

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

REPUBLICANS | RANKING MEMBER MIKE BOST

The Veterans Justice Outreach Improvement Act

Background:

Justice-involved veterans who have been arrested and/or incarcerated are at an increased risk for homelessness, substance abuse, mental illness, and suicide. In 2009, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) established the Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) program to help support justice-involved veterans. Through VJO, specialists at each VA medical center work with local courts, jails, and law enforcement offices – including those in veteran-specific treatment courts - to identify justice-involved veterans, assess their needs, and connect them with VA benefits and services. In 2020, 36,365 veterans were served through VJO. In 2021, the Government Accountability Office issued a report entitled, “Further Actions to Identify and Address Barriers to Participation Would Promote Access to Services,” which found that VJO had certain deficiencies, including with regard to the identification of and outreach to justice-involved veterans and the training of VJO specialists. As a result, not all veterans who could benefit from VJO are able to seek it out.

The *Veterans Justice Outreach Improvement Act* would require VA to improve outreach about VJO to justice-involved veterans, military and veterans service organizations, criminal justice communities, and other relevant stakeholders to ensure that every veteran who could be eligible for VJO is aware of it. The bill would also require VA to increase the number of VJO specialists in rural, remote, and underserved areas and to improve training and establish performance goals, measures, and timelines for VJO specialists. VA would further be required to report to Congress on the availability and efficacy of veterans treatment courts.

The Message:

- Veterans who are involved in the criminal justice system have a higher risk of homelessness, suicide, drug abuse, and mental illness.
- VA's Veteran Justice Outreach Program does critical work but does not currently meet the needs of all the justice-involved veterans who could benefit from it.
- The *Veterans Justice Outreach Improvement Act* would make needed improvements to ensure that all justice-involved veterans have the support they need once their debt to society has been paid.