

Montgomery County Veterans Response Team

An Innovative Practice in VHA Homeless Program Operations

White Paper

VA



U.S. Department
of Veterans Affairs

Developed by
VHA Homeless Programs Office

INTRODUCTION

The VHA Homeless Programs Office (HPO) identifies and disseminates innovative practices in homeless program operations. HPO identified the VA Coatesville Health Care System (VACHCS) in Montgomery County, PA, as a site with an innovative practice involving collaboration with community partners to develop a Veterans Response Team (VRT) aimed at connecting justice-involved Veterans to voluntary treatment and other supports before being arrested or involuntarily committed. This approach enables Veterans to resolve clinical and other issues without exposure to traumatizing criminal justice processing and incarceration, or the loss of civil liberties.

VRTs provide “deflection” interventions that seek to meet the needs of justice-involved Veterans while avoiding unnecessary arrests or involuntary commitments. VRT members are specially trained law enforcement officers (LEO) and first responders who coordinate with local VA Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) specialists when they interact with Veterans. This allows VRTs to leverage the vast array of services that VA provides in their interactions with Veterans so that Veterans may choose to engage in voluntary treatment instead of being arrested or involuntarily committed. VRTs are often dispatched when LEOs need assistance engaging with Veterans, either in person or by phone. Once VRT members assess and identify a Veteran’s needs, they reach out to specific supports, including VJO specialists, who connect the Veteran to the services they are eligible for. VRT members are occasionally accompanied by VJO specialists when the scene is determined to be safe.

In Montgomery County in 2021, a coalition of representatives from VA, county officials, and critical criminal justice stakeholders convened to explore the possibility of starting their own VRT.

PRACTICE OVERVIEW

TRAINING THE TEAM

After nearly a year of consensus building, research, and planning, Montgomery County hosted its first VRT training in late January 2022. Seventeen LEOs from various departments throughout the county attended. The eligibility requirements for LEOs attending the VRT training included graduation from Crisis Intervention Specialist (CIS) training *and* prior service in the U.S. armed forces.

The two-day training teaches LEOs about the different kinds of mental health needs that Veterans may have as well as resources to assist Veterans in meeting those needs. The training provides LEOs with



an overview of peer support practices and skill-building opportunities to help when their fellow Veterans are in crisis. The curriculum encourages officers to view the information from two perspectives: one as a helper, and the other as a Veteran who is potentially eligible for additional support and resources.

Once trained, the new VRT members are given special VRT pins to affix to their uniforms and are tagged in Montgomery County's dispatch system as being able to provide VRT support. The Montgomery County Mobile Crisis Team, which also received VRT training and were included in planning and update meetings, provides backup for the VRT members.

VRT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The Montgomery County VRT is supported and managed by a VRT Advisory Committee. Its standing members include representatives from the VA Coatesville Health Care System, the Norristown Vet Center, and Montgomery County offices, including the Sheriff's Office, the Office of Veterans Affairs, the Office of Mental Health/Developmental Disabilities/Early Intervention, the Office of Senior Services, the Chief's Association, and CIS. Sub-committees address specific topics such as curriculum development, law enforcement outreach, community education, and data collection.

"This is a high speed/low drag effort that meets the needs of the community, VA, the law enforcement and first responder community, and most importantly, Veterans themselves."

Dennis Miller
Montgomery County
Veterans Service Officer

OUTCOMES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Montgomery County VRT's training process, implementation, and impact on the community have been universally positive. VRT members have all expressed strong enthusiasm and support for this intervention. In particular, they were enthusiastic about the many peer-to-peer interventions in low-level situations with Veterans to help connect them to care.

The Montgomery County VRT's performance and outcomes are tracked through a collaborative agreement between the participating police departments, the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services, and the Montgomery County Sheriff. Since January 2022, the Montgomery County VRT has welcomed 27 LEOs who received VRT training. Within the first eight months, the team received more than 30 referrals to the VRT, many of those from wellness check



requests by LEOs on elderly Veterans with either late-stage life or dementia diagnoses. The team's early connection to care for these vulnerable Veterans likely prevented future medical crises, additional first responder attention, or other adverse outcomes. Additionally, since the implementation of the VRT in Montgomery County, even more county agencies have joined the advisory committee to provide support or assistance.

CONSIDERATIONS

To improve the quality of Montgomery County VRT training, VACHCS provided surveys to LEO trainees following each training session and held focus groups targeting LEOs. Feedback highlighted the need to provide more information on specific clinical issues that VRT members commonly encountered (e.g., elderly Veterans or Veterans with dementia), role clarification for VRT members, and how the VRT and VA work together.

The Montgomery County VRT also found value in increased partnerships across multiple agencies, which likely reduced arrests, reduced barriers to care, and ultimately saved lives.

CONCLUSION

Given the increased focus on prevention and early intervention, VA is well-equipped to collaborate with the county, state, and law enforcement partners to develop VRTs in their local communities.

We want to thank the dedicated staff at the VA Coatesville Health Care System and the members of the Montgomery County VRT for sharing their practice with us. For more information about this practice, email HomelessVets@va.gov.

