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Veterans Moving Forward: Process and Impact Evaluation Results of the San Diego County Sheriff's Department VMF Program Summary Overview¹

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Submitted by: San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG)

Purpose

In 2014, SANDAG applied for and received funding from the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) to conduct a process and impact evaluation of the Veterans Moving Forward (VMF) program that was created by the San Diego County Sheriff's Department in partnership with the San Diego Veterans Administration (VA) in 2013. VMF is a veteran-only housing unit for male inmates who have served in the U.S. military. When the grant was written, experts in the field had noted that the population of veterans returning to the U.S. with numerous mental health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and depression, were increasing and as a result, the number of veterans incarcerated in jails and prisons was also expected to increase. While numerous specialized courts for veterans had been implemented across the country at the time, veteran-specific housing units for those already sentenced to serve time in custody were rarer and no evaluations of these units had been published. Since this evaluation grant was awarded, the number of veteran-only housing units has increased, demonstrating the need for more evaluation information regarding lessons learned.

A core goal when creating VMF was to structure an environment for veterans to draw upon the positive aspects of their shared military culture, create a safe place for healing and rehabilitation, and foster positive peer connections. There are several components that separate VMF from traditional housing with the general population that relate to the overall environment, the rehabilitative focus, and initiation of reentry planning as early as possible. These components include the selection of correctional staff with military backgrounds and an emphasis on building on their shared experience and connecting through it; a less restrictive and more welcoming environment that includes murals on the walls and open doors; no segregation of inmates by race/ethnicity; incentives including extended

¹ The full final evaluation report is available online at sandag.org/index.asp?classid=14&subclassid=17&projectid=499&fuseaction=projects.detail

dayroom time and use of a microwave and coffee machine (under supervision); mandatory rehabilitative programming that focuses on criminogenic and other underlying risks and needs or that are quality of life focused, such as yoga, meditation, and art; a VMF Counselor who is located in the unit to provide one-on-one services to clients, as well as provide overall program management on a day-to-day basis; the regular availability of VA staff in the unit, including linkages to staff knowledgeable about benefits and other resources available upon reentry; and the guidance and assistance of a multi-disciplinary team (MDT) to support reentry transition for individuals needing additional assistance.

The general criteria for housing in this veteran module includes: (1) not being at a classification level above a four, which requires a maximum level of custody; (2) not having less than 30 days to serve in custody; (3) no state or federal prison holds and/or prison commitments; (4) no fugitive holds; (5) no prior admittance to the psychiatric security unit or a current psychiatric hold; (6) not currently a Post-Release Community Supervision Offender serving a term of flash incarceration; (7) not in custody for a sex-related crime or requirement to register per Penal Code 290; (8) no specialized housing requirements including protective custody, administration segregation, or medical segregation; and (9) no known significant disciplinary incidents. Discharge status from the military was not an eligibility factor.

Project subjects

Because random assignment of inmates to receive VMF services or to be in a “treatment as usual” control group was not feasible, a historical comparison group of clients was selected to compare to the Treatment Group that was the primary focus of the evaluation, as well as a Historical Treatment Group, to better understand how the program may have changed over time. The 141 Treatment Group clients entered the program between March 1, 2015 and December 31, 2016, had a program exit and release from custody date prior to January 1, 2017, and were in the program for at least 30 days. A total of 191 VMF clients were approached to be in the Treatment Group, but 24 declined to participate and 1 gave initial consent but later withdrew it; these individuals were not tracked. Of the remaining 166, 16 were excluded from the Treatment Group because they were in the program for less than 30 days (with the majority transferred to another placement, including regional recovery centers), 8 did not exit custody until after the cut-off date to track recidivism outcomes, and 1 had previously participated in VMF and was already in the Historical Treatment Group. The Comparison Group was composed of 98 veterans in Sheriff’s Department custody who would have been eligible for VMF, who were booked on or after January 1, 2013 and

were released from custody prior to January 1, 2015. The Historical Treatment Group included 91 VMF clients who entered the program on or after November 1, 2013 and had a program exit date prior to January 1, 2015 and a release from custody date prior to January 1, 2017.

Consistent with other research with veterans involved in the justice system, the Treatment Group included a greater proportion of Whites than the general population, as well as those that were older. Almost three in five (58%) of the VMF clients in the Treatment Group were White, 22 percent were Black, 15 percent Hispanic, and 4 percent represented other ethnicities. Their average age was 41.89 (SD = 12.12, range 21 to 66). Almost all (97%) had at least a high school degree or equivalent, 45 percent were employed at the time of their arrest and 21 percent were homeless (i.e., living on the street or in a public place). Around one in three (29%) had been arrested as a juvenile and 87 percent reported they had at least one arrest prior to the current one, with a median number of six prior arrests. The most common types of prior arrests included an alcohol/drug offense (80%) or a property crime (33%). In terms of the conviction which led to their VMF participation, 32 percent had been convicted for a highest charge that was a drug offense, 26 percent for a property offense, 21 percent for some other type of offense, 18 percent a violent offense, and 3 percent a weapons offense. The greatest proportion of clients reported that they had served in the U.S. Navy (38%), followed by the Army (29%), Marine Corps (28%), Air Force (3%), and Coast Guard (1%). Just over half (55%) reported they had been honorably discharged, followed by 28 percent who were "other than honorable", 14 percent who were generally discharged, 1 percent who were discharged for bad conduct, and 1 percent who were still active.

Project design and methods

Three key objectives guided this evaluation effort, including being able to (1) document how a veteran-only housing unit was implemented and managed; (2) determine if service delivery and inmate management are facilitated when veterans are housed together; and (3) determine if veteran reentry is more successfully accomplished and cost-effective when veterans are housed together. In addition, because the focus of the funding was on documenting the challenges and successes of a researcher-practitioner partnership, the nature and lessons learned from these interactions were tracked.

To measure these objectives, a variety of data collection methods were used. To understand how the program was implemented, data were compiled through 22 program observations; regular meetings with the practitioner

partners and other communication that was documented in a research journal; VMF Treatment Group surveys at intake (141 completed), program exit (113 completed, 80% response rate), and six-month follow-up (98 completed, 70% response rate); VMF key staff surveys in 2015 (33 completed), and 2016 (13 completed), and a key staff interview in 2017 (8 completed); surveys of deputies who worked in the unit but were not formally assigned to it (11 completed); two listening sessions with 19 VMF clients in 2016; and data compilation from program records to track service provision and COMPAS-based assessment data.

To measure outcomes, data were provided and shared through a Sheriff's Department data platform that included data on rule violations for all three study groups for the tracking period, as well as jail booking data (including number of days incarcerated, level, and type of booking charge) and prosecutorial conviction data (including level and type) for the 12-months following release from participation in VMF/custody. Arrest data for the 12-month follow-up period was also compiled from the Automated Regional Justice Information System (ARJIS), another data sharing platform for law enforcement in San Diego County. Cost data for the cost analysis were compiled from project partners and previous SANDAG studies (with prior years' rates updated using the Consumer Price Index).

The research methodology and instruments received approval from an independent (BioMed) Institutional Review Board (IRB) and SANDAG also complied with other NIJ-related research requirements including receiving a Privacy Certificate from the Department of Justice. Research limitations, which are described in more detail in the full evaluation report, include the lack of random assignment, reliance on a historical comparison group, and the lack of data that was initially hoped would be available (e.g., assessment data from the VA, greater level of documentation from the program).

Data analysis

Quantitative data for this project were entered and analyzed in SPSS or using R software. Descriptive statistics, measures of central tendency and variability, and cross-tabulations were run to summarize the data and identify patterns of responses. Open-ended responses were coded into thematic categories and analyzed to identify common themes. To control for the fact that the three samples differed significantly on a number of factors, a propensity score weighting method was used to estimate the average treatment effect unbiased for ethnicity, age at program entry, the COMPAS violence scale, and the COMPAS recidivism scale by weighting the sample prior to fitting a logistic regression model for conviction recidivism with the group as the sole covariate. The cost analysis

was done by considering the number of arrests, days in jail, and number of convictions and with the available cost data an average 12-month follow-up recidivism cost across the three study groups was computed.

Findings

VMF programming

- VMF Treatment Group clients spent a median of 68 days in the program (range 30 to 440 days).
- While VMF clients appeared to spend over 30 hours per week in programming², on average, there was variability in the types of classes offered over time, as well as from week to week. This fluctuation reflects the fact that no specific program funding had been provided for VMF (existing resources were reallocated), as well as the reliance on volunteers and staff with multiple responsibilities.
- Despite this variability, research staff program observations revealed that instructors appeared enthusiastic and knowledgeable, were communicating the information clearly, and that clients were engaged and appeared to be enjoying the material.
- On average, VMF clients in the Treatment Group reported they had attended 14 different types of classes and had found almost all (13 on average) to be “Very Useful” or “Useful”.
- At program exit, the program components/classes that VMF clients were most likely to describe as “Very Useful” included Thinking for a Change, a session on personal growth, an HIV awareness class, mentoring from a volunteer veterans group, a critical thinking class, and an anger management class, as well as meditation. At six-month follow-up, clients again noted the usefulness of Thinking for a Change, anger management, and critical thinking, but also noted that stress management and Co-Dependents Anonymous (CODA) had provided them with useful tools upon reentry.

Staff perceptions of the program

- Key staff consistently gave high ratings to how the program had been implemented and managed (100% rating of “Very Well” or “Somewhat Well” on both annual surveys). In explaining their ratings, common themes included that they could see the difference the collaborative rehabilitative focus (including classes and resources) was making with clients, the unit was a safer environment for all, and that building on the shared military

² Treatment data were not available for the Historical Comparison Group, and service provision could have varied as a function of which facility that inmate was housed at.

culture provided a strong starting point. However, at the same time, staff also noted that additional resources were needed, the change in facility leadership with different priorities could be challenging, the competing issues of maintaining safety while providing programming was an ongoing issue, and even more focus could be put on facilitating the clients' reentry back into the community.

- When key staff were asked what they thought the most effective components of VMF were, their top responses in both 2015 and 2016 included having deputies assigned to the unit who had a military background, having the VA in the unit and available to meet with clients while in custody, the one-on-one sessions with a counselor assigned to the unit, and the incentives.

Client perceptions of the program

- Almost all (98% at exit, 95% at follow-up) of the surveyed Treatment Group clients said they would recommend VMF to another veteran. Common themes at both survey times regarding why they would recommend it related to the perception that it works and is a good program, they obtained resources they would not have otherwise received, and that the veteran-only housing was a plus.
- As part of the post-release six-month follow-up survey, the Treatment Group was asked to describe if their needs had been met by VMF, and if so, where they had been met (in custody, after reentry, or both). VMF clients were most likely to report that their needs related to critical thinking (94%) and spiritual/personal development (91%) had been met. Three-quarters or more also said their needs related to general reintegration (88%), health (87%), relationships (87%), peer influences (86%), mental health (85%), substance abuse (84%), and education (76%) had been met. Needs related to housing (68%), financial (67%), and employment (60%) were less likely to be reported as met. With the exception of financial and employment, clients were more likely to say that each need had been met in custody rather than the community.
- When asked to describe the most helpful parts of VMF at exit and follow-up the top three responses both times included the class Thinking for a Change, the classes and programming overall, and that the VMF Unit offered a safe place to work on issues. When asked to describe the least helpful parts, clients surveyed at exit were most likely to note the challenge of having veterans in the unit who were not committed to change or who had issues that challenged the work that others were doing. Other responses on both surveys related to some of the programs that were not curriculum based (i.e., art, creative writing, yoga/meditation), the lack of consistency, and some of the staff.

Living situation and employment

- At six-month follow-up, about one in four (23%) reported they were living in their own residence, 24 percent with a family, friend, or significant other, 44 percent in some type of group situation, and 8 percent on the street. When intake and follow-up surveys were linked, of the 18 veterans who said they were homeless at intake, one in four (24%) still described their predominant housing status as homeless at follow-up, 53 percent said they were in a group living situation, 12 percent their own residence, and 12 percent were living with friends or family. This reiterates the struggle of securing long-term housing for those veterans that have a history of unstable housing.
- Also at follow-up, around 2 in 5 were employed – 30 percent full-time and 11 percent part-time. Twenty-three percent (23%) were retired, disabled, or a student, 21 percent were unemployed and looking for employment and 15 percent were unemployed and not looking. When asked to rate the usefulness of the VMF employment assistance, 57 percent gave the highest rating of “Very Well” at exit, compared to 35 percent at follow-up. Of those who had a job at follow-up, just around half (53%) reported they had obtained it within a couple of weeks of release and when asked how they got the job, 49 percent said on their own and 24 percent indicated it was a job they had before their incarceration.

Linking to VA services and reentry

- Most, but not all, of the VMF Treatment Group reported on the exit survey that they had met with the VA Social Worker (83%) and VA Benefits Worker (79%) at least one time while in custody. While almost all rated these services as “Very Helpful” or “Helpful”, those who met with the VA staff more regularly were significantly more likely to give these staff and services the highest rating of “Very Helpful”. For example, about 1 in 5 VMF clients said they met weekly with the VA Social Worker and 90 percent said her assistance was “Very Helpful”, but of those who said they met only monthly (also about 1 in 5), only 45 percent said the services were “Very Helpful”.
- When asked at follow-up if they had received services in the community, only 61 percent said they had, with 44 percent saying they received services from the VA and 31 percent from another service provider (clients could indicate that they received services from both entities). The four most frequently provided services by the VA and other agencies in the community were the same – housing, mental health, medical/dental, and substance abuse. A greater percentage of clients expressed the need for help with living expenses and compensation/pension than may have received it. Clients were more likely to receive mental health, Social Security/disability, legal, and education assistance through the VA than other entities.

Outcomes

- Based on feedback that veterans in the VMF Unit were better behaved than inmates in the general population, data were compiled regarding rule violations. This perception proved to be correct, with only 1 percent of the Treatment Group having any documented rule violations during their time in VMF, compared to 43 percent of the Comparison Group and 18 percent of the Historical Treatment Group.
- Overall, 17 percent of the Treatment Group, 25 percent of the Comparison Group, and 21 percent of the Historical Treatment Group had a conviction for a new offense in the 12 months following release. The weighted logistic regression model showed that the probability of the Treatment Group having a conviction, unbiased for differences in ethnicity, age, the COMPAS violence scale, and the COMPAS recidivism scale during the follow-up period was 16.3 percent, compared to 18.2 percent for the Historical Treatment Group. Both probabilities were significantly less than the 27.1 percent for the Comparison Group. This suggests that VMF participation, as a proxy for treatment, had a significant effect in reducing the probability that an individual would be convicted for a new offense in the 12 months following release from custody. However, it is important to note that there were no significant differences in the proportion arrested and booked during follow-up, even when the propensity score matching model was applied.
- Because VMF did not have any documented costs, the cost analysis focused on the justice system cost of recidivism to include the number of arrests for individuals in the three groups, days in jail, and number of convictions. Because the two treatment groups spent more time in jail, even though they were less likely to be convicted, the cost analysis did not show any cost savings for VMF during the 12-month follow-up period with the costs (arrest, jail, conviction) considered alone (\$5,577 Treatment Group, \$4,005 Comparison Group, and \$8,360 Historical Treatment Group).

Implications for policy and practice

- As evidence-based practice has shown, changing criminal thinking can have long-term positive impacts for those who are ready to change and committed to their rehabilitation. While few clients entered the program identifying their thoughts as an issue, the nurturing environment of the veteran-only housing unit, coupled with participation in cognitive-based therapy (CBT) programming appeared to truly make a difference. A commitment to maintaining the quantity and quality of these proven programs by the Sheriff's Department is encouraged.

- Because VMF was implemented without any additional resources or budget and resulted in fewer rule violations and other positive outcomes, it is encouraging to consider what other low-cost changes could be implemented that would increase the quality of the detention experience for both staff and inmates.
- While being able to create and maintain a program without any dedicated funding speaks to the strength of existing partnerships, the Sheriff's Department commitment to veterans, and the collaboration across agencies, it is a challenge that was evidenced by schedules and curriculums that changed by necessity. Having a dedicated person to identify community partners and serve as a conduit between screening and training would be a helpful addition to this type of effort.
- While the feedback from clients and outcome results showed the positive effect of the VMF program, there appeared to be a few areas that could be further strengthened in partnership with the VA and connections to other community service providers, including meeting basic needs, housing, and employment. With only about three in five clients linked to outside services, exploring the barriers, as well as implementing additional best practices (e.g., transportation assistance), may improve these connections and in turn transitions to the community.
- Maintaining a balance between security and strong programming is a challenge in a detention facility. As the focus shifts to increasing the availability of rehabilitative programming, a necessary issue for jail staff to be aware of and plan for is how safety and security will be maintained. On-going communication, tracking, and flexibility are needed.
- Determining the appropriate client eligibility criteria for a veteran-only housing unit can be challenging and there may be a difference of opinion between staff and clients regarding how important readiness to change is, as well as other factors related to mental health issues. As part of this evaluation, some clients felt that having veterans in the program not committed to positive change had a negative impact on the environment overall. Programs may want to consider a more formal assessment for inclusion or a probation period prior to full inclusion in the unit.

- Having staff at all levels who care and demonstrate this to clients is essential. Even when other program issues may arise, knowing that they are seen as individuals and someone believes in them, is something many of the justice population may not have experienced before and can potentially be a buffer when other resources are not consistently available.
- Even though some of the staff started working in VMF because of their prior military experience or their desire to help veterans, it can include a large shift from prior duties. As such, understanding the training needs of staff early on, including expectations of the expanded role of an assigned deputy, is important. Closely related, volunteers may be identified who have a reentry knowledge, but may not understand the military culture. Cross-training in this area is something that also could be explored.
- Many programs may expand to accommodate eligible clients that could benefit from services, but find that once they do, they have stretched themselves thinner than desirable. Having a clear understanding of all the effects of expansion, including being able to dedicate adequate time to administrative tasks, is important so that quality of programming is not compromised.
- For researchers interested in working in detention settings with practitioners, demonstrating an understanding of the jail culture; providing consistent staffing; displaying openness, transparency, and no hidden agendas; seeking the input and feedback from the practitioner; and sharing data on a regular basis are important components of a strong working relationship.
- While this research adds to the field's knowledge regarding the effectiveness of a veteran-only housing unit, additional research would be beneficial that could build on this work by using a randomized controlled trial, exploring what mechanisms in particular may be generating effects (e.g. important program services versus veteran-only housing), and determining how the results may generalize to female veterans.