

# VETERANS PODS REPORT

THE BENEFITS OF BRINGING VETERAN-SPECIFIC  
HOUSING TO MARYLAND'S PRISONS



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This report was created by Fall 2022 and Spring 2023  
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

3	INTRODUCTION
4	WHAT ARE VETERANS PODS?
6	WHAT DO VETERANS PODS DO?
7	ADVANTAGES TO INMATES WHILE IN PODS
8	VETERANS PODS IN SURROUNDING STATES
9	IMPACT OF VETERANS PODS IN MARYLAND
12	LOGISTICS: PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS
16	SOURCES

# INTRODUCTION

Individuals who have served in the Armed Forces make up approximately seven percent of the over two million people incarcerated in the United States. [1]

Most Veterans are honorably discharged from service. But, for some, traumatic experiences in service have a profound impact on their lives. [2] This, coupled with a lack of support, can lead to substance use disorder, other mental illness, and incarceration. [3]

The criminal justice system has found ways to respond to this issue. One response is the implementation of Veterans Pods. These Pods have proven to be successful across the country. Veterans Pods can be implemented in Maryland prisons to help those who have served our country.

Students at the University of Baltimore Bob Parsons Veterans Advocacy Clinic created this report by compiling data from studies on Veterans Pods. This Report focuses on the potential implementation of Veterans Pods in Maryland.

**This report will explain:**

- 1) What are Veterans Pods;
- 2) What do Veterans Pods do;
- 3) What advantages Veterans Pods provide to inmates after release;
- 4) The impact Veterans Pods have in surrounding states;
- 5) The potential impact of Veterans Pods in Maryland; and
- 6) Practical considerations for implementation.

# WHAT ARE VETERANS PODS?

A prison unit where incarcerated veterans are housed together, implementing Veteran-specific programming and allowing for growth and camaraderie. [4]

## INCARCERATED VETERANS IN THE US

- In 2016, there were 1,421,700 prisoners incarcerated in state and federal prisons and jails in the United States.[5]
- A study published by the US Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Statistics indicates that, out of roughly 1.4 million prisoners, 108,049, or 7.6%, are veterans. [6]
- While only 5.3% of federal inmates identified as Veterans, 7.9% of all inmates in state facilities identified as Veterans. [7]
- It is estimated that roughly 2,430 veterans are currently incarcerated in Maryland state facilities. [8]
- The chart below provides a breakdown of Veteran and non-Veteran incarcerated populations in the U.S. An estimated two-thirds of Veterans in prison and jail were discharged from military service between 1974 and 2000. [9]

**TABLE 1**  
Veterans in the U.S. adult resident, prison, and jail populations, 1978, 1985, 1998, 2004, and 2011–12

Year	U.S. adult residents			Prison			Jail		
	Total	Veterans	Percent	Total	Veterans	Percent	Total	Veterans	Percent
1978	157,810,300	29,984,000	19.0%	307,300	73,100	23.8%**	158,400	39,900	25.2%**
1985	176,370,700	27,857,000	15.8	502,500	100,200	19.9%**	254,100	54,400	21.4
1998	201,576,800	25,062,000	12.4	1,307,200	156,400	12.0%**	592,500	69,300	11.7
2004	220,832,100	23,427,600	10.6	1,497,100	140,000	9.4%**	714,000	66,500	9.3
2011–12*	241,419,000	21,230,900	8.8	1,570,400	131,500	8.4	744,500	50,000	6.7

Note: For years in which either prison or jail inmates were not surveyed, the total prison or jail population was multiplied by the veteran distribution from the most recent survey. See *Methodology*. See appendix table 3 for standard errors.

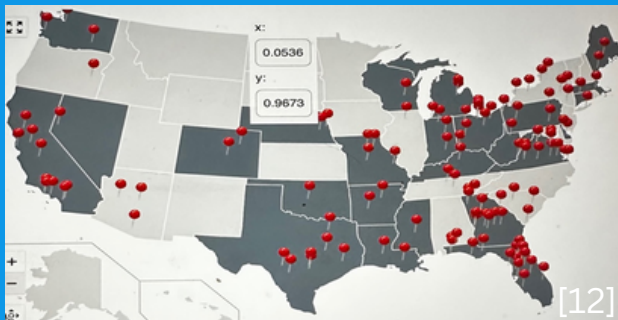
\*Comparison group.

\*\*Difference with comparison group is significant at the 95% confidence level.

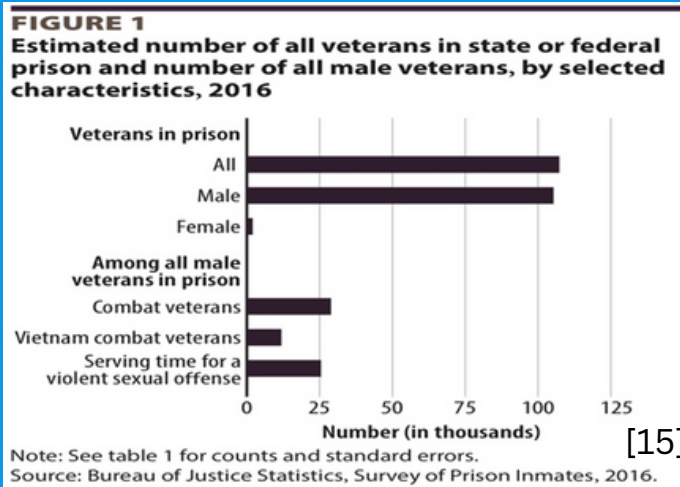
Sources: Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Survey of Inmates in Local Jails, 1996 and 2002; Annual Survey of Jails, 1986, 1997, and 2004; Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, 1979, 1986, 1997, and 2004; National Jail Census, 1978; Correctional Populations in the United States, 1985, 1998, 2004, and 2012; National Inmate Survey, 2011–12; Profile of Jail Inmates, 1978; Veterans in Prison or Jail*; and U.S. Census Bureau, *National Estimates by Age, Sex, Race: 1900–1979; Quarterly Intercensal Resident Population, 1980–1989; National Intercensal Estimates, 2000–2010; National Monthly Postcensal Estimates, 1990–2000; Census Estimates for National Prisoner Statistics, 2012; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1987 and 1999; Census Factfinder Tables, 2004 and 2012; and American Community Survey, 2005. U.S. Veterans Administration, Annual Report 1978.*

# HOW MANY VETERANS?

- 75 + state and federal prisons have a variation of Veterans Pods. [10]
- The majority of the prisons and jails offering Veterans Pods are on the East Coast and in the South. There are a few Pods on the West Coast and even less in the Northwest and Midwest. [11]



- Approximately 7% of all incarcerated persons are Veterans or Service members. An overwhelming proportion of Veterans in prison are male. [13]
- Around 75% of male Veterans in prison were discharged with a honorable discharge or general discharge under honorable conditions. [14]



# WHAT DO THE PODS LOOK LIKE?

- Veterans Pods are similar to normal cell blocks; however, they are housed solely with Veterans. [16]
- They are sometimes decorated with military murals, paraphernalia, quotes and phrases, and anything else that helps bring about military bonds. [17]
- The Pods facilitate camaraderie between Veteran prisoners and make the prison setting more relatable. [18]



- The Pods help veterans engage in group therapy and activities that help the Veterans talk and work through their military-related issues. [20]
- The Pods allow for professionals to visit and help Veterans prepare for the post-discharge hardships that cause many Veterans to be reincarcerated. [21]
- The Pods typically have activity areas that foster group bonds, help Veterans cope with being incarcerated, and help prepare Veterans for reintegration into their communities. [22]

# WHAT DO VETERANS PODS DO?



- Create camaraderie among incarcerated Veterans. [24]
- Facilitate programs that keep Veterans together while incarcerated. During the day, Veterans work on similar projects and are involved in similar activities. [25]
- Offer activities tailored to helping Veterans be productive while incarcerated and upon release. [26]
- Offer support to Veterans with service injuries, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). [27]
- Create a sense of family and military bonds. [28]
- Help Veterans focus on what caused them to go from military life to prison and think about how to avoid recidivism. [29]

- Bring Veterans together by helping them connect with one another while incarcerated and find ways to maintain their connection and stability once released. [30]
- Create safe spaces for incarcerated Veterans to express themselves and get help with Veteran specific issues that arise in prison. [31]
- Help connect the Veterans to services they have earned that can aid in alleviating issues arising from PTSD and other military-related mental illnesses. [32]
- Help Veterans connect to treatment courts for Veterans who developed drug and alcohol problems post-discharge. [33]



# ADVANTAGES TO INMATES WHILE IN PODS

## A. Assistance with Substance Use Disorder

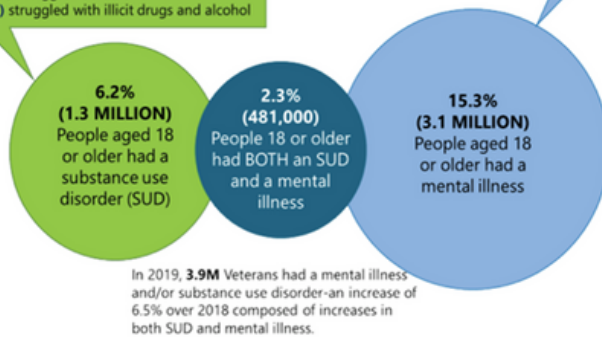
- Pods facilitate weekly rehabilitative classes, counseling, and mentoring that address substance use disorder, PTSD, and trauma. [35]
- If behavioral health disorders, like substance use, are left untreated, Veterans have a higher likelihood of entering the criminal justice system. [36]

## Mental Illness and Substance Use Disorders in America among Veterans (≥18 y.o.)

PAST YEAR, 2019 NSDUH, Veteran 18

Among Veterans with a substance use disorder:  
1 IN 4 (26.9% or 343K) struggled with illicit drugs  
4 IN 5 (80.8% or 1.0M) struggled with alcohol use  
1 IN 13 (7.7% or 98K) struggled with illicit drugs and alcohol

Among Veterans with a mental illness:  
1 IN 4 (26.6% or 833K) had a serious mental illness



**SAMHSA**  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

[37]

## B. Partnerships with VA and Other Organizations

- Veteran inmates in Pods typically receive regular visits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to discuss documentation and benefits. [38]
- Jurisdictions that have created Pods have partnered with various community outreach organizations, Veterans groups, correctional staff psychiatrists, and rehabilitated individuals with military experience who act as mentors to address various Veteran-related issues, like substance use disorder, PTSD, and trauma. [39]
- Individuals from VA and other organizations “can engage more easily” and do not have the same fear as correctional employees of “being perceived as indulgent or too friendly.” [40]

## C. Lowered Recidivism Rates

- Recidivism is common among Veterans under the supervision of the criminal justice system:
  - 62% of Veterans in jails report four or more prior arrests [41]
  - 68% of Veterans report at least one prior incarceration [42]
- Pods promote targeted re-entry planning by creating specialized programs that support housing, employment and treatment needs upon re-entry to society.[43] These specialized programs reduce recidivism rates. [44]
- Pods offer structured environments that lower recidivism by:
  - Allowing inmates to live together like a military unit; [45]
  - Simulating a military boot camp by requiring inmates to wake up at the same time, participate in group meetings, and eat meals together; [46]
  - Providing group workshops on life skills and home/employment plans, [47]; and
  - Providing classes such as English, medical record keeping, and business administration. [48]



# VETERANS PODS in Surrounding States

- Maryland is surrounded by states that have implemented some type of Veterans Prison Unit.
  - Delaware, Virginia, and Pennsylvania have all implemented Veteran housing plans that have achieved some degree of success.
  - Pods in these states have allowed Veterans to get the services they need and have helped Veterans prepare for reintegration.

STATE:	NUMBER OF VETERANS UNITS:
Virginia	12
Pennsylvania	7
Delaware	2

## DELAWARE

- Gander Hill Prison provides a housing unit for incarcerated Veterans. They also collaborate with The Delaware Commission of Veteran Affairs which dedicates resources to Veterans' services. [49]
- The housing program ensures that Veterans receive education and training for an easier transition back into the population. [50]

## PENNSYLVANIA

- 7% of Pennsylvania's prisoners are verified Veterans. [51]
- State Correctional Institution (SCI) Muncy opened the first female Veterans Pod in the state. [52]
- Regardless of service branch, Veterans can access correctional facilities with Veterans Pods and their Veterans specified programs. [53]

## VIRGINIA

- Virginia has partnered with the VA and the Virginia Department of Veterans Services to provide on-site service-connection disability exams and help Veterans apply for disability benefits. [54]
- Access to other benefits, including application for Veterans Status on license plates and increased access to resources, help Veterans transition back to life outside of prison.

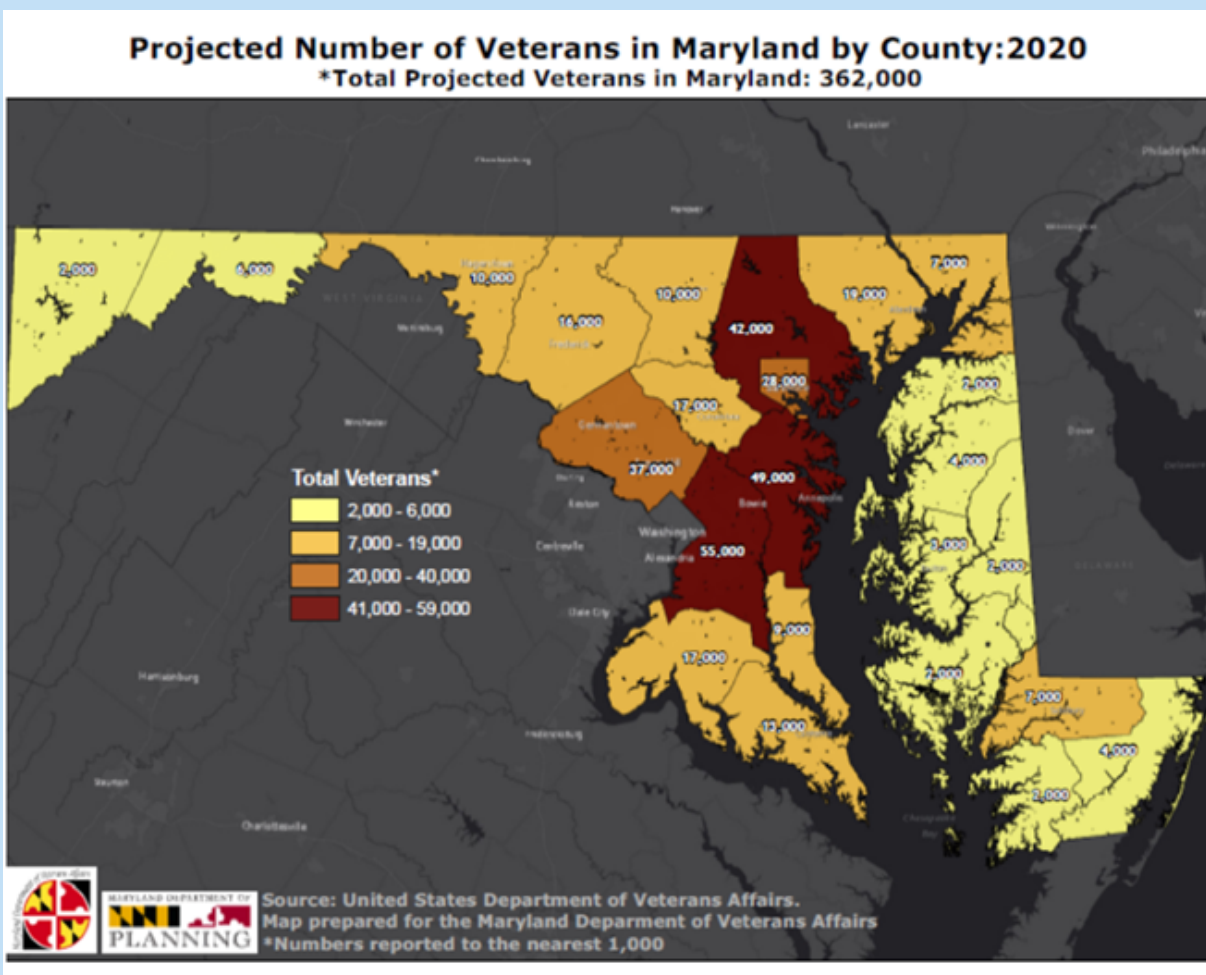
## How Maryland is Falling Behind

- Although Maryland offers resources to Veterans to help with their transition from military to civilian life, Maryland does not provide the support Veterans need while incarcerated. [55]
- With all of the models existing in the states surrounding Maryland and in other parts of the country and with the myriad federal, state, and local partnerships formed within the VTCs in Maryland, it is the perfect time for Maryland to establish veterans pods

# IMPACT OF VETERANS PODS in Maryland

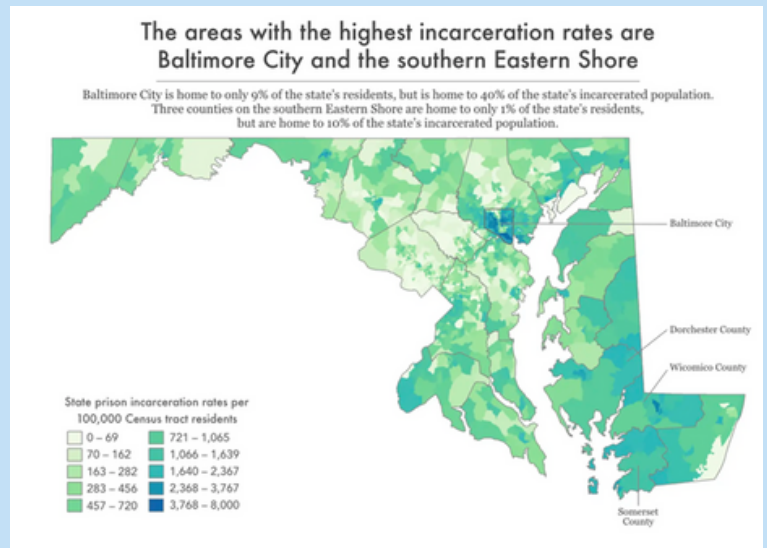
## Veteran Population Information in Maryland

- As of 2020, there are reportedly 6,165,129 people living in Maryland. [56]
- As of September 2021, the projected number of Veterans in Maryland is 377,772, 54,693 of which are women. [57]
  - This accounts for 6.12% of Maryland citizens. [58]
  - Roughly 84,000 of these Veterans receive compensation for disabilities through the VA. [59]
- The map below shows the distribution of Veterans throughout Maryland by County.[60]
- As of December 2021, the total number of prisoners housed in Maryland state prisons, private prisons, or local jails was 30,755. [61]
- Using the most recent nationwide statistic, indicating that 7.9% of all inmates in state facilities are Veterans, and applying it to Maryland, it is estimated that roughly 2,430 Veterans are presently incarcerated in Maryland state facilities. [62]



## Prisons, Jails, and Incarceration Rates in Maryland

- As of 2019, the State of Maryland has 30 jails and 19 state prisons. [63]
- The map to the right shows the incarceration rates, generally, throughout Maryland by County. [64]
- Maryland correctional facilities have four types of restrictive housing and two types of specialized housing for vulnerable inmates – none of which are designated to address the specialized needs of Veterans. [65]
  - Restrictive units: administrative segregation, disciplinary segregation, Maximum II Structured Housing, and Serious Mental Illness Structured Housing [66]
  - Specialized units: Protective Custody (designed for inmates who require extra protection for safety reasons) and Specialized Needs Unit (designed to manage inmates diagnosed with serious mental health issues) [67]

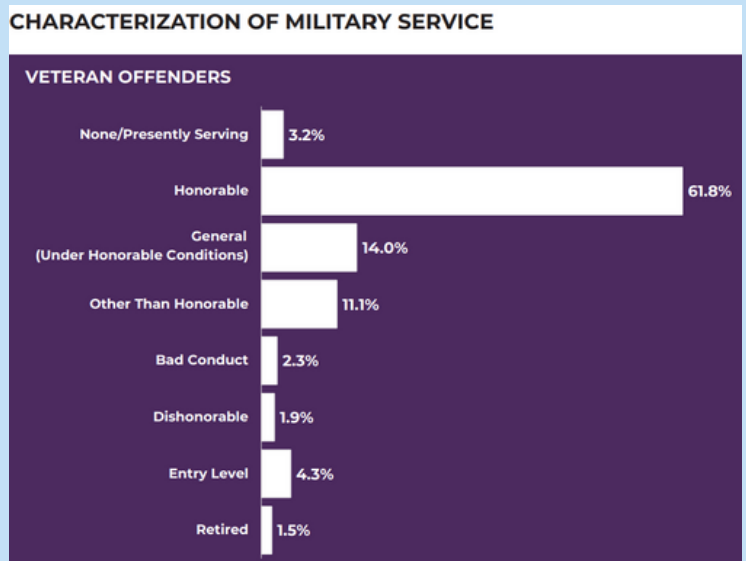


- There are only 13 states in the U.S. with a lower incarceration rate than Maryland. [68]
  - While 9% of Maryland residents (7% of Maryland Veterans) call the City of Baltimore home, 40% of Maryland residents in state prison are from the city. [69]

## Why Veterans Pods Would Succeed in Maryland

### Demographics of incarcerated Veterans present unique needs which could be mitigated through Veterans Pods

- In 2012, a greater percentage of Veterans (64%) than non-Veterans (48%) were sentenced for violent offenses. [70]
- The average age for incarcerated Veterans in jail is 43 years old, 11 years older than the average age of non-Veterans which is 32 years old. [71]
  - 19% of Veterans in jail were age 55 or older, compared to 3% of non-Veterans. [72]
- The average age for incarcerated Veterans in prison is 49 years old, 12 years older than the average age of non-Veterans which is 37 years old. [73]
  - 33% of Veterans were age 55 or older, compared to 6% of non-Veterans. [74]
- In a study of federal Veteran inmates, 61.8% of the offenders received an honorable discharge at the conclusion of their military service (see right). [75]



- Among Veterans who connected with a post-release VA outreach program, 47% were diagnosed with substance use disorder in the first two weeks following release from incarceration. [76]

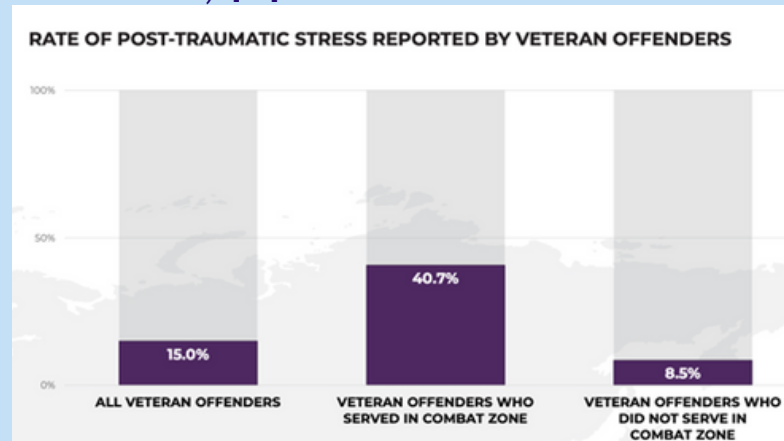
## Incarcerated Veterans experience unique mental health conditions, which could be mitigated through Veterans Pods

### Generally

- While Veterans only account for 6.12% of Maryland citizens, a study published in 2019 found that 17% of all Maryland suicides over a five-year period were committed by Maryland Veterans. [77]
- The Treatment Advocacy Center estimates that 16% of all Maryland inmates suffer from “serious mental illness”. [78]
  - Comparatively, roughly half of all Veterans in prison (48%) and jail (55%) had been told by a mental health professional they had a mental disorder. [79]
- The graphic below shows the prevalence of mental health conditions and substance use disorder among Veterans. [80]

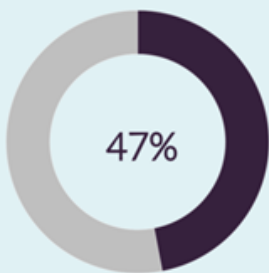
### PTSD

- A study of federal Veteran offenders reported that, of the 1,869 Veteran offenders sentenced in 2019, 281 reported suffering from PTSD related to military service. [81]
  - This study also reported that more than one-in-five Veteran offenders participated in a combat operation (see chart below). [82]

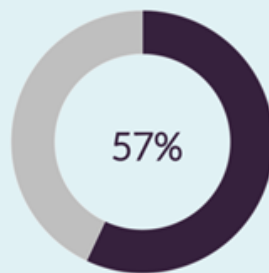


### MENTAL HEALTH & SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS

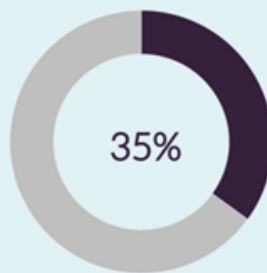
Among over 18,000 veterans who connected with a post-release VA program, 69% were diagnosed with at least one mental health or substance use disorder.



Veterans diagnosed with a substance use disorder



Veterans diagnosed with a mental health disorder



Veterans diagnosed with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders

Source: Finlay, 2017.

## Maryland’s Veterans Treatment Courts are an inspiring example of how efforts to support Veterans in the criminal justice system decrease recidivism rates.

- Maryland’s first Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) Docket occurred in 2015 in the Prince George’s County Circuit Court. Shortly thereafter, the Baltimore City District Court launched the first District Court VTC in Maryland. [83]
- Approximately 100 Veterans have completed Baltimore City’s VTC program to date. [84]
- Maryland’s VTC program has expanded since its founding and currently operates in four districts: Baltimore City District Court, Anne Arundel County District Court, Prince George’s County Circuit Court, and Dorchester County District Court (serving Dorchester, Wicomico, Somerset and Worcester County Veterans). [85]
- VTC operates as a comprehensive court-supervised voluntary treatment-based program for Veterans charged with a misdemeanor and concurrent jurisdiction felonies in the District Court and one Circuit Court in Prince George’s County. [86]
- A nationwide study found that only 14% of Veterans in VTC programs experienced a new incarceration during an average of 1 year in the program, lower than the 23–46% 1-year recidivism rate found among U.S. prisoners. [87]

# LOGISTICS: PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

## COST AND FUNDING

Institutions that have implemented a Veterans Pod in their prison system report little to no startup cost for the endeavor. These prisons were able to utilize preexisting resources to create Pods. In many cases, no additional financial support nor any special funds were used to implement the Pods. Once the Pod is created, sustaining it is done through volunteer support and programming. [88]



## CREATING SPACE

Prisons that have already implemented Veterans Pods have identified two main options for creating space for the pod within the existing building. The first option, which utilizes more traditional-style prison housing, is implemented by picking an already existing unit in the prison, transferring the nonveteran inmates into another unit, and filling the unit with veteran inmates. Some prisons that have implemented this option have decorated the unit to make it easily identifiable as a Veterans unit – utilizing patriotic murals and other armed forces décor.

The second option is to use available non-traditional housing space in the prison to create an open dorm-style unit. These units are similar to barrack-style housing used on military bases and can increase camaraderie among Veteran inmates. This style of housing can be more easily implemented and is a good option for prisons that may have space constraints preventing them from transforming an entire unit into a Veterans Pod.

Once a space has been created, prison staff work to identify inmates who are Veterans and interview them to see if they would be a good fit to move into the Pod. Being placed in the Veterans Pod unit is typically voluntary, as Veteran inmates are not forced to participate in the program. [91]

## STAFFING/PERSONNEL

Generally, one individual who is either a Veteran or who has worked closely with Veterans is considered the original 'champion' of the Veterans Pods within a prison. The 'champion' is often a prison staff member or an official who kick starts the program through organization and development. This person will spearhead the effort but will bring in other individuals to help in a collaborative effort, including the warden, the unit team manager, a caseworker, and the superintendent, among others.

Veterans Pods have been staffed in a variety of ways. Some institutions have chosen to staff the units with employees who are Veterans while other institutions did not consider this as a requirement. The institutions did not report creating formal or additional training for the staff of the Veterans Pods. Instead, employees who are Veterans or partners from organizations like the VA informally share what needs Veteran inmates have, how they can be helped, and what resources prison staff can help them access. Some institutions even reported watching YouTube videos created by preexisting Veterans Pods units throughout the United States to implement Pods. [92]

Additionally, all existing institutions with Veterans Pods indicated the importance of creating partnerships with outside agencies to implement programming specific to Veterans. Many institutions reported partnerships with the VA to provide PTSD treatment as well as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous programming. Medicaid has also previously funded mentorship programs in Veterans Pods. [93]

## STAKEHOLDERS

Creators of existing Veterans Pods have emphasized the importance of looping in local stakeholders to create programming specific to Veterans. These stakeholders are often community organizations who want to facilitate the success of the Pods or who are concerned about Veteran welfare in general. Many existing Pods have partnered with their local Department of Labor for employment programming, to help incarcerated Veterans learn important skills such as leadership, dependability, and persistence. Other Pods have partnered with nontraditional employment programming providers, including those offering a beekeeping course, a yoga instructor program, and a master gardener program. [94]

The Veteran Pod model is similar to the Veteran Treatment Court model and offers many of the same benefits. Stakeholders and community partners take advantage of the efficiencies and opportunities in serving a group of Veterans who are collocated. The synergy created by various partners and Veterans working together is powerfully rehabilitative.

Foundational stakeholders of existing Pods programs are organizations that offer VA services. These programs assist Veteran inmates with completing paperwork and educating them on available resources.

Other common partners include transitional housing programs, which provide Veteran-specific housing options for post-release, and America's Vet Dogs, which gives Veteran inmates the opportunity to train service dogs for other Veterans. [95]

# SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION SURROUNDING MARYLAND

## Haynesville, VA

*"The vet dorm continues to be a space for incarcerated veterans to get a snippet of the military lifestyle so many of them left behind. For the past three years, Virginia has had the lowest recidivism rate among the forty-five states that report their felon attrition rates. Much of the prison staff attribute that record to their facility motto: "Reentry begins on day one of a person's incarceration." [96]*



## State Correctional Institution, Houtzdale, PA

*When The Pennsylvania Department of Corrections and Pennsylvania Board of Probation and Parole discovered that there were nearly 5,000 incarcerated veterans in their care, the agencies launched a nationwide program to address the needs of their veterans. SCI Houtzdale is the largest VSU (Veteran Service Unit) in Pennsylvania and has successfully established a program that ensures a successful transition back into the community with the support of all the VA benefits they are entitled to. The Superintendent of Houtzdale, Barry Smith (above), is a 22-year combat veteran himself and stresses the importance of giving back to those who have served. He credits the success of the program to support from the higher ups with the opinion that anyone can be a leader but without support from the community, you can only do so much on your own. Smith emphasizes that the recipe to a successful program is prioritizing a safe and stable environment for the veterans and gathering support from key stakeholders. An inmate in the program agreed with Smith stating that, "We [the veterans] can peer facilitate all the classes we want to, [but] if that's not really connecting guys with real jobs, then what does it matter?" By instilling values such as honor, integrity, loyalty, duty and discipline, the Houtzdale VSU has garnered support from the community and the inmates and that is what makes the program so successful. The PA DOC VSU program has taken a military principle "Leave no man behind" and made it the focal point of their mission. The program instills a sense of community and pride in these inmates that allows them to seek help and put themselves in vulnerable positions with support from their fellow inmates. At the end of the day, participants in the program can all relate to one thing: being a military family. [98]*

# MORE SUCCESS STORIES

## Orange County Jail, FL

When Malik Muhammad (Muhammad) returned from deployment to his job at the Orange County Jail in Orlando, Florida, he realized that a veterans' dorm would be a way to help veterans who were currently in the system. Having been military himself, Muhammad recognized that deployment in sustained combat "does something to you" and he wanted to find a way to help those who served their country and were now incarcerated. Muhammad began sketching his idea for implementing veterans' dorms out on a napkin.

Muhammad noted that there were challenges, but that cost was not one of them. He stated, "It doesn't cost a nickel to start a program. All it took was to not be told no." Muhammad's passion is what got the program started. He got buy-in from stakeholders. He trained staff members already at the prison how to appropriately respond to veterans in custody, especially when distressed. He advocated for a core group of officers, who were already working in the prison system, to be assigned to the veterans' dorm. The local VA as well as Orange County Corrections provide various veteran specific services, using funding that is already available. Muhammed indicated that buy-in from prison management and the community was the biggest factor in the success of the implementation. [100]



## Kennebec County Jail, ME

Sheriff Randall Liberty, a veteran himself, experienced the effects of PTSD firsthand. He knew that more work needed to be done for veterans within the criminal justice system. In 2011, Liberty created a veterans pod at Maine's Kennebec County Jail of twelve to fifteen beds. Liberty reports that the pod was created "at little to no cost." To implement programming, Liberty brought in resources from the VA Medical Center, the Veterans Center, Veteran Peer Mentors of Maine, Easter Seals Veterans, and Bread of Life homeless shelter to work with the veterans. Liberty noted the importance of working with stakeholders. He stated that "[o]ne of the things [he] did very early on was work with the Department of Labor to create jobs and give veterans the opportunity to prove themselves[.]"



Liberty also identified the importance of identifying what was bringing veterans into the mental health system – mental health, including substance use disorder, and trauma. He emphasized the importance of treating each veteran as an individual by identifying what brought them there and forming a case plan. This includes comprehensive planning to prepare veterans for re-entry. Additionally, he plan includes helping veterans develop relationships, find housing, and get treatment. [102]



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[12] Id.

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