

Increasing Social Supports for Incarcerated Veterans Program

Innovative Practices in VA Homeless Programs Operations

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White Paper

VA



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INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Programs Office identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. The VA Central Ohio Healthcare System has been identified as a site with an innovative practice for increasing access to Veterans justice programs for currently incarcerated Veterans.

Among male Veterans, a [history of incarceration](#) is one of the strongest predictors of future homelessness. To help ensure that Veterans involved in the criminal legal system are connected with VA resources to address their needs upon reentry into society, VA launched its Veterans Justice Programs (VJP). VJP staff connect with Veterans who are currently incarcerated in prisons and jails, and support Veterans participating in diversionary court processes.

Although VJP staff commonly conduct face-to-face visits with incarcerated Veterans, circumstances outside of VA's control occasionally impose barriers to successfully completing outreach encounters. There may be scheduling issues, or the institution may be on lockdown, severely limiting inmates' access to activities and facilities. In these circumstances, VJP staff may miss significant opportunities to connect with Veterans to develop plans for accessing services upon release. And while incarcerated Veterans can make phone calls to outside parties, these calls are not free. They require either the incarcerated Veteran or the outside party receiving the phone call to pay a toll. This can pose further barriers when the Veteran does not have sufficient funds to pay for the call, or VJP staff do not have the authorization or funding to accept collect calls on government-furnished cellphones.

In search of creative ways to overcome this barrier, in fall of 2023, VJP staff at VA Central Ohio developed a local partnership with their VA Center for Development and Civic Engagement (CDCE) team (formerly known as Voluntary Service) to develop a process for paying the call fees through a program they would eventually name the Increasing Social Supports for Incarcerated Veterans (ISSIV) Program.

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

ISSIV allows VJPs to receive phone calls from correctional institutions on their VA government cellphones and, when applicable, schedule video appointments.

VJP staff at VA Central Ohio worked with their Chief of CDCE to use General Post Funds from monetary donations made to their facility to purchase prepaid debit cards. With the prepaid debit cards,



VJPs then created telephone toll fee accounts that were set up to draw funds from the debit cards whenever telephone contact with a Veteran was needed. This simple two-step process allowed VJP staff to receive calls from currently incarcerated Veterans at no cost to neither the Veteran nor the taxpayers.

PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS

Facilities interested in developing ISSIV should be mindful of several important lessons learned.

Expiration Dates on Funds

VJP staff should be mindful of each correctional institution's telephone fee policies. Some institutions have expiration dates for unused account funds. Account balances can often be refunded by contacting the correctional institution's customer service department.

Many Vendors Work with Multiple Correctional Institutions

Correctional institutions often contract with third-party vendors to implement their telephone toll programs. This means that VJP staff can actually receive calls from any correctional institution that uses the same vendor.

Verify the Fees Before Engaging with Veterans

Different correctional institutions charge different fees for different methods of communication (e.g., telephone calls, video calls, text messaging) through a cost-per-minute approach. At VA Central Ohio, most calls were no longer than 10 minutes in length. It is important to verify the costs for each to ensure that the funds are used responsibly. If the cost schedule is not publicly available, contact the correctional institution's customer service department for more information.

Replenishing Funds

Depending on the success of the program and how fast funds are used, local CDCE may need to work to identify potential donors to continue funding ISSIV.

Secure and Appropriately Track Use of the Prepaid Debit Cards

Work with your CDCE to ensure that prepaid debit cards are stored in a secure location when not in use. Be sure to follow all guidelines and instructions on submitting any needed documentation on funds used.



CONCLUSION

ISSIV allows Veterans who are incarcerated to call their local VJP team free of charge. From the program's start in October 2023 to the time of this writing, 19 unique Veterans have benefited from ISSIV, with a total of 44 clinical encounters.

The VA Central Ohio VJP team identified several benefits from developing this program, including increased Veteran access to VJP services, improved social and emotional support for Veterans, increased opportunities for Veterans to join interdisciplinary team case planning discussions, and improved VJP specialist productivity. ISSIV not only increases the number of Veteran encounters, but it also allows VJP staff to prioritize face-to-face encounters based on acuity level and scheduling barriers.

We want to thank the dedicated staff at the VA Central Ohio Healthcare System. For more information, please contact HomelessVets@va.gov.

APPENDIX : STARTUP PROCEDURE

1. **Contact your local Chief of CDCE** to ask if they would support this program. VA Central Ohio is willing to participate in this conversation.
2. Work collaboratively to **identify one or more jails or prisons** in your catchment area that receive the most referrals.
3. Once the institution is selected for your local pilot, **research how to create an account** for phone calls, video scheduling, and text messaging. Identify costs for each modality. Some institutions have tablets that allow scheduling video calls, but inmates may not always have access to them. Talk with your Veterans to see what would be beneficial for them. Call customer service to identify costs if they are not on the website.
4. Determine if CDCE will **find donors to support the ISSIV program**.
5. **Request prepaid debit cards** from CDCE and store them in a safe place.
6. **Create your telephone toll fee account with correctional institutions** using your VA email, VA cellphone number, and prepaid cards.
7. Develop a flyer or Veteran agreement for the ISSIV program and **review this program with the institution's primary point of contact**.
8. Track your calls to **measure your success**.

