

15. U.S. DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS AND VETERAN SERVICE PROVIDER PARTNERS

What Is the VA?

The United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is the second largest federal department. It is composed of three main administrations:

- ❑ The Veterans Health Administration
 - As of November 2017, more than 1,600 health care facilities, including more than 400 VA medical centers and hospitals, and more than 1,200 outpatient sites of care
- ❑ The Veterans Benefits Administration
 - 56 Regional Offices within the United States, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines
 - Benefits include: life insurance, home loans, disability compensation, pensions, education, and vocational rehabilitation
- ❑ The National Cemetery Administration
 - 135 national cemeteries

What Is Not the VA?

There is often confusion between the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and state and local departments of veterans affairs. The latter are not part of the federal VA. Other programs that are not part of the federal VA are veteran service organizations such as the American Legion, U.S. military medical services such as Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, and nonprofit agencies receiving VA funding.

Partnerships with VA

The nine HHS-VA-ABA pilot sites partnered with a variety of federal VA programs, as well as with state and county departments of veterans affairs and local veteran service providers.

This section identifies federal VA programs with which child support agencies may wish to partner in providing services to veterans, especially homeless or at-risk veterans.

❑ VA Veterans Health Administration (VHA)

The Veterans Health Administration is America's largest integrated health care system with more than 1,600 health care facilities, including VA medical center and outpatient sites of care. Together these health care facilities provide comprehensive care to more than 9 million enrolled veterans each year. The VA has divided the United States into Veterans Integrated Service Networks (VISNs), which are regional systems of care working together to better meet the local health care needs of veterans.

■ VA Medical Facilities

Social workers are present in all VHA programs. They can be an excellent referral resource for child support agencies.

■ VA Vet Centers

Congress established the Vet Center Program in 1979 in recognition that a significant number of Vietnam-era veterans were still experiencing readjustment problems. Since 1979, Congress has extended the eligibility to include World War II and Korean Combat veterans; veterans who served during periods of armed hostilities in Lebanon, Grenada, Panama, the Persian Gulf, Somalia, and Kosovo/Bosnia; and veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), and subsequent operations within the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). The family members of all veterans who have served in those combat zones are also eligible for Vet Center services. The goal of the Vet Center program is to provide a broad range of counseling, outreach, and referral services to eligible veterans to help them make a satisfying, post-war readjustment to civilian life. VHA operates more than 275 community-based Vet Centers in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Learn more about Vet Centers at <https://www.vetcenter.va.gov/>.

❑ VA Homeless Programs

To further its goal to end homelessness among veterans, the Department of Veterans Affairs offers a number of Homeless Veterans Programs within the VHA. The following list highlights some of the VA Homeless Programs with whom a child support agency may wish to partner if it includes homeless veterans within its targeted population.

■ Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV)

Initially VA's Health Care for Homeless Veterans served as a mechanism to contract with providers for community-based residential treatment for homeless veterans. There are more than 135 HCHV sites. Outreach is at the core of the HCHV program. The main goal is to reduce homelessness among veterans by conducting outreach to those who are the most vulnerable and are not currently receiving services and engaging them in treatment and rehabilitative programs. The HCHV program offers exams, treatment, referrals, and case management. Learn more about the HCHV program at <https://www.va.gov/homeless/hchv.asp>.

■ Grant and Per Diem Program

Nonprofit organizations, state and local government agencies, and tribal governments are eligible for the grants. The program has two components: the Grant Component and the Per Diem Component. The VA offers grants for the acquisition, renovation, or construction of a building that will provide services for homeless veterans. Such services may include case management, education, crisis intervention, counseling, and services targeted toward specialized populations such as homeless women veterans. In addition, the VA pays per diem to help organizations defray operational costs. The availability of grant funds is announced in the Federal Register. Learn more about the Grant and Per Diem Program at <https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/GPD.asp>.

■ Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF)

The purpose of the SSVF Program is to provide grants to private nonprofit organizations and consumer cooperatives that will coordinate or provide supportive services to very low-income veteran families who are living in or transitioning to permanent housing.

There are two primary forms of assistance:

- Homelessness Prevention

Homelessness prevention assistance is intended for eligible veteran families who are imminently at-risk of becoming literally homeless¹⁸ but for SSVF assistance. The “literally homeless” definition is a narrower definition than the “homeless” definition given by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in 24 C.F.R. § 576.2. Targeting SSVF assistance in this manner helps ensure limited SSVF resources are directed to veteran families most in need of assistance to avoid falling into literal homelessness (e.g., entering an emergency shelter).

- Rapid Re-Housing

Rapid re-housing assistance is intended for eligible veteran families who are literally homeless and may remain literally homeless but for SSVF assistance. Targeting SSVF assistance in this manner helps ensure limited SSVF resources are directed to veteran families most in need of assistance to end their homelessness (for example, exit an emergency shelter and obtain their own housing).

SSVF grantees provide eligible veteran families with outreach, case management, and assistance in obtaining VA and other benefits, which may include:

Health care services	Fiduciary and payee services
Daily living services	Legal services
Personal financial planning services	Child care services
Transportation services	Housing counseling services

In addition, grantees may also provide time-limited payments to third parties (e.g., landlords, utility companies, moving companies, and licensed child care providers) if these payments help veteran families stay in or acquire permanent housing on a sustainable basis.

As noted above, legal services are among the services that a SSVF grantee can provide. In fact, the SSVF program recommends that SSVF grantees allocate and use

at least 5 percent of their grant award for legal services. Because SSVF grantees may not know that homeless veterans have consistently named child support as among their top unmet needs, child support agencies may want to meet with any SSVF grantees in their area and note those findings. The discussions may include the possibility of the grantee using SSVF funds to partner with a legal provider to host legal clinics that address child support issues.

Learn more about the SSVF program at <https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/SSVF.asp>.

- Housing and Urban Development-VA Supported Housing (VASH)

The Department of Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing (HUD-VASH) Program is a joint effort between HUD and VA to move veterans and their families out of homelessness and into permanent housing. HUD provides housing assistance through its Housing Choice Voucher Program (Section 8) that provides rental assistance vouchers for privately owned housing to veterans who are eligible for VA health care services and are experiencing homelessness. VA offers eligible homeless veterans clinical and supportive services through its health care system across the 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and Guam. Learn more about the VASH program at <https://www.va.gov/homeless/hud-vash.asp>.

- Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO)

The VJO initiative is designed to help veterans avoid unnecessary criminalization of mental illness and extended incarceration by ensuring eligible justice-involved veterans receive timely access to VA health care, specifically mental health and substance use services (if clinically indicated) and other VA services and benefits as appropriate. Shortly after the start of the HHS-VA-ABA collaboration, the VA placed Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) coordinators at VA Health Care System facilities; they served as the VA partner at some of the pilot sites. In addition to the pilot sites, a number of child support agencies work closely with the VJO in their jurisdiction; the two programs provide cross-training and referrals. Learn more about the Veterans Justice Outreach initiative at <https://www.va.gov/homeless/VJO.asp>.

- Health Care for Re-entry Veterans (HCRV)

The HCRV Program is designed to promote success and prevent homelessness among veterans returning home after incarceration. A critical part of HCRV is providing information to veterans while they are incarcerated, so they can plan for re-entry themselves.

Child support agencies can work with the HCRV in their jurisdiction to ensure that the HCRV case managers address child support issues when developing re-entry plans for incarcerated veterans. Even if the veteran is not in the local child support agency's caseload, the agency can help the HCRV case manager understand the impact that unpaid child support can have on a veteran upon his or her release. OCSE has developed a number of resources related to incarcerated obligors that are also helpful to incarcerated veterans. Learn more about the Health Care for Re-entry Veterans Program at <https://www.va.gov/homeless/reentry.asp>.

- Other Potential VA Program Partners

- VA Compensated Work Therapy (CWT)

The Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) program is a VA vocational rehabilitation program that matches and supports veterans who are ready to work with competitive jobs. Through the CWT program, the VA contracts with private industry and the public sector to provide therapeutic work for veterans in VA health care facilities. CWT provides veterans with vocational case management and workplace supports that lead to continued employment success.

CWT Programs are located in more than 100 VA facilities throughout the United States. Participants in CWT programs are referred by a primary-care clinical team that has assessed the veteran and determined that he or she could benefit from the program. Vocational rehabilitation specialists then work with the veteran to address barriers that stand in the way of achieving full-time gainful employment in the private sector. Frequently those veterans enrolled in the CWT program have multiple challenges including psychiatric and substance abuse issues, physical limitations, are ex-offenders, and/or have family relationship issues.

Often the veterans also have child support obligations that have accumulated significant arrearages. In 2003, the Child Support Enforcement Division of the Massachusetts Department of Revenue (DOR) initiated a pilot project with the CWT program in the Bedford VA Medical Center. The partnership is formalized through written agreements between the veteran, VA CWT staff, and DOR. Once veterans are employed by CWT, they are encouraged to voluntarily help support their children by paying a portion of their otherwise non-garnishable veteran's benefits toward their child support debt. DOR staff work with VA clinicians on several other child support issues, including modification, arrears management, and negotiation of settlements. DOR also provides assistance with reinstating an already suspended driver's license. Pursuant to the written agreements, DOR agrees to:

- Exempt from levy the first \$2,500 in the veteran's savings account;
- Exempt the veteran from the assessment of interest and penalty while a participant in the CWT/DOR program; and
- Forego suspending or revoking the veteran's driver's, professional, trade, or recreational license and/or motor vehicle registration.

In turn, the veteran agrees to:

- Make weekly payments (from otherwise non-garnishable wages) to DOR in an agreed-upon amount determined by CWT, the veteran, and DOR; and
- Establish a savings account in a bank or other financial institution and save a minimum of 30 percent of his or her current weekly earnings.

Learn more about the VA's CWT program at <http://www.va.gov/health/cwt/>.

■ VA Regional Offices

A VA Regional office can also be an important referral resource for a child support agency. Each VA Regional Office has a Homeless Veterans Outreach Coordinator who is a direct point of contact for the veteran to learn more about what benefits he or she qualifies for, assist with applying for those benefits, and refer the veteran to other helpful organizations and resources. For locations and services of VA regional offices, visit <http://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/offices.asp>.

Partnerships with State/Territory Department of Veterans Affairs

A state or territory Department of Veterans Affairs is not part of the federal Department of Veterans Affairs. However, it is an important resource for veterans and can be an effective partner with the child support agency. All state or territory Departments of Veterans Affairs promote awareness of federal and state benefits to which veterans, their families, and their survivors may be entitled. Additionally, they assist eligible veterans and family members in obtaining such benefits. Many states have veteran financial benefits and services in addition to those provided by the federal government. Depending upon the jurisdiction, a state or territory Department of Veterans Affairs may also provide such services as long-term health care and coordination with other agencies and nonprofits to help veterans address education, mental health, housing, employment, and other needs. For the location of a state or territory Department of Veterans Affairs, visit <https://www.va.gov/statedva.htm>.

Partnerships with Veterans Service Organizations (VSOS)

The Office of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs provides a directory of Veterans Service Organizations. Inclusion of an organization in the directory does not constitute approval or endorsement by the VA of the organization or its activities.

- Part I of the directory lists Congressionally-chartered and other VSOs recognized or approved by the VA Secretary for the purpose of preparation, presentation, and prosecution of claims under laws administered by the Department of Veterans Affairs.
- Part II of the directory lists other Congressionally-chartered VSOs not recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs for the purpose of preparation, presentation and prosecution of veterans claims only. However, they do represent the interest of American veterans. In doing so, they may provide such services as benefits counseling, outreach, and advocacy.
- Part III of the directory lists other service organizations not Congressionally-chartered or recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs for the purpose of preparation, presentation and prosecution of veteran's claims only, but who represent the interest of American veterans.

Child support agencies may wish to partner with a veteran service organization, which can refer veterans to the child support agency or provide information to veterans about child support services.

Partnerships with Other Nonprofit and Community Agencies Serving Veterans

Child support agencies may also wish to partner with other nonprofit and community agencies that receive grants or have other funding streams that include a focus on serving veterans.

Partnerships with County Veterans Service Offices

County governments usually operate a County Veteran Service Office that provides a number of services to veterans. For example, the Veterans Service Office may assist veterans with compensation/pensions, medical care, military records, grave markers and veteran home loans. Some counties may also have dedicated funds to assist veterans with temporary shelter/utilities, food/health supplies, medical/dental, job placement, counseling, and transportation. These offices and programs are not part of the state VA structure.

Community Resource and Referral Centers (CCRC)

CCRCs are collaborative, multi-agency programs that provide veterans who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness with one-stop access to community-based, multi-agency services providing housing, health care, job development programs, and access to VA and non-VA benefits. Through the National Center on Homelessness among Veterans (NCHAV), this service model is being used in more than 25 sites across the country. A CCRC may be an excellent location for holding a legal child support clinic or for coordinating meetings with homeless veterans who have child support issues.

Recommendations to the Child Support Agency

- ❑ If the focus is on homeless veterans, work with VA transitional housing programs. Because the goal of these programs is to help the veteran obtain permanent housing, they provide services related to budgeting, financial stability, and employment. Addressing child support arrears would also help these veterans obtain permanent housing.
- ❑ If the focus is on homeless or at-risk veterans, develop a Question and Answer resource sheet for local homeless veterans' hotlines and crisis hotlines. Many times these centers get calls from veterans who are depressed because of child support and make comments like, "I owe so much child support. How can I pay child support if I can't get a job?"
- ❑ Explore information on the website for SSVF grantees. There is an SSVF University that includes training resources developed by the VA, HUD, and other entities, which may be useful for training child support staff. The resources target homeless veterans, but they also include information related to veterans in general. Visit: https://www.va.gov/homeless/SSVF/?page=/ssvf_university/.
- ❑ Provide education to VA social workers and mental health workers regarding the family-centered services offered by the child support agency to correct any misperception they may have about the child support program. Make sure to include workers who are not part of the VA Homeless Program. Explain how addressing his or her child support issues can help a veteran.
- ❑ Ask the VA/Veteran Service Provider to assist with outreach.
 - Develop visually attractive posters/flyers that the VA facility or veteran service provider can display.
 - Provide contact information so the initiative is not dependent upon a VA intake person remembering to bring up child support.

- Establish one point of contact within each VA facility.

VA facilities usually work with veterans over an extended period of time, and track the veteran as he or she moves through different programs. Since child support issues usually take time to resolve and may require follow-up, the VA point of contact can assist the agency in locating the veteran, if the veteran has signed a release of information.

- Work with the VA facility to establish a regular on-site presence. Veterans spend so many hours navigating a VA facility. The likelihood that they are going to travel to a child support office is remote. It is important to go to them instead.
- Keep in mind that many veterans do not receive VA services or VA benefits. So if the scope of the child support initiative is all veterans, as opposed to homeless veterans, it is especially important to include a local veteran service provider as a partner.
- Work with the VA/veteran service provider to develop a streamlined referral process to the child support agency.
- Provide VA staff or the veteran service provider with updates on case referrals.

Recommendations to VA/Veteran Service Provider Services

- Inform staff about the mission of the child support program and how the child support agency can help veterans.

It is especially important for staff within the VA's Homeless Program to recognize that addressing a veteran's child support issues is an important part of treating the veteran's issues holistically. If the VA solely addresses the veteran's housing needs, without addressing any child support issues, the child support agency may suspend the veteran's driver's license or garnish new wages to collect outstanding child support. As a result, the veteran may lose his or her financial stability and end up back on the streets.

- Help the child support agency with outreach.

In the existing Homeless Programs Assessment, if a veteran during intake acknowledges having significant outstanding debt, VA staff can ask whether such debt includes child

support. If a veteran answers “yes,” VA staff can provide information about child support resources and help focus appropriate follow-up interventions.

Share information broadly.

If the scope of the child support initiative includes all veterans, seek approval of the medical center director to post flyers about the child support initiative throughout the VA facility – including the admissions point and waiting areas of various departments – so that veterans participating in any of the VA services may become aware of the initiative.

Ask the right questions.

If you are a veteran service provider with flexibility in designing your intake form, include a question about needing help with outstanding debt or with child support issues.

Reach out to veterans where you know they’ll be.

If possible, regularly schedule an on-site clinic at which the child support agency and/or legal provider can provide information to veterans about child support issues.

An on-site presence is a powerful way to engage with veterans. If the VA facility will allow an external group to be on-site, it is preferable for the liaison with the child support agency and/or the legal provider to be on-site to provide veterans with child support information and to answer any questions the veterans may have. One benefit to the veteran is that it allows the veteran to speak to a child support representative or legal provider in a familiar environment. It reduces transportation costs of having to travel to a legal office or local child support agency. An on-site clinic also allows the child support liaison to resolve some cases on site, especially if the liaison knows about the case in sufficient time to research the issue and come ready with appropriate forms for the veteran to complete.

Serve as a case navigator for a homeless or an at-risk veteran.

Even if a homeless or an at-risk veteran does not need legal representation in court, the veteran may benefit from the support of a case manager/navigator. This person could be

from the legal partner or the VA/Veteran Service Provider partner. It is often traumatic for a homeless or an at-risk veteran to be in a court proceeding or to be in the presence of a former spouse and children whom the veteran has not seen in years. The case manager/navigator can help prepare the veteran for how to act in court and how to handle emotions that may arise when the veteran connects with his or her family.

- Participate in cross-training with the child support agency.
- Make sure information about the child support initiative is on the website of the state/county Department of Veterans Affairs.

Additional Information

For information on federal veterans benefits, see:

- <https://benefits.va.gov/benefits>
- <http://benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets.asp>.
- http://www.va.gov/opa/publications/benefits_book.asp.

Tools and Training Resources