

Cincinnati Police Department's Veterans Response Program— Deflecting Veterans into VA Health Care

Voiceover

00:00

Welcome to *The Beat*—a podcast series from the COPS Office at the Department of Justice. Featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines, *The Beat* provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics in community policing.

Jennifer Donelan

00:16

Hello, and welcome to *The Beat*. I'm Jennifer Donelan, your host. Today's interview is being hosted via Zoom. There are an estimated 18 million veterans in the United States. And following the recently concluded 20-year global war on terror, veterans have returned to communities throughout the country, and some have been challenged in making the transition and moving beyond their wartime experiences. It follows that if a veteran is in crisis, homeless, or in need of a service, they can end up interacting with law enforcement. However, in too many cases, police are challenged by a lack of resources or options beyond arrest.

Today we'll be talking with two people who have made supporting veterans a part of their profession and teamed up to serve those who served our country. With us are Sergeant Dave Corlett, who is the military liaison coordinator for the Cincinnati Police Department, and Ron Michaelson, who's with the Veterans Justice Outreach Program at the Cincinnati Veterans Administration Medical Center. Together, they are the anchors of a Veterans Response Program in Cincinnati that was started by Sergeant Corlett and later formalized by the CPD. Gentlemen, welcome to *The Beat*.

Sergeant David Corlett

01:30

Thanks, Jennifer. Glad to be here.

Donelan

01:32

The reason why I'm so excited about this particular subject and getting an opportunity to speak with both of you is because we get to uncover something for our listeners, and I really hope that they walk away with information that they can turn around and implement in their communities because I know that this is a challenge across the country and the answer, as so many are finding, isn't arrest; there's got to be something more. And I think you guys have that information that could help them take things to the next level and really help people. So, this is amazing, and I can't wait until people hear your story. So, Sergeant Corlett, I'm going to start with you. We start all of our shows with the same question: How did you get started in law enforcement? Just a brief, little... Walk us through. Why'd you pick this career?

Corlett

02:18

Well, that's going back a little farther than I thought we were going. I was in the military. I was in Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm back in 1990, and we got back from Iraq. The first time, we were kind of sitting around. I was a young soldier and the helicopters that we had were all broken, and my wife didn't want me to deploy again. And I kind of made the decision it was time to move on, but I didn't really know what I wanted to do when I grew up. There was an Apache helicopter pilot in my unit who had previously been a New Orleans police officer. He left policing to become an army helicopter pilot. And he used to sit around and tell me stories about law enforcement, stories about, you know, chasing the bad guy and stories about helping people and putting the bad guy in jail.

And I remember sitting there as a 21-year-old, 22-year-old kid thinking, "You know what, I could probably do that. That sounds like something that I wouldn't get bored with and I'd have a mission." And all of those things that I liked about the military seemed to exist in law enforcement. So, based on everything he told me, I started going to job fairs and I wrote to departments around the country and started taking tests. I was fortunate enough to be offered three different positions in the region in the Midwest, and I ended up choosing Cincinnati. I wasn't originally from here, but I chose Cincinnati and here we are 30 years later.

Donelan

03:33

So much of your past and your military background plays such a huge role in this. And I don't want to take away from that part of the story because I want you to tell that next. So, you are working now as a Cincinnati police officer; you're coming up through the ranks; you're going on your calls; you're seeing what you're seeing out there on the streets—tell me about that moment, that call that you went on where this program sort of found its birth.

Corlett

04:03

There were a couple of specific incidents. We dealt with veterans throughout our time and my partner was also a Desert Storm veteran, so we spent a lot of time together. But it was in maybe 2013, 2014, I had been a middle manager, a supervisor, with the police department for a good number of years already, and I made a traffic stop one night in an area called Over-the-Rhine and when I stopped this car, the guy got out of the car. And as I approached him, he immediately took a position of parade rest. Which is, you know, a military position just under attention. It was showing me some respect and showing me that he was paying attention to me. And I talked to this young man.

It was clear to me that he was, you know, just out of the military or he was still in the military. And we had a conversation about what he was doing in this neighborhood at this time of the morning. And he finally opened up to tell me that he was searching for heroin. He was trying to buy narcotics and that he was an addict and he had only been out of the military for about six months and he just didn't know what to do. At that point in time—I've kind of always been known as a military-style supervisor—he stood at attention while I yelled at him.

I made him feel bad about his life and I made him feel bad about his choices and his decisions, and I made him feel like he had embarrassed every veteran that came before him. And he literally broke down into tears. And at that point in time he would've accepted any help I had to offer him, whether it was rehabilitation, whether it was jail, whether it was... Anything I could have given him at that point, he was in a position to accept and make his life better, but it was only at that point that I realized I had nothing to offer him. I'd been a police officer for, you know, 25 years, or 24 years. I'd been a city supervisor for over 20 years, and I had nothing to offer this kid to help him. He didn't need to be in jail. He wasn't a violent felon. He was only hurting himself and the community at large, and I had nothing to offer him.

So that was one of them. And then there was another one where I found a veteran in his home, deceased, living in a vacant building with no family, no communications, no connections. I started volunteering my time with a national peer support group called Battle in Distress. And they still exist—it's Battle in Distress. They do a fantastic job of supporting veterans who are struggling across the country. They're available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, but it's strictly a peer support group. While I was doing that, they determined that my best function for them was to continue to be a law enforcement crisis intervention officer. And whenever they would receive a call from a veteran who was suicidal or who they felt was in danger of suicidal tendencies, they would get me involved.

And I would be the guy who collected the information and called the Orlando Police Department to notify them of this suicidal veteran, because I knew that information was necessary for the police officers to make a safe response to keep both the veteran and the police safe. I did this for probably eight to 10 months, and we were involved in SWAT standoffs and suicidal veterans from coast to coast—Port St. Lucie, Florida, to San Diego, to Las Vegas, to Dallas—and it suddenly occurred to me that here I am out there throwing my name and my rank and my city and my department around, and I've really never talked to my command staff about the fact that I'm doing it. Command staffs don't typically like to hear about things you're doing from outside the agency; they like to hear about it before that.

At that point, one of the assistant chiefs was a friend of mine; he had been one of my supervisors early in my career, and I talked to him about what I had been doing and he recommended I have a sit-down meeting with the chief. So, the chief scheduled me 15 minutes and I walked in and he said, "So I hear you've been doing some things, you know, outside of the department, representing yourself as a member of the department." And I said, "Yes, sir, I have." He said, "Well, you have 15 minutes to convince me that it's a good idea." And I spent 15 minutes—probably more than that because I talk a lot—convincing him that what we were doing was necessary, needed, and we were able to provide things that other people couldn't.

By the end of the 15 minutes, the chief looked at me and he said, "That's an absolutely fantastic program. You are no longer a volunteer with that agency, you are going to start that as a department program, and you will run that program. Go forth and do good things." And at that point, the Military Liaison Group in the Cincinnati Police Department was born. And we, from that point, have taken on any number of tasks from crisis intervention training to PTSD recognition training to personally taking people up to the VA system, getting them into the VA system. We're working with the veterans court system.

We do national military recruiting programs, pretty much anything that has to do with the VA or the DoD, we somehow get involved in. And we've had tremendous success and we've received tremendous recognition. I couldn't be more grateful for the positivity that's come out of this program.

Donelan

08:43

This story is actually an example of ask for permission or ask for forgiveness that worked in your favor.

Corlett

08:48

It did. It did.

Donelan

08:48

But I see why it probably took less than 15 minutes for him to sign on to that, but good on you for stepping out there like that. I want to take it back just a little bit. And if you could, in your own words, take us inside your personal feelings. Quite frankly, you've been there. You've been on the front lines, and you've come home. I'm sure you had your own demons and challenges you had to face internally. You made a decision to enter into law enforcement, others—as you've witnessed in your own community—didn't have that sort of positive decision making; they ended up doing some other things. And what went through your heart and mind? Did you have to battle internally with things that nobody else knew what was going on with you? And then when you would see your brothers and sisters out in the community like that, suffering like that, how did that grab you?

Corlett

9:35

I've always felt like I have had a phenomenal support network. I was married at a very young age. My wife and I got married right when I finished my training in the military, so we've been together over 30 years and we kind of grew up together, so she was a part of all that. I've always had her support. And then when I came on the department here, the guy I spent 12 hours a day with, and was an 82nd Airborne veteran who was also in Desert Storm, we were able to talk to each other and bounce things off of each other. And, you know, and then as we went through our careers, obviously, there were a lot of traumas we dealt with in our careers.

And as I got older and I realized what those were, I've had the support of the VA staff. And, you know, one of the doctors at the VA that I teach with routinely calls me to check in on me when bad things happen because I'm always somehow involved when some horrible crime happens. And she always texts me to make sure I'm okay and let me know that she's there for me to talk to. And I've always had that support, so doing what I do, I found out very quickly that that was what was lacking in the veteran community. When these younger soldiers are coming home from deployment, a lot of them are no longer with the unit or the people they had those experiences with, and they don't have someone that they can relate to to talk about them with.

So, what I found in the department, and we try to intervene prior to arrest, that's one of our big goals, is to intervene prior to arrest or that suicidal call or anything like that. So, we became the peer support on scene. So, when the soldier's mother would call and say that, you know, "Johnny's in the basement. He's been drinking a 12-pack a night. He can't hold a job. He's not sleeping. He's fighting with everybody." We now, as an agency, recognize that to be a deeper problem. And we're able to sometimes, or most of the time, step in using our shared experience to get that soldier help. And they're most often willing to accept it from another soldier.

Donelan

11:25

It sounds like you had an amazing support system. And as you mentioned, these men and women were coming home and didn't have that support system in place. It also sounds like, based on what you were saying, that you've gotten to a point now where people are calling you ahead of the bad thing happening. How do you deal with this and how does this kick in—or does it kick in—when you're in a situation? You know, where a crime has been committed or it's drunk driving—you've got them pulled over, you recognize there's a veteran there... Does the program kick in there at all? Or is it, at that point, the law is the law and now we have to—

Corlett

11:58

Right, no, we don't forgive criminal offenses in lieu of treatment or health. But what we will do is, in addition to the necessary criminal charges, is offer the support to ensure that it doesn't occur again. We will often make referrals into the veterans court system if we think that the charges are appropriate. And we also have a lot of resources outside of the VA community because one of the things we ran into was we were dealing with a lot of veterans that weren't eligible for VA care. So, we had to develop a network of resources that were basically 501(c)(3)s who were willing to help any veteran regardless of the circumstances.

So, we don't forgive criminal charges. The only time that we're able to intervene prior to criminal charges is when those calls come in, you know, about... I guess a good example is we get a family trouble run, and it's a husband and wife who are arguing every night. There's not been any domestic violence committed, there's not been any threats, but they just can't seem to reconnect the way they used to. You know, we're able to offer counseling, we're able to pull that veteran aside and talk to him about the transition that he or she is making back from a combat theater, the difference between the military and the civilian world, and how you can get yourself back to being a productive member and happy person.

And they usually accept that. You know, when I start with, "Hey, listen, my name's Dave Corlett. I'm a Sergeant with the Cincinnati Police Department, but I'm going to talk to you as a veteran. I'm an Iraq vet. I've been in a combat theater; I've experienced some traumas and I've been through a lot of the thought processes that you've been through, or that you're going through. And I'm also a patient at the VA. And I know some people up there who can help you or make your life easier. I want to take you up

there and introduce you to them.” That method is usually accepted. Nine out of 10 times that veteran says, “You know what, I’ll go with you if you’re going to take me up there yourself and you know somebody up there.” We’re able to make that connection.

So, we here in Cincinnati, we’ve expanded upon that, and it’s not just me. You know, my left-hand man, his name’s Terrence and he’s a Marine. So, we have the same thing for the Marine Corps, and I have other officers who were Air Force and Navy, and I’ve even got Coast Guard. So, we try even to be branch-specific when we’re helping people.

Donelan

14:01

When you’re talking to a veteran and you say, “I’m a veteran,” do you see the change? Because, you know, just one human being to another, when you know you’re talking to somebody who understands what you’re going through... Changes the course of the conversation off entirely.

Corlett

14:16

It absolutely changes the direction of the conversation. Because, typically, one of the things I use in crisis intervention is that veteran connection. If I discover that you’re a veteran and you’re dealing with some serious deep trauma, I’m going to take you to a happier place. I’m going to ask you, you know, what branch were you in? Who did you serve with? Where did you go to basic? Did you deploy? Who was your best friend when you were in the military? Are you still in contact with them? Because, typically, what I find is that even if a soldier experienced those traumas during his time in the military, he’s going to have some fond memories of the military.

And going back to that beginning when you were just learning that world can take someone’s mind to an entirely different place, and a lot of times can bring them out of that place where they are and make our interaction a lot less confrontational. You know, one of the things that Ron has always liked so much—and we did this in the department early on—we ordered branch pins for all of the officers. So, every uniformed officer in the city of Cincinnati who is a military veteran wears on their uniform a branch designator pin. So, mine is a green one that says Army; my partner’s is a red one that says USMC. So, when we go into somebody’s house, you would be astounded at how quickly they notice that pin. That’s typically the first point of conversation for any of my veteran officers when they enter a room: “Hey, you were in the Marine Corps? Who’d you serve with?” And that conversation starts and it’s non-confrontational. So that’s a benefit to us as law enforcement.

Donelan

15:38

You know, it’s interesting because as you’re talking, you’re talking about this pin, you’re talking about military veterans, so many of whom work in law enforcement—so the resources have been sitting there right in front of us, right?

Corlett

15:50

Yes, absolutely.

Donelan

15:50

The pin is very simple; the people are here. It all seems very simple. Gosh, why didn't we start doing this a long time ago? Why isn't everybody doing this?

Corlett

15:59

I sometimes question why I didn't think of it 20 years ago instead of eight years ago.

Donelan

16:03

And you're right, they're going to check your uniform, right? You know, and they see that pin and you don't even have to say a word and it's a game changer within itself. Walk me through a call for those agencies that don't have the military liaison officer. Walk me through a typical call so people kind of understand how this all works.

Corlett

16:19

So, we'll do both. I train here; I train PTSD recognition as part of our crisis intervention program. And that means that officers from all over the region get to know that we exist. Because one of the things I tell them is what the military liaison group does, and I provide them contact information for myself and Terence and Tammy Brown, who are my, you know, probably the three most active people. But on a routine call, I'm in Downtown Area District 1 of Cincinnati. Say a District 4 officer at 3:00 in the morning gets a family trouble run for a veteran. He'll make that run just like any other household and he will try to make the connection with the veteran. And if he finds himself struggling with being able to connect with this veteran or being able to help this situation, he has the ability to get on the radio and ask for any MLG officer.

Now, any MLG officer is any one of the 340 veterans in my department who have sat down and listened to me talk for an hour and are willing to answer the radio and come talk Marine-to-Marine on that radio run. And we do that a lot, actually. You'll hear officers ask for an MLG officer and somebody will answer up from another district or wherever it may be. They'll drive to that location. They'll make that connection. We don't expect them to call us all the time to fix whatever the problem is. We do more of a triage system so that those officers are able to make that connection, and they're familiar with the resources that they need to refer the veteran to. They handle it and then they just notify me of the run and give me the information.

And I put it aside in case we, you know, have further contact with that veteran in the future. Or I may notify our VJO program that we had that contact with the veteran and the VJO program is then able to get that information into that veteran's medical folder so that his psychologists or psychiatrists or anybody he's seeing at the VA will know about that law enforcement contact and be able to modify treatment for that reason. Now, if I get that information, and Terrence and I are reviewing it and we determine that a follow up is probably in order, or that we know something that would benefit this veteran further, he and I will not hesitate to drive out to the house and introduce ourselves and offer our services to this veteran.

He's not under any need or necessity to follow our recommendations or accept our help, but, typically, we get shock and awe that the police department cared enough to come back, and come back not to arrest anybody but to offer assistance to make somebody's life better. Now, outside the agency, it kind of works the same way. Actually, the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department, which is our local Sheriff's Department, is developing the same model. I was on the phone with a lieutenant from the Sheriff's Department yesterday and agreed to go out and teach her deputies how we do things. But for say smaller departments who can't field that operational unit or units that are farther away, they are provided our contact information.

Our recall information is at our communication section. So, if you call Cincinnati 911 and ask for the military guy, you get one of the three of us. And we're going to answer that phone, you know, 24/7 when you need us. And the direction I was given originally by my command staff was, you know, the program that you run is needed and necessary and it saves people's lives. And the chief told me, you know, I'm to make myself available to whoever needs my help. And that means if Dayton PD calls in the middle of the night, I put on a uniform and drive to Dayton, or if Indianapolis PD calls in the middle of the night, I put on a uniform and drive to Indianapolis. So, I have the full support of my command staff, which is absolutely necessary to be successful.

Donelan

19:40

And you said 300 officers in your department?

Corlett

19:43

We're a 1,000-man department, and last check I had over 330 veterans. So more than 33 percent veteran.

Donelan

19:49

When you were describing how the process works, I was thinking about interpreters, right? These are officers who speak another language.

Corlett

19:56

Absolutely, and they do. If you've ever heard two Marines talk to each other, normal people can't even understand it.

Donelan

20:01

Right. And, you know, I am a layman, so this all makes so much sense to me. So, I want to talk cost and I want to talk payoff. But before we do that, I want to bring Ron in—Ron Michaelson. The Veterans Health Administration is a component of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. And it's the largest integrated health care system in the U.S. providing care to over nine million veterans at more than 1,200 health care facilities, including 171 VA centers. The message to take from that: It's a lot. Ron, you're with the Veterans Justice Outreach Program, correct? At Cincinnati Veterans Administration Medical Center, do I have that right?

Ron Michaelson

20:39

That's correct.

Donelan

20:40

So, what is the focus of your program?

Michaelson

20:42

Well, it's kind of like it sounds—a Veterans Justice Outreach. We're tasked with providing outreach services to justice-involved veterans in whatever venue we find them. We outreach to courts and work with attorneys. If a veteran has a case, a criminal case pending in a court system, if they are in jail awaiting adjudication of the case, we will actually go physically to that jail and go into the jail and do assessments with the primary purpose of trying to identify what those treatment needs are that that veteran has. And to see whether or not the VA is well positioned to provide them with treatment for those needs.

So, we work with courts and attorneys. We do that direct jail outreach, and sort of the third leg of the stool, as I like to describe it, is to work with police and other first responders with the idea that we want to, you know, capture this veteran on the front end of their justice involvement before they penetrate the criminal justice system any further, and deflect them into the VA system of care. So that's kind of how I came to work with Dave and became familiar with his program.

Donelan

21:47

And that's exactly what I was going to ask you. How did you hook up with Sergeant Corlett? Tell me that story.

Michaelson

21:52

It is an interesting story. You know, part of our work, and I believe Dave may have mentioned this earlier, is to work directly with veterans treatment courts, veterans treatment court teams. I believe we have eight or perhaps nine veterans treatment courts in the greater Cincinnati area that we staff. And it just so happens that Dave was at one of these veterans treatment court proceedings that I was working at. The presiding judge of the vet court program introduced the two of us and he kind of looked at me and said, "What do you do?" And I told him, then I looked at him and said, "What do you do?" And he told me.

And we found that our interests and our mission aligned very neatly. So, we thought, "You know what, I think we're probably going to want to talk again so we can kind of figure out a direction forward and see how our respective efforts complement one another. So it was that fateful day, I think, in that veterans treatment court docket that kind of sparked everything between Dave and I and it just kind of grew from there.

Donelan

22:50

Was this before Sergeant Corlett told his bosses what he was doing or after?

Michaelson

22:54

I'm not sure. I know, for us, this is part of our job. We're encouraged to seek these relationships out with first responder agencies for the reasons I gave to deflect those veterans into the VA health care system before they get further involved with the criminal justice system. So, this is part of my job; this is part of my charge. And I've just been really grateful to have someone as committed as Dave, Sergeant Corlett, has been to this process and to this mission. This truly is his baby and he has grown this exponentially, drawn in other very disparate community stakeholders, brought them to the table. Anybody who will listen, he'll talk to about the effort on behalf of our veterans. Some of our most vulnerable veterans, too.

Donelan

23:38

Sergeant Corlett, where were you in the process when you met Ron?

Corlett

23:41

No, I had already talked to the command staff. Actually, it was, I think it was one of the members of the command staff that told me I needed to go down to the courthouse and talk to Judge Melissa Powers. And Judge Powers and I were actually friends from when I was a 23-year-old policeman and she was a brand-new prosecutor and she was the veterans court treatment judge. So, I showed up in court a couple times and I watched Ron doing what he does and I was like, "Man, it really seems like he and I need to talk." He—

Donelan

24:17

Oh, help, help, this is great. [Laughs]

Corlett

24:06

Yeah. Yeah, and then, like he said, as soon as we talked about, well, what his function was? I was like, "Well, that's exactly what I want to do. So, yeah, we need to work together." And to Ron's credit in dealing with the VA—myself, you don't always get what you want out of the VA—but Ron has been more than willing to be active in what we do. There's occasions that Ron's gone out on radio runs with me in a patrol car and met the veteran that was struggling. There's one particular occasion where District 3 called me, and I got out there and this guy was in such bad shape. He was drinking several fifths of vodka a day, begging me not to let him die. And I was like, "Ron, you got to meet this guy."

And Ron came out to the scene and the two of us decided right then and there that we needed to transport him up to the VA and signed him into detox. And we did. So, I put him in a police car and Ron met him up at the VA and we signed him into detox, you know, an hour after the call. So, it's taken both of us to make our efforts successful.

Donelan

25:01

You know, when you were talking about the fact that this doesn't replace charges, it does sound like Ron's there to sort of catch them once they could move from point A to B, if they are charged in the vet court. Am I understanding that correctly?

Corlett

25:11

Correct. And another thing that I've learned in dealing with veterans, which was totally opposite of the way I came up as a young policeman... As a young policeman, if I stopped a combat veteran doing something not so serious that nobody would really care about, I often would cut them a break and tell them not to ever do it again. But what I've learned in my middle and senior age is that veterans who are in crisis, who are acting out in those ways respond much better to being held accountable for their actions.

So, a lot of times I'll get a call from a young policeman at night asking me if they should charge this guy or whether they should, you know, just refer him to me. And oftentimes my answer is to file the charges because if we bring him into veterans court, then we can hold him accountable for his actions. And we could ensure that he seeks the treatment that he needs. He can't just disappear.

Donelan

25:55

Ron, you work for a government organization. Sometimes you have to take steps when you're introducing something new. And I think that this is going to be beneficial for our listeners hearing this and wanting to maybe start something like this with their particular agency. Were there steps that you had to take in order to work with Sergeant Corlett on your end of things?

Michaelson

26:15

That's a great question, Jennifer, and as I said before, interfacing with law enforcement and other first responders is a part of the gig, right? For VJO specialists, I mean, that's part of what we're tasked with doing. Now how we do that, and the manner in which we engage is probably very individualized. I know for myself, internal to the Cincinnati VA, certainly I had the support of my supervisor kind of like Dave was talking earlier about his command staff—you never want to have your supervisor caught flat footed or learn about what you're doing at a meeting and then have to explain yourself afterwards.

So, I just had to apprise my supervisor what it was I was doing, what direction it was taking. It was brand new, so we weren't exactly sure what this would look like, what it could look like. So just apprising my chain of command along the way that, you know, this is what we're doing; this is how it's developing; this is how it's evolving. Any kind of media appearances that we would do, I would always alert them and our public affairs staff to the nature of that. So, there was no real significant processes or steps that I, you know, had to take from a field-level staff standpoint. My focus was just talking to Dave and his team and giving them a very clear understanding of what I could do, what I couldn't do.

You know, the VA is a health care facility, so HIPAA laws apply. So, we had to be very clear on the front end about any kind of privacy rules, confidentiality that was in play. And just describing that for Dave and his team that, "Hey, you know, you can give me this information. I can let the veterans providers know what's going on that there was a police contact made. Probably not going to be able to share with you on the back end what the disposition was because of confidentiality."

Donelan

27:57

Right, right.

Michaelson

27:57

Now if the veteran signs a release of information specific for Sergeant Corlett, sure, as long as it spells out the exact nature of the information to be shared, I can go back to the well with Dave or any officer and let him know kind of what the disposition or the outcome was. But, typically, that's not typical. So, he understood very early on that, you know, this was going to be a refer and that's probably about it unless he went back, as he mentioned earlier, to that veteran's home for a follow up.

Donelan

28:25

And the veteran told Sergeant Corlett what happened, but it was on the veteran to share that. And I see that because a lot of what police do from arrest, listing of charges, court docs, in terms of affidavit, statement of charges—those are public documents for the most part. That's public information. When you start getting into the health care component, HIPAA is the guideline.

Michaelson

28:45

It really is, and we at the VA take that very, very seriously. I think most medical centers do that. But one thing to help facilitate... You know, one of the biggest obstacles as part of this type of arrangement is identification, right? I mean, it's always about correctly identifying whether or not the person that you're dealing with is actually a veteran. And then once you establish that, what are their eligibilities? Because the VA has a number of programs, and sometimes the eligibility criteria changes based on the program.

Donelan

29:15

I wanted to ask you that because not all veterans are eligible, correct? For VA health care to include mental health care, and that's a big chunk of it.

Michaelson

29:24

Yeah, I think that's a common misperception among the general public. I think most people, lay people, might think that if a person served in the military, then obviously they're entitled to that benefit of VA health care. And that's not exactly true, right? There's a set of eligibility criteria having to do with the number of days of active duty service that veteran served. What was their character of service? Did they separate from the military with an honorable, a general under honorable conditions discharge? And there's also a financial component, a means test, involved in that eligibility criteria, but that's a pretty heavy-duty topic to get into with eligibility because it's very dense and it could change. There's so many factors and considerations to make, but you're correct, Jennifer, not every veteran is eligible. But that's part of what I do for Dave. When he calls with a veteran, I have access to secure database systems where I can look this veteran up and see, and at least give them a cursory understanding as to what the eligibilities for that particular veteran is. And then we can chart a path forward based on that.

Donelan

30:26

So is your recommendation for law enforcement who are thinking about this or listening to this and saying, "You know what, I've got a lot of veterans within my organization. This is something we could pull off." Do you suggest out the gate—I'm going to ask both of you this—that you're connecting with the veterans administration in some capacity to have that sort of expertise on hand to help guide you through that?

Corlett

30:46

Ron, you want to go first?

Michaelson

30:47

Absolutely. This is our task; this is what we've been charged to do in the Veterans Justice Outreach Program is to work with these agencies to deflect veterans into VA care when possible and when appropriate. So that said, you know, there are VJO specialists, people like me, oftentimes multiple people like me, that make up teams attached to every single VA medical center across the country. So, I guess the message to law enforcement is: Yes, reach out to your respective VA medical center. Cold call. Call them up and say, "Hey, I need to talk to the Veterans Justice Outreach specialist. And they should be able to link to one of us to start that conversation.

There's actually a list online of every single specialist across the country that is broken down by state and their respective medical center that they work for. It's online, you know, anybody can do a search—just a Google search of Veterans Justice Outreach Program—and they can navigate to that page and find out who the specialist is that they should be speaking to.

Donelan

31:50

Before I hear from Sergeant Corlett, let's just go back to that Veterans Justice Outreach Program specialist, right? That's what they need to be looking for. And the Justice Outreach Program, it can help law enforcement identify veterans eligible in whether or not they're eligible for services. You can access mental health care needs. Talk a little bit about this other piece with the training and education related to judicially approved options to incarceration. Translate that for me. You can assist or what? Can you offer advice in veterans court on what an appropriate sentence might include and the options?

Michaelson

32:26

Typically, Jennifer, we're not really weighing in on any type of plea agreement. Once a veteran is arrested and formally charged with an offense, typically, what we'll do is we'll meet them out in the jail. Get a sense of what their treatment needs are and whether or not they're connected. If they're not connected to the VA, but they are eligible, we'll actually enroll them out in the field into VA health care. So, we'll do that front-end sort of social work piece, sort of that outreach component. Now on the legal side of things, once the releases of information are in place, we can then communicate with their attorney and say, "Hey, just so you know, you are representing a United States veteran. This veteran is eligible for VA health care. I met with this veteran at the Hamilton County Justice Center on this particular date."

And this is what we talked about in terms of an initial plan of care if the court sees fit to allow for it. So, it's a very neutral letter, I might say, a neutral communication because we want to ensure that we stay in our lanes, right? We're a health care facility; we want and have treatment options that can be

responsive to that veteran's needs, but we're not the ultimate arbiters of the judicial outcome. Oftentimes, you know, I will talk to veterans about veterans treatment courts, what those look like, but always that conversation ends with consult with your attorney about the advisability of considering that path towards a veterans treatment court. And most of these involve a post-plea agreement where the veteran will agree to plead guilty to a particular charge in exchange for an option to participate in this veterans treatment court program.

And veterans treatment court is not a typical criminal docket where veterans just might receive preferential treatment. I know that a lot of people misperceive what those programs are. So, these are 12- to 18-month programs, typically, where the veteran is rigorously monitored during their time in the program. This includes regular status review hearings with the vet court judge and the vet court team. They are required to engage in intensive substance use and/or mental health treatment. And they have rules that they have to follow as a result of their involvement with these court programs. The programs are typically phased. Phase one is more of an engagement, or rather stabilization, kind of phase with the assumption that the veteran is coming to us in crisis. They're coming to us needing intensive care at that point. So, we want to have eyes on and more contact. So, they might come to court once a week to meet with the judge and the team. And as they progress through the program, that loosens up a little bit, that contact with the judge, because the assumption is that they've stabilized, they're starting to reintegrate into the community—maybe they're going to school; maybe they're working a full-time job; relationships are improving, so they don't need us monitoring them as closely anymore.

Donelan

35:21

So, listening to all that, Sergeant Corlett, and all the benefits and everything that Ron's describing, have police—and I know you don't speak for all of law enforcement, but just in your personal opinion—have police and the VA been missing each other on this relationship, the benefits of it? You've seen it; you've been experiencing it; you've been in it.

Corlett

35:40

Absolutely. Ron and the VJO program are a big part of what we do. A lot of these guys and gals who are struggling with PTSD, who are struggling with substance abuse issues are already patients at the VA. But their VA staff or their VA treatment team doesn't know what's going on when they're out in the world. And that line of communication has made treatment better; it's given us the ability to sometimes keep them out the legal pipeline. And as far as the police are concerned, the way veterans treatment court works is pretty phenomenal. I didn't used to be a treatment court proponent—kind of an old-school cop who thought it was just being nice to the criminals—but I've been involved in the veterans court and I've watched it, and I've seen the veterans go through there in the process they go through with.

They're assigned an entire treatment team. So, they have a probation officer; they have a VJO; they have a treatment specialist; they have actually one of my officers who participates in the treatment team. And the judge who is hearing their case, overall, listens to that treatment team on recommendations for sentencing. You know, when they follow the program and they make those

positive strides, then they don't end up sitting in jail for six months, which benefits them, it benefits the community, and it benefits all of us. So that VA connection is a great thing. And I think what Ron and I had figured out was, prior to the way we came together and when I look at other departments, there's just not that easy way to make the connection.

Because Ron will tell you that most VJOs aren't going to just reach out and call the police department because they don't even know who to ask for. Like am I asking for a patrol officer? Am I asking for the chief? I mean, where do I start in that program or where do I start with the police department to make that contact? Everybody doesn't have an MLG coordinator like me. And then from the other side, you know, police officers are not typically involved in the VA and don't know that that VJO program exists. And one of the things I've said from the very start of this program was that our goal is to expand this program nationwide. We want every major department in the country to have a military liaison program to do what we do.

And, you know, there's been a lot of things that have happened recently to help us with that. There is a congresswoman from Miami who just, in the last couple months, wrote a bill based on our program to nationally fund a military program for police departments across the country. So that bill is sitting in committee right now. We're hoping that moves forward. And we have the support of all of our local and state politicians to expand the program. As we move forward, we hope to make available, I guess, myself and some of the other guys to actually go and establish those relationships.

My vision or my dream is that the San Diego Police Department can call me and say, "Hey, we want to have an MLG," and I'll go spend three days with them teaching them how to set it up and form those relationships. We'd be able to introduce the VJOs to the police administration. We'd be able to introduce the VA system to the police officers. And then, hopefully when I leave, those relationships would flourish like ours did.

Donelan

38:33

That'd be a tremendous ripple effect for sure. Let's talk about cost versus benefits. Let's talk about how has this paid off for you. How has this paid off for the department? How has it paid off for the community?

Corlett

38:44

So, financially, we cost the department almost nothing. This is an additional duty that we take on as patrol officers. I'm the downtown day shift patrol supervisor for the city of Cincinnati. So, on any given day, you drive through downtown Cincinnati, you're likely to see me in a patrol car making daily radio runs. The military group is an additional duty that I take on because I'm passionate about it, and that applies to the people that work for me. So, our cost there is almost nothing. It was funny that the program was so successful and we were recognized nationally on several stages and we've received

awards and we've had news stories done on us and everything has been so positive for the department that the chief was like, "Listen, if you guys need to work overtime to do what you do, work overtime to do what you do."

But I'm the son of a county auditor, and we just have not needed to really do that. We've been able to staff what we do with officers that are on duty. And if they need to reach out to me, which is very rarely, I make myself available to them. So, the costs of department have been very low. We have been able to benefit from the military recruiting programs where we send our veterans, our police officer veterans, to a military base to recruit other veterans. And nobody can have that conversation about what a post-military career in law enforcement is like other than someone who has stood on that side of the table. So that's been beneficial to us to be able to make that connection. The costs of the department have been low and the benefits have been pretty great.

The numbers is something that Ron and I have talked about a great deal, and we really have a hard time tracking because we often don't know the long-term outcome of our contacts and referrals. Like unless the veteran comes back to me and tells me what the benefits of our contact were, I don't know if he went to Texas and is still an alcoholic. I can't keep up with everybody that we contact, but I do know that we have enough success stories that I filled four pages to send to the congresswoman when she was asking about the program. And some of those people have emailed me every year to tell me that they're thankful that they're still alive and they're only alive because we intervened in their lives. So, I know that to be incredibly successful and satisfying to me.

Donelan

40:45

Yeah, it sounds satisfying to me too. In one sense, it's really hard to sort encapsulate whether a nonviolent encounter would've gone violent if you hadn't had an MLG on scene, right?

Corlett

40:57

Right. Well, here's one thing I'm going to tell you, and this is something that was shocking to me. I use this in my PTSD class. One time we had a deputy here who shot and killed a Marine Corps veteran with PTSD. It was determined to be a suicide by cop; the veteran struggled for a long time, and he was suicidal. The officer was really struggling with the fact that it happened. So, I had talked to the officer and it really struck a chord with me because the officer said, "Dave, I knew this guy." And I said, "What do you mean you knew this guy?" He said, "I've been to his house 12 times. Like his mom was calling on him once a week. And I was there every week, you know, and I would just tell him to go to bed, stop acting up. Don't drink so much, you know?" The classic law enforcement response. And I thought, "Okay, well, that's a problem."

So, I went back to my computer and I sat down and I did a real quick Google search nationwide on police intervention shooting / combat veteran and hundreds of them came up all across the country. I printed out the first 10 on the list and I started calling those departments across the country. And I spoke to the homicide investigators who handled, you know, the police intervention shooting on these veterans. And

almost every single one of these police intervention shootings, every veteran had had six or eight prior law enforcement contacts in the preceding two years, and to me that screamed necessity for what we do.

At any one of those six or eight contacts, had we been able to make the necessary resource referral could we have prevented the police intervention shooting and the loss of that life? And that's a question that I can never answer except for the two or three suicidals that email me every year and tell me that they're thankful they're alive.

Donelan

42:25

But I got to tell you, Sergeant, that question alone is enough.

Corlett

42:28

We all know about the 22 veterans [a day] that kill themselves, and people think that just a guy comes home from a combat tour and two weeks later he decides to kill himself, and that's not what happens. That process to suicide takes years; it takes several years. The highest number of suicides right now are Vietnam veterans. Nobody's stepping in before they reach that point. And I think we now offer the ability to step in and cut off that suicidal train of thought.

Donelan

42:54

You know, maybe you start looking at those missed opportunities. You start counting those, because I bet you that's a staggering number. Every single interaction between police and a veteran who's engaged in whatever that is, right? Domestic violence, suicide, you know, threatening suicide—that's a missed opportunity, and when you start looking at how many times that happens, how many interactions there are, that certainly demonstrates need for sure.

Michaelson

43:18

And, Jennifer, I can jump in here to kind of really reinforce a point that Dave made. You know, anecdotally, from my perspective, when I call a veteran who's been referred to me by either Sergeant Corlett or a member from his team, oftentimes I'll get contact information for the veteran and I'll call them up by way of follow up the next day after they've had this police contact. And I'll introduce myself, let them know who I'm affiliated with, the program I work for, and then I'll let them know, "You had a couple cops out at your house yesterday. Do you remember that?" "Yeah, I remember that." "Sergeant Corlett." "Yeah, yeah, I remember. He's a great guy. He's a great guy." "Well, you know, he asked me to call you from the Cincinnati VA and see if there's anything we can provide you."

And there's shock; there's absolute shock on the end of that line, "Are you serious? Really? Those cops asked you to call me?" And it kind of ties into the point that we're talking about here in terms of early intervention, and what's going to move that needle for that veteran. And I think that, in and of itself, is

huge. It creates a huge impact in the mind of that veteran, that, you know, these people actually do care and they care enough to remember who I am and to call me and to do these follow-up visits or these follow-up calls with an offer of assistance. Oftentimes, that in and of itself is restorative to that particular veteran. And they're going to be much more likely to engage in care at the VA, and that's where I kind of step in and say, "Well, let's take a look at what our options are for treatment. Is it PTSD? Is it substance use? Is it some other type of mental health concern?"

We're a hospital, so what are your medical concerns? Oftentimes, they've neglected their medical. We deal with a lot of homeless veterans out on the street. We have a whole homeless veterans division here at Cincinnati VA. VJO was a part of the homeless program's office. You know, the numbers are going to be the numbers, but I also think it's important to measure the true anecdotal impact on these veterans and the care that is taken by Dave and his team to ensure that that follow up occurs.

Donelan

45:15

Absolutely, 100 percent agree with you. And I go back to what I said when we first started, you know, this is about uncovering something, and I'm glad that you're getting the attention that you're getting, because, again, it's sitting right there in front of us. We have the officers who are military veterans, we have the need out there as evidenced by all the calls for service that involve veterans, and making this connection between a law enforcement agency—one of the key players in this whole cycle—and making the connection between law enforcement and the VA administration and getting them hooked together in an effort to try and help these people, help the community, just makes plain sense.

And it was sitting there right in front of us the whole time, because sometimes it's just pointing someone in the right direction. And the fact that you're so willing to help these other law enforcement agencies get started so they can run with this, I think it's phenomenal. I want to make sure that everyone knows we're going to be asking you to share some contact information, but as we wrap up, are there any lessons—I'll start with you Sergeant Corlett—that you could maybe help someone else avoid? Were there any landmines during this process that you say, "Hey, make sure you don't do this?"

Corlett

46:26

I don't know if it's so much "make sure you don't do this," but it's the other things that occurred that I wasn't expecting. When we got the support of the department, and the first year we did this, we did an hour's worth of training at our annual in-service. So, every officer in Cincinnati went through that program and got a feel for what we do and how we deal with PTSD and recognizing and things of that nature. And I very quickly turned into the department confidant. I had a lot of law enforcement officers coming to me with their own PTSD issues or with the struggles that they had asking me if I had resources that could help them. And some of them were veterans and some of them were not, and I had to scramble. We did not have a very large peer support program or a good peer support program at that point in time to refer them to.

So, I became the guy inside the department, you know, dealing with sometimes things I didn't even want to know about my coworkers. And I had to very quickly remind them that I'm still a manager in the police department and I have certain responsibilities, but I went out and I developed civilian resources and I made the command staff aware that this was something that we needed to look a little harder into. And CPD has made leaps and bounds into a phenomenal peer support program, you know, that the officers are able to seek out. So other than that, I really haven't run into too many problems as far as law enforcement is concerned.

Donelan

47:45

I got to say that makes a lot of sense. Make sure you have the support for those within, right?

Corlett

47:48

Well, it became a big part of what we do. I mean, we now run an onboarding program for all the new officers who come in that are veterans. We have a military wall at our academy that includes military pictures of CPD officers going back to World War I. We do all the military recruiting. So, there's probably 50 percent of what I do now that is internal as well as external.

Donelan

48:08

And that sounds like a win-win to me. Ron, one of the things you mentioned earlier in terms of just giving that one single piece of advice—pick up the phone, cold call, call your local VA hospital—anything beyond that, or any lessons learned that you offer for our audience?

Michaelson

48:23

Yeah, so I think for the VJO specialists who might listen to this, you know, certainly, you know, my brother was a cop, growing up, so I had some exposure to law enforcement. It is a culture, in and of itself, and for specialists, I can't advise them enough to get to know that culture. To go out to lunch with these guys, to get a sense of what they do if your supervisor or your chain of command allows for it to go on a run that's safe, of course, so that you can see how they're interacting out in the field with these veterans. It's enormously instructive to learn the culture of the police department and to learn their language. Much like veterans, police have their own language too and we need to be fluent in that language and be able to talk to them to gain their trust.

I would suspect, and maybe Dave can speak to this better than I can, if the importance of making sure that I'm available to them when they call. He mentioned in a training that we did more recently that he's probably going to call a resource once or twice, and if they don't respond, he's moving on. He's moving on to the next agency or resource that could be helpful to his calls. You know, for us as VJO specialists, it's absolutely imperative that we are responding to these officers when they're calling. Oftentimes, it's

a phone call while they're with a veteran and my role is more of a consultant to them. What's going on? Is he voicing any kind of suicidal statements? Does he appear to be under the influence? Is he responding to internal stimuli to kind of indicate that there's some severe mental illness there?

Well, what do we do? Bring them to the ER, or if it's after hours maybe you can go to a community hospital or something to that effect and make sure that connection is made once they get there. So, I think for VJO specialists it's absolutely imperative that we learn the language of law enforcement and we understand the culture and the stress that they're under in just doing their day-to-day activities and their job, and being sensitive to that and being intentional about how we interface with them and interact with them. Dave and I have a great relationship even beyond this program, and I think it's because of the efforts that he and I both have made to understand one another, and what it is that we do in our respective agencies.

Donelan

50:34

It's been an honor because you're serving those who served us. And so much of this has boiled down to communication and language and having that conversation and picking up that phone and being available, but it's communicate, communicate, communicate, and I love it. And I'm hoping that this discussion generates a lot of interest in serving veterans and establishing more veterans response collaborations between law enforcement and the veterans administration. So, if anyone is interested in speaking with you to learn more, to pick your brain some more about how they could perhaps launch a veterans response in their area, can they contact you? And if so, how can they reach you? Can they call? Can they email?

Michaelson

51:15

Sure. Yes, absolutely. Yeah, so this is Ron Michaelson. I could be reached by phone at 513-266-1733. Email address is ronald.michaelson@va.gov. So that's R-O-N-A-L-D-dot-Michaelson... M-I-C-H-A-E-L-S-O-N-at-V-A-dot-gov.

Donelan

51:41

Thank you. Sergeant Corlett?

Corlett

51:42

And this is Sergeant Dave Corlett. I can be reached at area code 513-260-5311, or my email address is Dave, D-A-V-E-dot-Corlett... C-O-R-L-E-T-T-at-Cincinnati... C-I-N-C-I-N-N-A-T-I-dash-O-H-dot-G-O-V. [dave.corlett@cincinnati-oh.gov]

Donelan

52:05

Gentlemen, I cannot thank you enough for speaking with us today and I want to thank our listeners for joining us. I think this has been a very special episode. I hope that the word keeps spreading and more law enforcement agencies consider adopting these programs. So, thank you again, and thank you everyone for joining us here on *The Beat*.

Corlett

52:25

Thanks, Jennifer.

Michaelson

52:26

Thank you.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

52:27

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

53:25

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