liaison network, which continues to hold quarterly calls and communicate online about complex issues. The network is open to federal, state, tribal, and local child support professionals interested in collaborating to improve services to military and veteran families.

Learn About Employment Programs and Services Offered by Federal Agencies

In addition to local employment resources, a number of federal agencies, such as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and U.S. Department of Labor, offer employment programs and services.

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Make Referrals to Veteran Agencies for Mental and Physical Health Services, if Appropriate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
<th>Link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department of Veterans Affairs</td>
<td><a href="http://www.va.gov/">http://www.va.gov/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Veterans Justice Outreach</td>
<td><a href="http://www.va.gov/homeless/vjo.asp">http://www.va.gov/homeless/vjo.asp</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Veterans Health Administration</td>
<td><a href="http://www.va.gov/directory/guide/division.asp?dnum=1">http://www.va.gov/directory/guide/division.asp?dnum=1</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Mental Health</td>
<td><a href="http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/">http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Center for PTSD</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ptsd.va.gov/">http://www.ptsd.va.gov/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State/Territory Department of Veterans Affairs Offices</td>
<td><a href="http://www.va.gov/statedva.htm">http://www.va.gov/statedva.htm</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Be Willing to Address Family Issues That May Arise

As a homeless or at-risk veteran becomes more willing to address child support issues, the veteran may also become more connected with his or her family. As a result, one or both parents may seek information related to parenting time. A veteran may also seek information about fatherhood programs. It is important to communicate with the custodial parent, as well as the veteran obligor. The communication may be about arrears that the veteran owes the custodial parent, and whether the parent is open to arrears management. The child support agency will also want to communicate with the custodial parent regarding any request for a modification of the support amount, to see if the parties can reach an agreement. Such communication would be in addition to service of process requirements.

Explore the Development of a Veterans Child Support Court or Collaboration with Any Veteran Treatment Court in Your Area

For information, see Section 13, “Child Support Agency – Participating in Stand Down Events” and Section 17, “Legislative and Court Reform.”
Additional Information


In honor of Veterans Day, this Dear Colleague Letter offers promising practices and resources that child support agencies can use to better serve veterans and their families, who have sacrificed so much for all of us.

Source: Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement

Tools and Training Resources
10. CHILD SUPPORT AGENCY – TRAINING

Provide Information about the Project’s Mission to Child Support Caseworkers

The project coordinator should be the single point of contact for project partners. However, the coordinator will need to work with child support caseworkers throughout the county or state, or within the tribal child support program. They need to have information about the project’s mission.

Provide Information about Women Veterans

According to an October 2016 Department of Veterans Affairs Fact Sheet, the population of women veterans numbered 2,051,484, or approximately 10 percent of the total veteran population in the United States, Puerto Rico, and Territories/Foreign. If caseworkers have such information, they are less likely to make faulty assumptions. As one pilot site coordinator noted, “The moment a staff person assumes that the female in a couple attending a legal clinic or participating in project outreach is the girlfriend, not the veteran, is the moment the agency loses credibility with that veteran.”

Educate Project Staff about Homelessness

If project services are focused on homeless veterans:

- Educate staff on what it means to be “homeless.” It does not necessarily mean the veteran is living on the streets. For example, he or she could be couch surfing among friends or relatives. The fact that the veteran provides a sibling’s address does not mean he or she is living there consistently. The federal definition of a homeless person in 42 U.S.C. § 113202(a) includes:
  - A person who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence
  - A person with a primary nighttime residence that is not ordinarily used as a regular sleeping place, such as a car
A person living in a supervised shelter meant to be temporary

A person who will imminently lose housing, has no subsequent residence identified, and lacks resources or support networks to get permanent housing

Federal, state, and local efforts to address veteran homelessness are having positive results. Since 2010, data collected during the annual Point-in-Time Count shows a progressive decline in the number of homeless veterans.\(^{13}\)

Many homeless veterans suffer from mental illness or PTSD. Staff need to understand that the person’s emotional or mental state may affect how the person interacts during interviews or responds to directions.

Because homeless veterans are transient and often mistrustful, emphasize to staff the opportunity to provide a positive interaction. One message could be: “You have one opportunity to serve this veteran. It’s important that you provide the veteran with the information that he or she needs and that the veteran perceives you as credible.”

**Educate Agency Staff about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)**

Child support workers do not have the expertise, and are not expected, to diagnose someone with PTSD. The purpose of training staff about PTSD and TBI is to help them understand that when they are interacting with someone who is exhibiting certain behaviors, those behaviors may be the result of PTSD, rather than the actions of a person who is angry at the caseworker. A psychologist at a local VA facility may be an excellent resource to present on this topic. See Additional Information in Section 6, “Child Support Agency – Getting Started.”

**Educate Agency Staff about VA Programs**

See Section 15, “U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Veteran Service Provider Partners.”
Provide Training on Federal and State Benefits Available to Veterans

☐ Ensure that child support personnel are sufficiently familiar with various veterans benefits.

☐ Ensure that the child support agency has consistent instructions available about how child support guidelines treat veterans benefits.

Educate Partners about How the Child Support Program Can Assist a Veteran with Child Support Issues

Inform partners about family-centered services offered by the agency.

Conduct Joint Training with Partners

As an example, in 2014, the Washington State Division of Child Support brought together all of the military and veteran liaisons from its nine field offices for a first-ever symposium and training. The two-day symposium provided a wonderful opportunity for the child support agency to not only strategize about how to deliver services most effectively, but also to conduct cross-training with its legal partner.

Additional Information

General Information about Working with Service Members and Veterans

A Support and Resource Guide for Working with Military Families

This guide is designed to help service providers and other stakeholders integrate healthy marriage and relationship education into their services for military service members and their families.

Source: National Resource Center for Healthy Marriage and Families

Veterans and Military Families

This page of the SAMHSA website lists a number of resources on veterans and military families.

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
Information about PTSD and TBI

National Center for PTSD

The National Center for PTSD is dedicated to research and education on trauma and PTSD and works to assure that the latest research findings help those exposed to trauma.

Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration


This monograph presents the findings of RAND’s comprehensive study of post-deployment health-related needs associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, major depression, and traumatic brain injury among veterans of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Source: RAND Center for Military Health Policy Research


This report presents statistics regarding U.S. military and civilian casualties in the active missions Operation Freedom’s Sentinel (OFS, Afghanistan) and Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR, Iraq and Syria), as well as operations that have ended, Operation New Dawn (OND, Iraq), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF, Iraq), and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF, Afghanistan).

Source: Congressional Research Service

Traumatic Brain Injury (2010)

This independent study course was produced by the VA Employee Education System and presents an overview of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) issues that primary care practitioners may encounter when providing care to veterans and active duty military personnel.

Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration

Information about Homeless Veterans


This report outlines the key findings of the 2016 Point-In-Time count and Housing Inventory Count conducted in January 2016. It provides 2016 national, state, and local level estimates of homelessness, as well as estimates of chronically homeless persons, homeless veterans, and homeless children and youth.

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
**Ending Veteran Homelessness**

This website describes the VA’s efforts to end homelessness among veterans.

**Source:** The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

**Homeless Incidence and Risk Factors for Becoming Homeless in Veterans (2012)**

The VA Office of Inspector General Office of Healthcare Inspections conducted this study to estimate incidences of becoming homeless (the newly homeless) after military separation, identify risk factors for veterans becoming homeless, and describe utilization of VA-specific homeless services by homeless veterans.

**Source:** U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of the Inspector General

**National Coalition for Homeless Veterans**

NCHV is the resource and technical assistance center for a national network of community-based service providers and local, state and federal agencies that provide emergency and supportive housing, food, health services, job training and placement assistance, legal aid, and case management support for homeless veterans.

**Source:** The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans

**Veterans and Homelessness (2015)**

This report discusses a range of issues related to homeless veterans, including attempts to estimate the number of veterans who are homeless, the demographic characteristics of homeless veterans, overrepresentation of both male and female veterans in the homeless population, and federal programs and initiatives to address homelessness among veterans.

**Source:** Congressional Research Service

**Information about Veterans Benefits**

**Veterans Benefits**

This website contains links to dozens of fact sheets regarding veterans benefits.

**Source:** Department of Veterans Affairs

**Tools and Training Resources**
The pilot sites, which focused on homeless and at-risk veterans, stressed that homeless veterans often have difficulties accessing government services. They may be distrustful of government. They may have difficulty being in confined spaces, such as waiting rooms. They usually lack funds for transportation. Many do not have cell phones for follow-up contact. They usually do not have access to documents such as birth certificates and copies of support orders. If your program wants to target homeless or at-risk veterans, try to design a program that meets the veterans’ needs rather than fit them into existing procedures. Look at your services through their eyes. What barriers exist for homeless or at-risk veterans? How can those barriers be removed? Consider surveying the client population for input into program procedures.

Many homeless veterans are transient. Service of documents or delivery of information by mail may not be a viable option. It is more effective, to the extent possible, to hand out notices or paperwork to the veteran while he or she is in front of you.

It is preferable to have standardized practices regarding modification and arrears management so that project staff can accurately inform a veteran of what to expect in any county within the state.

In state-administered, county-supervised programs, it is important for the state agency to support counties that are participating in any veteran project. That may mean allowing a county worker to act as a liaison between the veteran and a different county with jurisdiction over the case, or to access the case of another county, so long as there are status updates to the county that is enforcing the veteran’s case.
Additional Information

**State Child Support Agencies with Debt Compromise Policies**

This interactive map shows states that have policies to compromise child support debt owed to the state.

**Source:** Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement

**Changing a Child Support Order (2014)**

This guide offers information to help parents and those who work with them better understand the child support review and modification process. It explains how parents can request to have their child support order changed when their financial situation changes.

**Source:** Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement

**How to Change a Child Support Order – State by State**

This interactive map accompanies the Changing a Child Support Order guide and provides links to specific instructions for how parents can request a change to their child support order in each state and territory.

**Source:** Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement
There are many options for addressing a veteran’s child support legal issues. The model that works best for your community will depend upon available resources and relationships. The best advice is to get the veteran engaged — and engaged long enough to have a result. One option that the pilot sites found particularly effective was offering legal clinics where veterans were able to ask general questions and receive information about the child support program, including available services such as modification and arrears management (in some states). Veterans also had the opportunity to ask questions about their particular case. Depending upon the needed service, veterans were able to complete forms on-site or sign authorizations for agency representatives to research their case and provide information back to the veteran and anyone designated by the veteran.

Identify Legal Resources

As noted in the discussion on partnerships, the child support agency may collaborate with a number of different types of legal partners. Keep in mind that nonprofit legal entities often accept funds on the condition they serve a target population. For example, Legal Services and Legal Aid offices have income eligibility requirements. It may be necessary for the child support agency to identify several legal partners to serve the targeted veteran population.

Host Legal Clinics in a Place Veterans Already Frequent

When at all possible, seek out the veteran population you want to serve. You are more likely to get results that way, rather than depend on veterans coming to the agency for a legal clinic or follow-up appointment. Every pilot site stressed the importance of on-site intake. As one pilot site noted, veterans already spend so many hours navigating a VA facility for services. The likelihood that they are going to travel to a child support office is remote. It is important to go to them instead.
Some pilot sites held legal clinics at a VA facility. Pursuant to a 2011 VA directive, a number of VA facilities now host non-VA legal service providers. For a list of those legal service clinics, go to [http://www.va.gov/ogc/legalservices.asp](http://www.va.gov/ogc/legalservices.asp). Some pilot sites held legal clinics at a facility providing temporary shelter for homeless veterans. Other pilot sites held clinics at community facilities that welcome veterans, such as armories and the American Legion building. In selecting the site for a legal clinic, keep in mind that some veteran gathering locations perceived as traditional spots are not always locations where women veterans or younger veterans are comfortable.

**Determine the Staffing of the Legal Clinic**

The HHS-VA-ABA pilot sites that offer legal clinics use a number of different models. At some pilot sites, the child support agency hosts the legal clinics and staffs them with agency representatives and attorneys. Other pilot sites feared that a veteran owing thousands of dollars of arrears may be reluctant to come forward to a clinic hosted by the child support agency. They had one of the other partners host the legal clinic, and then included the child support partner to answer questions.

For example, at one pilot site, the legal partner hosts the legal clinics and includes a representative from the child support agency. At another pilot site, the veteran service provider hosts the legal clinics using staff attorneys, volunteer attorneys, law students, and paralegals. The law students assist in filling out modification forms, fee waiver requests, and the relevant service of process documents. A licensed attorney supervises their work. Once forms are completed, they can be notarized, copied, and served from the clinic. Child support officers are also on-site at the legal clinic to provide up-to-date information on existing orders and enforcement. When interstate cases arise at clinics, the child support officers are often the first to contact the other state(s) to discuss the options for bringing the veteran clients into compliance. That particular pilot site also has the following service providers present at the legal clinics to assist the veterans: case managers from the veteran service provider (assists with intake, housing, other non-legal resources), representatives of the county Veteran Service Office (assists the veteran with navigating VA processes), VA Homeless Outreach staff, and *pro bono* financial planners.
Determine the Scope of the Legal Clinic

The scope of the legal clinic will depend upon the legal partner, as well as who hosts the clinic. When the child support agency hosts the clinic, the agency is likely to limit the legal issues to child support. Some child support agencies also answer questions regarding other family law issues, such as custody and parenting time. When the legal partner or veteran service provider hosts the legal clinic, the clinic is more likely to have a broader scope. For example, the Vetlaw Program of the Minnesota Assistance Council for Veterans (MACV) hosts more than 30 legal clinics a year. Initially, the MACV Vetlaw Program limited its legal clinic to child support issues. It quickly broadened the scope to include other legal issues that impact homeless and at-risk veterans. Such issues include consumer debt, criminal charges, criminal expungement, employment, tax, housing, benefits, medical malpractice, and wills, trusts, and estates.

Determine the Frequency of the Legal Clinic

MACV found that many veterans attend multiple clinics to finish modification requests or to confirm they had gathered the correct documentation. It decided to hold clinics at regular intervals for this reason. The frequency requires a balance between two realities: There needs to be sufficient time in between legal clinics to allow the child support agency to research the case and the veteran to obtain information. If the targeted population is the homeless veteran, however, the time cannot be too long because the veteran often moves.

The most important factor that all sites stressed was consistency. The legal clinics should occur on a regular basis.

Decide Whether Veterans Must Register in Advance

All of the pilot sites accepted walk-in participants to their legal clinics. Although advance notice of attendance was helpful to allow the child support agency to research a case, it was not a prerequisite. In fact, most participants did not register in advance.

In contrast, the Texas Veterans Resource Clinic (VRC) offers online registration for participants in its Veterans Child Support Modification Clinic. The online registration
Toolkit: Child Support Collaborations to Engage and Assist Veterans

authorizes the VRC to forward the veteran’s name, social security number, and date of birth to the Texas Assistant Attorney General. The Texas Attorney General's Office is then able to print pay records for every veteran who has registered for the clinic and has a case with the Attorney General's Office. The veterans can use the pay records when consulting with volunteer attorneys and attorneys from the Texas Attorney General's Office of Child Support Division during the clinic.

**Assemble Needed Legal Forms and Documents for the Clinic**

Such documents should include an intake form and an authorization to release information; child support agencies will not release information about a veteran’s child support case to a legal provider in the absence of such an authorization. Legal forms may include a petition for modification.

**Additional Information**

**General Information**

[ABA Commission on Homelessness and Poverty](source: American Bar Association)

The Commission is committed to educating the bar and the public about homelessness and poverty and the ways in which the legal community and advocates can assist those in need.

**Source:** American Bar Association

[ABA Coordinating Committee on Veterans Benefits and Services](source: American Bar Association)

This website contains resources designed to provide attorneys and veterans with assistance in obtaining legal counsel, as well as assistance related to reemployment rights, consumer issues, housing issues, criminal and family law matters, and challenges in obtaining medical care and disability benefits.

**Source:** American Bar Association

[ABA Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defendants](source: American Bar Association)

The SCLAID works on matters relating to legal aid and defender services and is particularly focused on the administration of justice as it affects low-income populations, remedial measures intended to help protect the legal rights of low-income populations, and the establishment and efficient maintenance of legal aid and defender organizations and cooperation with other interested agencies, whether public or private.

**Source:** American Bar Association
Directories of Potential Legal Providers to Veterans

Pro Bono Resources for Veterans

This site lists resources by state for lawyers and veterans to assist with medical care challenges, disability benefits, reemployment rights, consumer, housing, criminal and family law matters, and obtaining legal counsel.

Source: American Bar Association

Legal Programs Available to Military Families

This site provides an interactive map with state-by-state information about legal programs available to military families. Programs listed include military legal assistance offices, legal aid and pro bono organizations, lawyer referral and information services, and military-specific programs.

Source: American Bar Association

American Bar Association Veterans Legal Services Initiative

Given the substantial volume of unmet legal needs among veterans and those who support them, and the ABA’s mission of public service, access to justice, and support for the military, the ABA in 2016 launched a Veterans Legal Services Initiative.

Statesidelegal

Using an interactive map, this website identifies available legal help for military members, veterans, and their families in each state.

Legal Services Corporation

LSC is an independent nonprofit established by Congress in 1974 to provide financial support for civil legal aid to low-income Americans. The Corporation provides funding to nonprofit legal aid organizations in every state, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories. This link allows someone to identify an LSC-funded legal aid organization in a particular location. LSC-funded organizations will have income eligibility requirements. They may also limit the type of civil legal aid they provide.
LawHelp

LawHelp helps people of low and moderate incomes find free legal aid programs in their communities, answers questions about their legal rights, and provides forms to help them with their legal problems.

**Funding Sources for Legal Assistance**


For more information about the Legal Services Pro Bono Innovation Grants, see [https://www.lsc.gov/grants-grantee-resources/our-grant-programs/pro-bono-innovation-fund](https://www.lsc.gov/grants-grantee-resources/our-grant-programs/pro-bono-innovation-fund).

For a directory of IOLTA programs, see [http://www.americanbar.org/groups/interest_lawyers_trust_accounts/resources/directory_of_iolta_programs.html](http://www.americanbar.org/groups/interest_lawyers_trust_accounts/resources/directory_of_iolta_programs.html).

For a listing of free legal clinics at VA facilities, see [https://www.va.gov/ogc/docs/LegalServices.pdf](https://www.va.gov/ogc/docs/LegalServices.pdf) (updated June 2017).

**Tools and Training Resources**
In times of war, exhausted combat units requiring time to rest and recover were removed from the battlefields to a place of relative safety. At these secure base camp areas, troops were able to take care of personal hygiene, get clean uniforms, enjoy warm meals, receive medical and dental care, mail and receive letters, and enjoy fellowship in a safe environment.

Today, Stand Downs are part of efforts by the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide services to the nation’s homeless veterans. They are collaborative events coordinated by local VAs, other government agencies, community agencies, and service providers who serve the homeless. Homeless veterans are brought together in a single location for one to three days and are provided access to community resources needed to begin addressing their individual problems and rebuilding their lives. Typical services include food, shelter, clothing, health screening, dental hygiene, VA and Social Security benefits counseling, legal counseling, and referrals to a variety of other necessary services such as housing, employment, and substance abuse treatment. In most of the HHS-VA-ABA pilot sites, the child support agency also participates in Stand Down events.
**Resource Fair**

If the Stand Down event in your jurisdiction is structured similar to a resource fair, ask if the child support agency can participate as a service provider.

- Share a table with your legal partner.
  
  A veteran is more likely to approach a legal provider’s table with child support questions than a child support agency’s table.

- If you are unable to share a table with a legal provider, ensure the child support table has a “booth banner” that is veteran friendly.
  
  Avoid use of words like “Enforcement” or “Department of Revenue” which may scare away the veteran.

- Provide a laminated business card with a 1-800 number the veteran can call for child support assistance. The veteran can easily place the card in his or her pants pocket.

- Because paper is easily torn, one pilot site placed contact information on a bandana, which the veteran can also use.

- Develop a fact sheet that explains child support topics of interest to veterans, such as modification, license suspension, arrears management, and paternity establishment. Point out the impact that unresolved child support issues can have on someone who is trying to obtain housing or employment. Such information can be shared with veteran service providers, as well as with veterans.

- Ensure that information provided about child support services is in “plain language,” avoiding acronyms and legal jargon.

- To the extent possible, design information in a checklist format.
  
  Service members are accustomed to using military checklists.

- Include practical take-aways that the homeless veteran can use, such as socks, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and hand sanitizer.
**On-Site Legal Clinic**

If the Stand Down event in your jurisdiction allows on-site legal service delivery, coordinate with a legal partner to host a legal clinic in conjunction with the Stand Down event.

- Provide a table where the veteran can meet with a lawyer, paralegal, or law student to discuss his or her child support issues.
- Provide an area where a representative from the child support agency can meet, as needed, with the veteran and legal representative to provide information about child support policies and procedures.
- If possible, arrange for access to the automated child support system so that the child support agency representative can provide case-specific information on the spot.

**Child Support Court**

- **Overview of Stand Down Child Support Court in San Diego, CA**

  In 1989, San Diego started the first Homeless Court Program in the nation. The San Diego Homeless Court Program is a special Superior Court session for homeless defendants — convened in a homeless shelter — to resolve outstanding misdemeanor offenses and warrants. To counteract the effect of criminal cases pushing homeless defendants further outside society, the Homeless Court Program combines a progressive plea bargain system, alternative sentencing structure, assurance of “no custody,” and proof of program activities to address a full range of misdemeanor cases. The Program builds on partnerships between the court, prosecutor, public defender, and local service agencies. Homeless participants voluntarily sign up for the Program. They are entitled to all protections afforded by due process of law.
For years, the Stand Down in San Diego had offered veterans the opportunity to participate in Homeless Court. In 2001, the San Diego Department of Child Support Services (DCSS) began participating in the Stand Down event. In the first few years, a small number of veterans approached DCSS staff to discuss options for resolving their child support cases. However, without the opportunity to fully review the veterans’ case files, DCSS was only able to provide general information along with outreach material and extend invitations to the veterans to discuss their cases with their case manager after Stand Down. Unfortunately, post-Stand Down follow-through by the veterans was minimal. Many homeless veterans expressed distrust of the child support system, and others conveyed a concern that they might be arrested if they attempted to come to the DCSS offices located in the County Courthouse. In addition, after Stand Down, veterans again focused on their own needs for food and shelter, and their child support issues remained unresolved.

DCSS continued to attend Stand Down annually as a way of connecting with the homeless veteran population and developing trust. To improve the on-site assistance, the coordinator of the Stand Down event — Veterans Village of San Diego — provided DCSS copies of the VVSD Stand Down applications completed by veterans prior to Stand Down. The applications provided demographic information that allowed DCSS staff to review the child support database prior to Stand Down and obtain case information that aided in discussions with veterans attending Stand Down. However, despite the increased efforts by DCSS, the same pattern of distrust and inaction persisted as homeless veterans left the supportive environment of Stand Down and returned to the streets.

As a result, DCSS again reevaluated its presence at Stand Down and considered alternative opportunities for case resolution. DCSS decided it needed to develop a full service case resolution process for Stand Down participants. To achieve full case resolution, the veterans would need the opportunity to have their cases heard by the court. To accomplish this, DCSS proposed a collaborative project that would bring the Superior Court to Stand Down.
In 2008, DCSS approached the San Diego Superior Court, the Family Law Facilitator’s Office, and the Thomas Jefferson School of Law Veterans Legal Assistance Clinic about the possibility of operating a child support court in conjunction with Stand Down, similar to the Homeless Court. They were receptive to the idea, and the first child support court was held in 2009. The veterans child support court was established through the efforts of the San Diego County child support liaison with the court, a Family Law facilitator, and the law professor from the Thomas Jefferson School of Law Veterans Legal Assistance Clinic, which provides legal representation for the veterans. The agency, law school, and court have cooperated each year since to hold a child support court, serving hundreds of veterans and resolving millions of dollars of child support arrears.

 Preparation for Veterans Child Support Court

The key to the success in San Diego of both Homeless and Child Support Courts is that veterans register in advance for San Diego’s three-day Stand Down event. As part of that registration, the veteran can request a child support review. The Request form asks the veteran to identify the issue he or she wants addressed:

- Reduce monthly support amount
- Reduce arrears balance
- Reduce arrears payment
- Attain release of driver’s or other license
- Reduce amount of income assignment
- Get genetic testing
- Set aside default order
- Compromise for arrears
- Other

The form also asks the veteran to provide certain information, such as employment, benefits, and whether the veteran visits with his or her children. By signing the Request Form, the veteran expressly requests that Thomas Jefferson School of Law (TJSL) Veterans Clinic represent the veteran, for free, at any hearing at Stand Down.
DCSS is able to match the list of registrants requesting a child support review against its child support caseload. After identification of veteran cases, a DCSS attorney reviews the cases to identify what services may be available to assist the veteran to better manage his or her child support obligation. Such services may include review and adjustment, arrears management, or reactivation of a driver's license.

Where appropriate, the office provides the veteran with notice of a hearing before a veterans child support court, which is held on a racquetball court at the Stand Down event. DCSS has agreed with Veteran's Village, the coordinator of the Stand Down event, that it will not serve Summons and Complaints or show cause orders without the agreement of the veteran, and it will not take enforcement action that would alienate the veteran. DCSS will, however, attempt to provide general information to encourage the veteran to address issues that cannot be heard at Stand Down.

If San Diego County has jurisdiction over the Superior Court action and a case is a IV-D case qualifying for some form of relief, DCSS files all appropriate pleadings, schedules the court hearing for Stand Down, and serves all parties. Telephonic appearances are scheduled for each nonveteran case participant. Motions are served on the other parent and forwarded to TJSL Veterans Clinic, which assigns the case to a law student.

During the week of Stand Down, DCSS meets with TJSL Veterans Clinic volunteers to discuss each case calendared and exchange any last minute discovery.

If, during its review of the veterans’ cases, DCSS identifies cases managed by other jurisdictions, DCSS follows up with those jurisdictions and requests priority assistance. After conferring with the other jurisdiction, DCSS schedules a meeting with the veterans at Stand Down and provides them with the documents and contact information needed to begin the process of resolving their cases with the appropriate jurisdiction(s).

DCSS assigns attorneys and paralegals to be present at Stand Down to handle the on-site pre-hearing conferences and court appearances as well as coordinate telephonic appearances by the nonveteran case participants. To complete the preparations, DCSS
makes a final site visit for a technical walk through to ensure all connectivity is in place and functioning.

- **Staffing**
  Court participants from DCSS include paralegals, attorneys who meet and conference with the veterans and their attorneys prior to court, an attorney who handles the court hearings, a clerk who prepares wage assignments, child support officers who handle uncalendared matters, and technical staff. The child support staff have everything they need to connect to the San Diego office by email or phone with on-site computers, a fax machine, a copier, and a printer. From the court side, in addition to the Family Law Facilitator and the court commissioner, there are bailiffs, a court reporter, and a court clerk. Students from the Thomas Jefferson Law School Clinic assist the homeless veterans with child support matters both prior to, and during, the Stand Down.

- **Veterans Child Support Court in San Diego**

DCSS staff arrive at 6:30 a.m. on the day of Stand Down to set up and prepare for pre-hearing conferences with the veterans and TJSL Veterans Clinic volunteers. Over the course of the day, veterans along with their TJSL Veterans Clinic counsel appear for court. In the majority of the calendared cases, the court resolves all pending matters. Legal outcomes include license releases, review of default orders, modification of ongoing support, and reduction of arrears payments. Veterans also meet with DCSS to discuss case issues that did not qualify for a court hearing.

Since 2009, DCSS has continued to coordinate and participate in the child support Stand Down project. Post-Stand Down follow-up by the Veterans Village of San Diego has found that as a result of participating in the Stand Down child support process, numerous veterans have obtained permanent housing, qualified for veteran’s rehabilitations programs, and become gainfully employed. Some veterans have reunited with their children.
Factors Contributing to a Successful Child Support Court in Conjunction with a Stand Down Event

Based on its experience over a number of years, San Diego makes the following suggestions for jurisdictions considering holding a Child Support Court in conjunction with a Stand Down event.

- It is important to have a strong event coordinator who organizes the participating community providers and facilitates communication with the veterans. In San Diego, Veterans Village plays that role.

- Identify child support cases in advance. This is essential for the child support agency to be able to review cases ahead of time and resolve matters on site.
  - In San Diego, homeless veterans must register in advance to participate in the Homeless Court or Child Support Court. The registration form includes authorization for the child support agency to review the veteran’s child support case.
  - The child support agency should refrain from enforcement measures against a veteran who voluntarily participates in the child support court.

- Designate an attorney in the child support agency to individually review the veterans’ cases.
  - The attorney should review each case from the perspective of what the agency can do to address barriers the homeless veteran may face to obtaining housing or employment because of his or her child support debt.

- Prepare any pleadings or prior notice required by law in your jurisdiction.

- Identify effective legal providers for the veteran.
  - Meet with the legal provider in advance to advise the provider of the result of the child support agency’s review of the case and the agency’s proposed action. Attempt to reach an agreement on resolution of the child support issues.
Toolkit: Child Support Collaborations to Engage and Assist Veterans

☐ Identify the judicial partners.
  - Such partners may include the family court division, people who set up the court calendar, any judicial office that provides assistance to pro se individuals.

☐ Ensure there is a place where the veteran can meet individually with a legal provider.

☐ Plan months in advance for a child support court on site at the Stand Down event.
  - What will be the role of each partner?
  - Who will take the lead?
  - Who from each partner will be on site during the event?
  - When can you do a site visit ahead of time and plan the logistics?
    - Where will the court be held?
    - What supplies are needed?
      - Tables and chairs
      - Laptop computers
      - Printers
      - Copiers
      - Phone access
      - Internet access
      - Power extension cords
      - Staplers, pens, and paper
      - Items typically found in a courtroom, such as the judicial seal or American flag
    - Where are the bathrooms?
    - Is there a safe, confidential environment in which the veteran can discuss his or her legal concerns with a lawyer or court facilitator?
    - How will food be provided to volunteers?
    - Can an attorney file motions on site?
    - What legal forms are needed on site?
    - What automated systems are needed and when will access be set up?
      The Court Technical Division or an equivalent entity will need to coordinate establishing access to the court system. The child support agency’s IT department will also need to coordinate establishing access to the agency’s system.
    - Who will coordinate security during the event?
Be flexible.

As one San Diego hearing commissioner noted, “You have to look at the long-term effect of your decision, not the short-term. That means you may be less rigid in the context of the Stand Down child support court than you ordinarily would be during a regular child support docket.”

Develop a data collection tool to measure the impact of the collaboration, such as the number of veterans served, and the numbers of order modifications, licenses released, cases closed, arrearages resolved, payment plans established, and orders established.

**Additional Information**

**Homeless Courts**

*The Homeless Court Program: Taking the Court to the Streets (2002)*

This manual created by the Law Offices of the Public Defender of San Diego County contains directions, suggestions, and examples of approaches that have worked for the Homeless Court Program in San Diego. It also includes testimonies from judges and court personnel as well as from shelter providers and defendants to illustrate the benefits of the program.

**Source:** American Bar Association

*ABA Principles for Homeless Court Programs (Aug. 2006)*

This resolution outlines basic principles for homeless court programs.

**Source:** American Bar Association

*Taking the Court to Stand Down (2006)*

This booklet provides information for establishing a Homeless Court Program at local Stand Down events.

**Source:** American Bar Association Commission on Homelessness and Poverty and the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans
Stand Down

More Information About Stand Down
This website describes the origin of the Stand Down concept along with a series of resources.

Source: National Coalition for Homeless Veterans

A Calendar of Events Related to Homeless Veterans
The events on this website are directly related to homelessness, veterans' issues, or have specific tracks or sessions exploring these topics.

Source: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

This manual provides a description and practical explanation for each component of Stand Down, as well as the unifying aspects of the community program.

Source: Vietnam Veterans of San Diego

National Stand Down Program Design (2008 update)
This manual describes the Stand Down encampment and the program.

Source: Vietnam Veterans of San Diego

National Stand Down Guide (2012)
This guide contains four sections: Frequently Asked Questions, Classification of Stand Down Events, Organizing a Stand Down, and Additional Resources.

Source: National Coalition for Homeless Veterans

This fact sheet describes how the child support program's participation in veteran Stand Down events can help parents who have served our country manage their financial responsibilities to their children.

Source: Federal Office of Child Support Enforcement

Tools and Training Resources