

# GAO@100 Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-21-564](#), a report to congressional committees

## Why GAO Did This Study

Veterans who have been arrested and jailed are at an increased risk of homelessness, mental health conditions, and suicide. To address these concerns and prevent re-incarceration, VA created the VJO program, which served over 30,000 veterans in fiscal year 2020. The Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act of 2018 included a provision for GAO to assess VA's implementation of the act's requirements.

This report examines the extent to which VA has (1) implemented the act's hiring and reporting requirements, (2) identified and addressed barriers that veterans face in accessing VJO specialists, and (3) conducted and used research to improve the use of VA services by veterans in the program.

GAO reviewed relevant federal laws and VA documentation, including program guidance, policies, plans, and reports; reviewed selected studies on veterans' use of the VJO program; interviewed VA and VJO officials; and analyzed VA data for fiscal years 2016 through 2020 on veterans served by the program.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO is making three recommendations to VA, including that VA improve VJO specialists' training to increase awareness of services available to veterans with other-than-honorable discharges; and enhance planning for research on the use of VA services by veterans in criminal justice systems. VA concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-21-564](#). For more information, contact Elizabeth H. Curda at (202) 512-7215 or [curdae@gao.gov](mailto:curdae@gao.gov).

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## VETERANS JUSTICE OUTREACH PROGRAM

### Further Actions to Identify and Address Barriers to Participation Would Promote Access to Services

## What GAO Found

In response to the Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act of 2018, Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) data show the agency hired 51 Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) specialists, though VA completed its hiring and reporting after the statute's deadline. The program relies on nearly 400 VJO specialists—primarily social workers—who work with jails and municipal courts to identify and assess the needs of arrested or incarcerated veterans, and connect them to VA health care services. In addition, VA's reporting to Congress lacked required information, such as the number of veterans who lack access to VJO specialists. Although VA does not collect these data, VJO program officials said that future research will help them estimate this number.

VA has identified and taken some steps to address barriers that veterans may face in accessing VJO specialists and receiving services. GAO additionally found that veterans with other-than-honorable discharges—often at greater risk of mental health issues and suicide—may not know they are eligible under a 2020 VA policy that extends mental health care services to certain members of this subgroup. (See figure.) In addition, this policy change and newly available services are not reflected in training for VJO specialists. As a result, veterans may not meet with VJO specialists and miss an opportunity to get help accessing VA's health care services.

### Barriers Justice-Involved Veterans (JIV) May Face Accessing VJO Specialists



Source: GAO analysis of Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) information. | GAO-21-564

VA and others have conducted research on the use of VA services by veterans in the VJO program, and VA officials have used this research to improve the program by educating staff and further directing their research. However, VJO research and improvement efforts are not guided by project plans that define goals and identify needed resources, such as stakeholder expertise, as called for by generally recognized project management practices. VJO officials told GAO that research is a key strategy for improving VJO services and that they intend to develop a plan, but do not have a timeframe for doing so. Until the VJO program develops detailed project plans that also identify needed resources, program officials will not have a road map to improve the use of VA services by veterans in the VJO program.