

JAN 2021 - DEC 2023

# VETERANS INTERVENTION STRATEGY 3-YEAR REPORT



Deschutes County District Attorney's Office

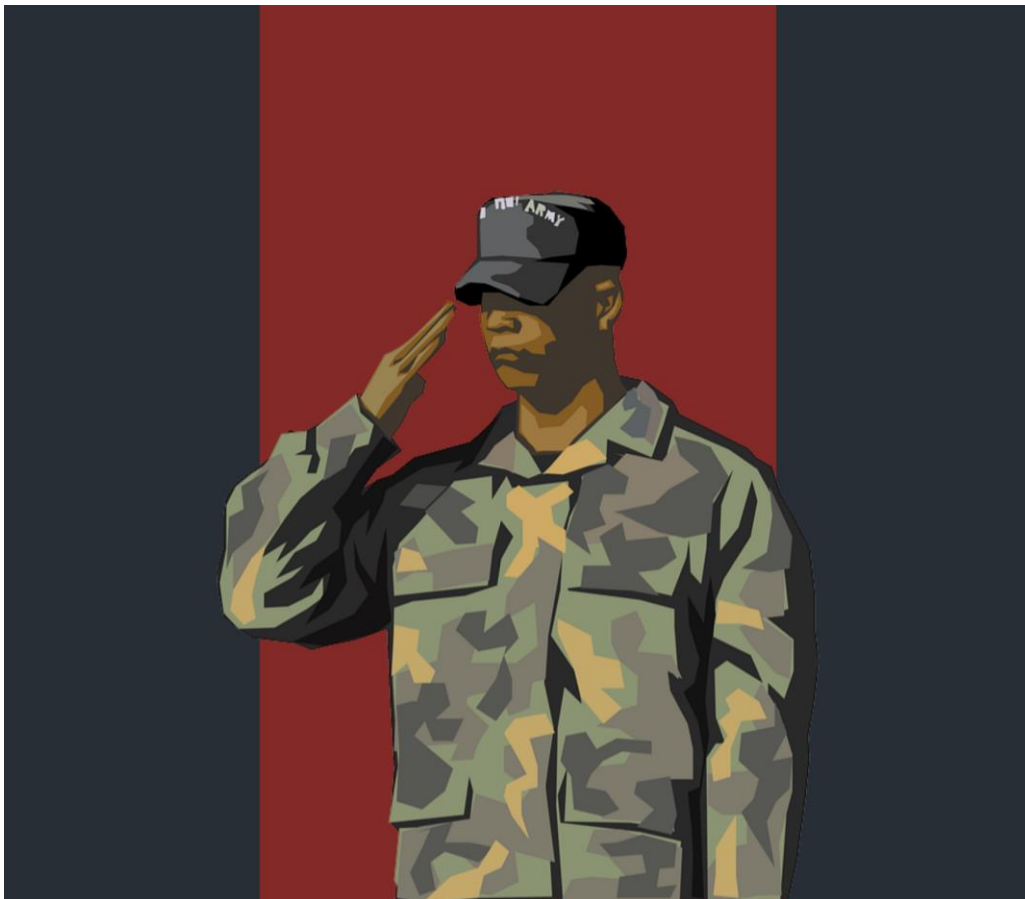
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## REPORT SUMMARY

This three-year report provides a comprehensive analysis of the program’s progress and outcomes from January 2021, when the first participant enrolled in the Veterans Intervention Strategy (VIS), through December 2023. Information provided includes program history and evolution, agencies involved, and data regarding participant demographics, program activities, and measurable impacts. The report offers valuable insights into the program’s effectiveness, challenges faced, and areas for future improvement.

## VETERANS INTERVENTION STRATEGY OVERVIEW

The Deschutes County District Attorney’s Office (DA’s Office) Veterans Intervention Strategy (VIS) is a veteran-focused treatment program designed to improve community safety by providing justice involved veterans (JIVs) with the opportunity to transform their lives through addressing personal life challenges and reducing their involvement in the criminal justice system. The VIS balances the community’s desire to improve the type and level of support provided to veterans in the criminal justice system, while taking into account the resources available and needed to implement a comprehensive veterans program in Deschutes County.

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### History

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Once an individual joins the military, they are at an increased risk for experiencing a range of traumatic events, including exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence.<sup>1</sup> Scholars hypothesize that justice-involved veterans (JIVs) are likely to have risk factors including higher rates of combat deployment/combat-related trauma, adverse childhood experiences, post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, military sexual trauma, mental health issues, substance use, and homelessness/housing instability.<sup>2</sup> These factors may elevate the risk of criminal justice involvement for veterans. Approximately one-third of veterans self-report as having been arrested and booked into jail at least once, compared to fewer than one-fifth of civilians.<sup>3</sup> According to the last comprehensive account, there were 181,500 veterans in American prisons and jails.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.).

<https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>

<sup>2</sup> In this document, we use “PTSD” to refer both to post-traumatic stress (“PTS”) and post-traumatic stress disorder (“PTSD”). This is in line with the George W. Bush Presidential Center’s approach, acknowledging that “experiencing some level of post-traumatic stress (PTS) after a traumatic event can be expected, and “PTS is an injury” suffered while in service. Kelly, K. (2018, July 29), Changing the dialogue of PTS. *George W. Bush Presidential Center*. <https://www.bushcenter.org/publications/articles/2018/06/pts-changing-the-dialogue.html>; Fischer, H. (2015). *A guide to U.S. military causality statistics: Operation freedom’s sentinel, operation inherent resolve, operation new dawn, operation iraqi freedom, & operation enduring freedom*. Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service.

<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/RS22452.pdf>; Parker, K., Igielnik, R., Barroso, A., & Cilluffo, A. (2019). The American veteran experience and the post-9/11 generation. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/09/10/the-american-veteranexperience-and-the-post-9-11-generation/>

<sup>3</sup> Snowden, D. L., Oh, S., Salas-Wright, C. P., Vaughn, M. G., & King, E. (2017). Military service and crime: New evidence. *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 52(5), 605-615. <http://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-017-1342-8>; Timko, C., Nash, A., Owens, M. D., Taylor, E., & Finlay, A. K. (2020). Systematic review of criminal and legal involvement after substance use and mental health treatment among veterans: Building toward needed research. *Substance Abuse: Research & Treatment*, 14, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1178221819901281>

<sup>4</sup> Bronson, J., Carson, A., Noonan, M., & Berzofsky, M. (2015). *Veterans in prison and jail, 2011-12* (NCJ 249144). Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics. <https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/vpj1112.pdf>

## Key Facts<sup>5</sup>

Deployment-related trauma increases incidence of mental health and substance use disorders, elevating a veterans' risk of making contact with the justice system.

Veterans who have served in the military since September 11, 2001 may be especially at risk, in part because they have seen more combat deployments, and redeployments, than any previous cohort of service members.

Transition from military service to civilian life creates a range of difficulties for many veterans.

Most veterans in prison (69%) are serving time for violent crimes; nearly twice as many veterans as non-veterans are serving life sentences.

Prior to the VIS, the need for a Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) in Deschutes County was evident. In 2016, it was estimated that 8.5% of the Oregon Department of Corrections inmates were veterans.<sup>6</sup> In 2020, approximately 241 individuals in the Deschutes County Jail self-identified as veterans.<sup>7</sup> Due to the rapid growth in the area, the Deschutes County Circuit Court had been understaffed for years, lacking the capacity to effectively establish a VTC. This shortage of resources was a primary obstacle to developing a program.

To address this obstacle, in 2013, a DDA (Deputy District Attorney) who was also a military veteran, began working with veteran service programs and defense attorneys to offer JIVs plea agreements aimed to address veteran's risk factors. With internal support, the DDA took on a vital role, but without dedicated staff or formal procedures, data was not tracked and continuity could not be ensured. When that employee left the county in 2014, the initiative fizzled, but their work set a precedent for establishing a future program.

In 2019, a group of local Vietnam veterans requested a county meeting to discuss the implementation of a VTC. Sheriff, Shane Nelson; Vet Center Director, Amanda Juza-Hamrick; and DA, John Hummel met with the veterans. Through research conducted by DA staff, it was determined that the barriers which had originally prevented a VTC from being established were still present. Yet, the gap in treatment opportunities to support JIVs whose actions had a direct connection to their military service was acute, and the county deemed it necessary to find a solution within the parameters available.

<sup>5</sup> Veterans Justice Commission. (2022). *From Service through Reentry, A Preliminary Assessment of Veterans in the Criminal Justice System*. [https://counciloncj.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Preliminary\\_Assessment.pdf](https://counciloncj.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Preliminary_Assessment.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Task Force on Incarcerated Veterans. (2016). Legislative Task Force on Incarcerated Veterans. Oregon.gov. <https://www.oregon.gov/odva/Connect/Documents/FinancialReports/2016%20Task%20Force%20on%20Incarcerated%20Veterans.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Numbers came directly from the jail.

A traditional VTC requires direct court involvement through all phases of the program. To maneuver around this unfeasible prerequisite, the county diverged from the original model to create a veteran-focused Interagency Team. The Interagency Team, comprised of the Deschutes County District Attorney's Office, Deschutes County Sheriff's Office, Central Oregon Vet Center, Veterans Administration, Deschutes County Community Justice, and Deschutes Defenders, was formed to develop an initiative that would emphasize legal accountability, and would offer targeted support, resources, diverse expertise, and legal authority to JIVs outside of the courtroom. This post-charge treatment program model ensures JIVs take accountability for their actions while offering the support and resources JIVs need to transform their lives to regain the honor and respect they earned through their service. This solution resulted in the formulation and launch of the Deschutes County Veterans Intervention Strategy (VIS) on Veterans Day 2020, a veteran's treatment program informed by, but not strictly conforming to, a traditional VTC program model.

"Deschutes County has been remiss in not providing justice-involved veterans a targeted program. The traditional criminal justice system does not effectively address mental-health illnesses or substance-use disorders, so we continue to see the same individuals in court. We needed to resolve this issue, and the Veterans Intervention Strategy is part of the solution," said DA Hummel. "Participating veterans will access the services and treatments required to help them improve their lives and leave the criminal justice system behind for good. And for those that are not ready for change, the program is structured to ensure we can still hold them accountable for their actions."

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From launch through December 2022, the VIS operated outside of the Deschutes County Circuit Court. Although the model showed initial anecdotal success, the VIS was not initially court-based and did not have a presiding judge, resulting in one significant challenge: This necessitated that the DDAs periodically act in capacities beyond the typical treatment court prosecutor, particularly when administering sanctions.

In early 2022, Michelle McIver and Alycia Herriott were selected to fill two new judgeships created by the Oregon Legislature. This provided space for court staffing for the VIS, and in January 2023, the Deschutes County Circuit Court's Honorable Randy Miller, a veteran himself, added the VIS to his docket. Adding the court to the program provided the VIS with an official authority figure, which parallels military culture. Although the court is one element of the larger Interagency Team, the symbolism of the position and its legal authority is conducive to the program and its participants.

Because the VIS was running effectively and the Circuit Court still lacked the capacity to implement a traditional VTC, The DA's Office continued to serve as the coordinating agency for the program. However, with the addition of the court in the program, VIS participants would now appear before a

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<sup>8</sup> Cascade Business News. (2020, November 5). District Attorney Launches Veterans Intervention Strategy. Cascade Business News. <https://cascadebusnews.com/district-attorney-launches-veterans-intervention-strategy/>

judge at least every other month, with the judge conferring on VIS cases as needed throughout the program.

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### Program Overview

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#### Eligibility

The VIS is specifically designed to assist justice-involved veterans with mental health and/or substance use disorders that are connected to their military service, and played a role in their criminal activity. Veterans are eligible to have their case considered if they committed a crime in Deschutes County, and are a resident of either Deschutes, Crook, or Jefferson County.

When the DA's Office is notified that a case involves a veteran, the case is flagged and reviewed by the DA's Office VIS team to determine if the charges are eligible for consideration. The team aims to identify cases where there are legal benefits, in addition to the program's treatment benefits, for the JIV. For example, veterans cited for DUIs are often not ideal candidates for the VIS due to state law which already requires a comprehensive treatment plan. However, the VIS considers most veterans with felony and misdemeanor charges, excluding only sex offenses and Measure 11 cases.

After a case has been deemed potentially eligible, the veteran's attorney is contacted and the veteran is asked to sign a release of information (ROI) and invited to schedule an appointment at the Vet Center for an assessment. The assessment reviews an individual's prerequisites for the program, including evaluation of the presence of a mental health illness and/or substance use disorder that is a result of their service, whether that disorder or illness played a role in the crime, and confirmation of veteran status. Because symptoms of both PTSD and TBI are strongly correlated with "bad paper" discharges, and because these diagnoses are risk factors for criminal justice system involvement, veterans are accepted into the program on any discharges status. Veterans that meet the assessment criteria are required to take accountability for their actions by pleading guilty, are offered a plea deal, and are invited to enroll in the VIS. The plea deal is program-specific and is revoked if the veteran does not complete the program.

#### Tracks

The VIS has two tracks to provide the most appropriate intervention for each veteran based on their individual situation. Track I is a minimum of twelve months, and is tailored for veterans who have engaged in lower-level crimes and have a less severe substance use or mental health condition. Track II is a minimum of fourteen months, and is designed for high-risk, high-need individuals who have committed a more serious crime and/or have more severe substance use or mental health conditions.

#### Program Requirements

Participants are expected to:

- Attend monthly VIS meetings.
- Complete an individualized treatment plan, including participation in all recommended mental health care, substance use treatment, medical care, group therapy, individual therapy, case management, and/or other VIS related services and programs.
- Comply with random sobriety tests, have documented clean time.

- Not incur additional charges.
- Engage weekly with veteran mentors.
- Pay restitution or compensatory fine(s) to victim(s), if applicable.
- Gain/maintain a stable living environment.
- Gain/maintain employment, education, or a volunteer role (per disability rating).
- Submit monthly self-progress reports.
- Comply with probation requirements and court obligations, if applicable.

### Treatment and Services

All participants enrolled in the VIS are assigned a Vet Center caseworker connecting them to services and support. The VIS coordinates with the Central Oregon Evaluation Services (COES), which provides substance abuse evaluations and refers the participants to their required treatment. All participants receive treatment, individual counseling, and attend groups for their specific needs, including but not limited to: substance use, domestic violence, military sexual trauma, PTSD, and other mental health issues. Treatment programs and support groups include, but are not limited to: Vet Center VIS Group, Veterans Ranch Group, Alcoholics Anonymous, Victim Impact Panels, BestCare Treatment Services, Anger Management, Batterer Intervention Program, Bridges 2 Success, and other substance use treatment programs. All participants attend the Vet Center VIS Group, which promotes relationship building with other veterans and provides an avenue for encouragement and healthy conversation when civilian services (services not specifically targeted for veterans) may not fully meet their needs.

The VIS team confirms VIS participants are enrolled in VA benefits. If they are not enrolled, the team and/or the veteran mentor will assist the participant in accessing VA benefits. If the participant is ineligible for VA benefits, the team will direct the participant to enroll in the Oregon Health Plan. Veterans who face medical issues receive assistance with access to care and are encouraged to obtain and make regular visits to a primary provider for health management.

### Veteran Mentors

*"I was looking for a volunteer opportunity to give back to the local veteran community. The VIS program resonated with me as I have seen firsthand how being a source of support to those struggling with mental health and substance abuse issues can make a real difference. Knowing that I can help someone is important to me."*

*- VIS Mentor*

Veteran mentors are role models who understand the impacts and realities of military service and are a crucial component of participant and program success. Each participant is assigned a mentor upon entry into the program and required to have weekly communications in the form of phone/video calls, personal meetings, and/or social outings. Every month, while filling out their self-progress reports, participants are asked to confirm whether they feel their mentor is a good fit for them. If they report they are not a good fit, the Vet Center mentor coordinator will assign a new mentor.

The mentor/mentee relationship is one that requires trust and confidentiality. Veteran mentors offer guidance and encouragement throughout the phases of the program, with the goal to empower individuals to face their challenges in order to cultivate self-respect, personal growth, future goals, and healthy relationships. Because they are engaged as volunteers who work outside the criminal justice system and outside the network of counselors and treatment providers, they play a necessary role in providing participants with an informal safe space to engage while they adjust to the changes they make throughout the program. In addition to developing meaningful relationships with the program participants, mentors provide the VIS team with insights into challenges the participants may be facing, for which the VIS team may be able to offer additional support.

### Program Goals

VIS outcomes serve the community by increasing safety through recidivism reduction, and benefit justice-involved veterans by improving their lives through engagement in veteran-specific programs and services, and by establishing a social and professional network to assist veterans through life challenges.

Take participant, Henry (not his real name): When Henry’s attorney first notified VIS DDA, Matt, that he wished to participate in the VIS program, Matt was surprised. Because there was a connection between the crime and Henry’s military service, he qualified for the VIS program. However, the penalty for the crime Henry had committed, a wildlife violation, consisted of a fine. With his entry into the VIS program, Henry would be required to complete a substantial amount of work, treatment, and support groups over the course of a year. Regardless, he opted to join the program. Matt reported, “Throughout the next year, Henry’s growth was remarkable. He addressed the underlying trauma that had followed him from his time in the service. He became far more outgoing and developed bonds with his fellow VIS participants. He reflected that through the program, he learned skills to address his anxiety and improve his decision-making. Henry was a pleasure to work with and his growth was remarkable.”

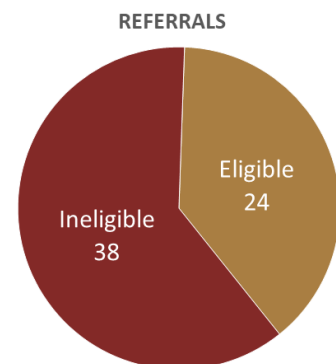
## PROGRAM METRICS

### Metrics: Referrals

#### Eligible and Ineligible

Anyone can refer a JIV to the VIS, and we often receive referrals from district attorneys, defense attorneys, legal assistants, program graduates, and local veterans. From January 2021 to December 2023, 62 veterans who were involved in 64 cases were referred to the VIS. Of the 62 individuals, 24 were accepted into the program and 38 were deemed ineligible. Of those 38 ineligible veterans/cases:

- Thirty-one percent failed to follow through on enrollment process requirements, including not signing or refusing to sign the ROI, missing their scheduled assessment meeting at least three times or refusing to attend.





- Twenty-six percent were ineligible for a variety of less common reasons, including an ineligible crime, living outside of the eligible tri-county area, and the individual required more services than the program could offer.
- Thirteen percent declined the program, some noting their unwillingness to plead guilty or their unwillingness to participate for the length of the program.
- Ten percent of the cases were sentenced or went to trial before the VIS had the opportunity to staff the case.
- Seven point five percent opted for another program such as Domestic Violence Deferred Sentencing Program or DUII Diversion.
- Seven point five percent did not have a connection between the crime and the individuals' military service.
- Five percent were untruthful regarding their veteran status.

**Metrics: Enrolled Participants**

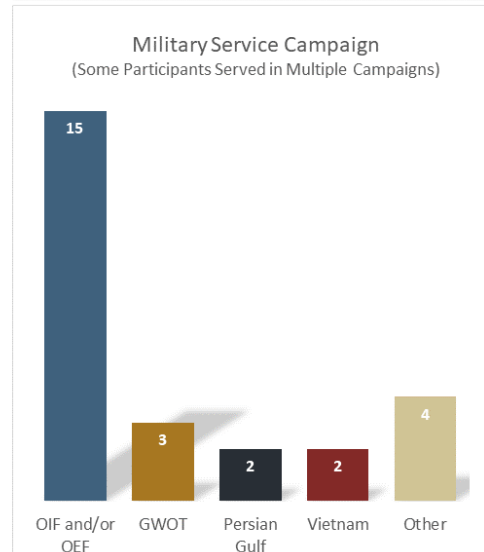
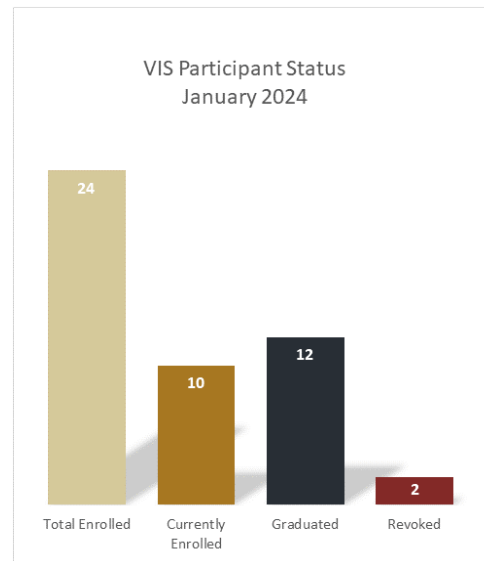
**Enrollment / Graduation**

Of the 24 total enrolled participants from January 2021 through December 2023, 10 were currently enrolled as of December 2023, 12 had graduated, and two were revoked due to non-compliance.

**Demographics**

Because the majority of participants in the VIS are high-risk JIVs due to combat-related trauma, we collect data on the military campaigns in which they participated. However, veterans are accepted on other service eligibility, including campaigns not listed here, injury during service, and/or military sexual trauma. Of the 24 enrolled participants, 15 served in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and/or Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), three in the Global War on Terror (GWOT), two in the Persian Gulf, two in Vietnam, two with Military Sexual Trauma (MST), and three with other service eligibility.

Forty-six percent of the VIS participants served in the Army, 29% in the Marines, 17% in the Navy, 4% in the Air Force, and 4% in the National Guard. Participants spent an average of six years in the service, with one year being the shortest term, and 20 years being the longest term. 79% of the veterans in the program at this time have been honorably discharged.

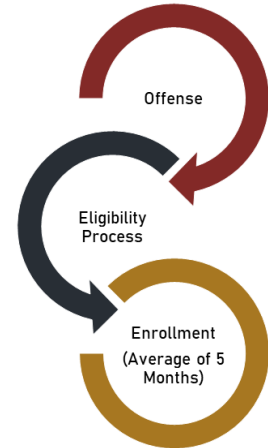


Slightly over 4% of VIS participants completed some high school, 33%+ completed high school or obtained a GED, 33%+ have attended some college courses, 8%+ have obtained an associate degree, 12.5% have a bachelor’s degree, 4%+ have a master’s degree, and 4%+ selected other.

The VIS participants range in age from 27 – 75, with an average age of 44. Seventy-five percent self-identified as Caucasian, 8% as Hispanic/Latino, and 17% as other. The majority (96%) of participants are male, while only 4% are female. Thirty-three percent of participants live in Bend, 21% in Redmond, and 46% live in the surrounding areas, including Deschutes County (La Pine, Powell Butte, Sunriver, Terrebonne, and Tumalo), Crook County (Prineville), and Klamath County (Bonanza)<sup>9</sup>.

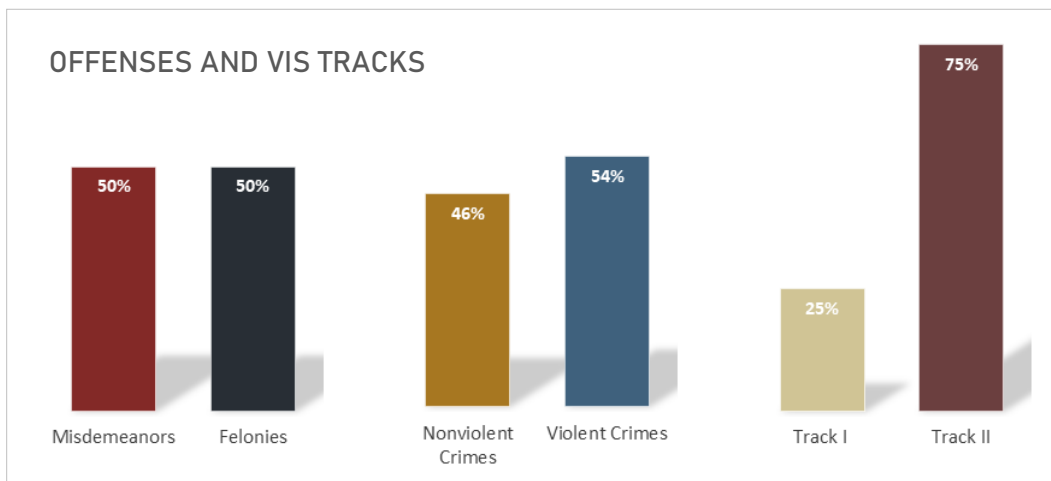
**Housing, Employment, and Disability**

Upon entering the program, 8% of participants were homeless, while 92% were housed, which includes owning, renting, or living with friends or family. Fifty-seven percent had a driver’s license, while 43% had no license or had their license suspended, and were in need of transportation assistance. Thirty-seven point five percent were unemployed, 29% worked full-time, 21% part-time, and 12.5% were retired. 83% were receiving VA benefits, with 58% receiving 50% or more disability, and 46% receiving 80% or more disability. Of the 46% with an 80% - 100% disability rating, 45% were unemployed, 46% worked full or part-time, and the remaining 9% were retired.



**Offenses and VIS Tracks**

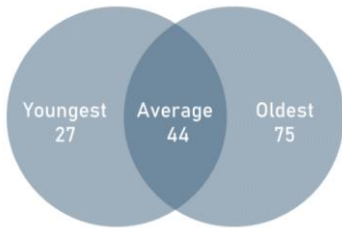
Of the 24 participants, half entered the program with felonies and half with misdemeanors. Forty-six percent were charged for nonviolent crimes, while 54% were charged for violent crimes. The process of getting an individual into the program took an average of five months, from a participant’s offense to enrollment. Twenty-five percent of program participants entered into Track I and 75% of program participants entered into Track II.



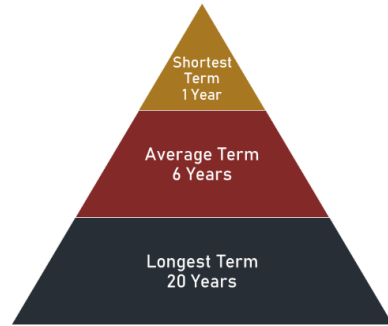
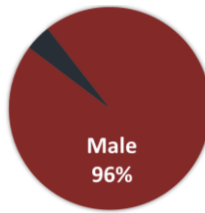
<sup>9</sup> This participant committed their offense while living in Deschutes County. Upon entering the VIS, he enrolled in residential treatment in Klamath County. The Interagency Team judged it was best for him to remain there, as he was able to find housing and had developed a local support network.

# PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

VIS PARTICIPANT AGE

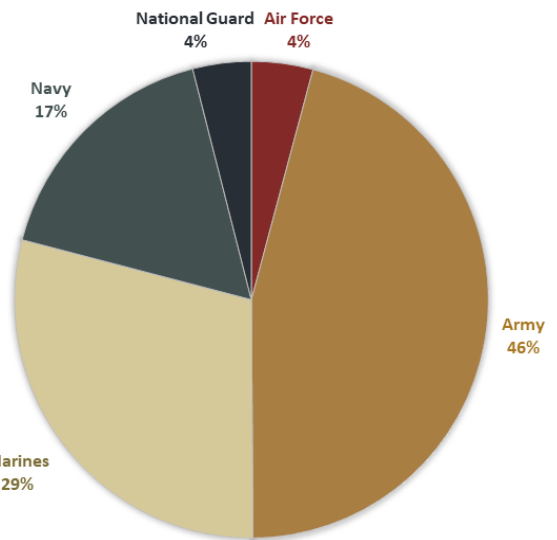
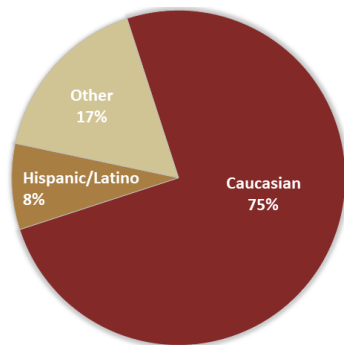


GENDER

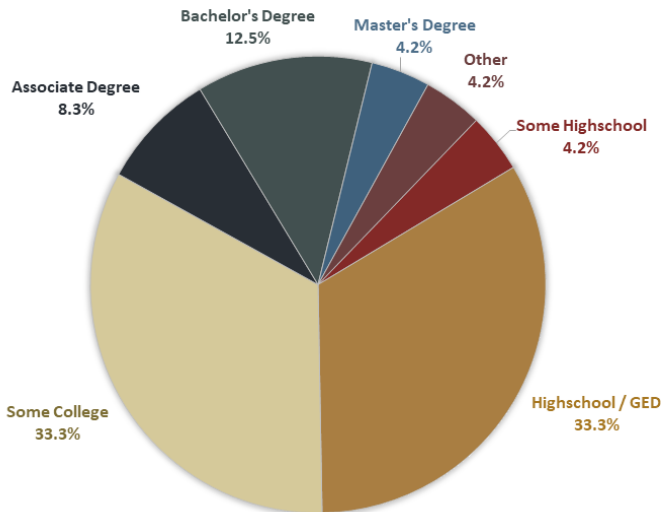


SERVICE TERMS

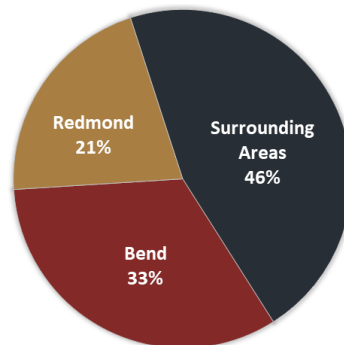
ETHNICITY



MILITARY BRANCH



HIGHEST EDUCATION



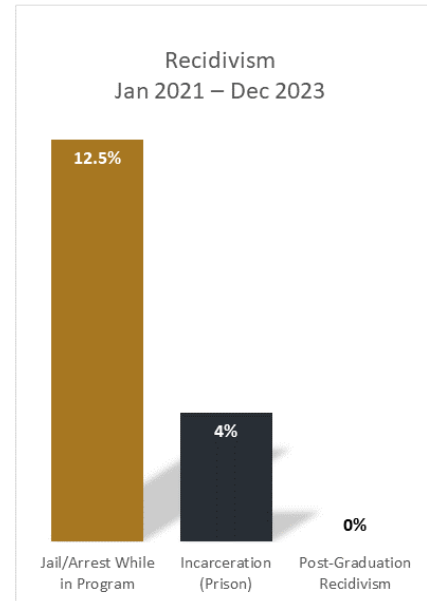
PARTICIPANT LOCATIONS

**Metrics: Outcomes**

**Recidivism**

Recidivism in the State of Oregon is defined as the arrest, conviction or incarceration of a person who has previously been convicted of a crime, if the arrest, conviction or incarceration is for a new crime and occurs three years or less after the initial crime, or three years or less after the person was released from incarceration.<sup>10</sup> In our data, we have divided these components into three recidivism categories: jail/arrest while in the program, incarceration (prison), and post-graduation recidivism (arrest, conviction, incarceration).

From January 2021 - December 2023, one veteran was revoked due to reengaging in criminal activity, and was incarcerated in prison due to a parole violation, resulting in the program’s 4% incarceration (prison) recidivism rate. The VIS had a 12.5% jail/arrest recidivism rate for participants while they were still in the VIS program. These minor offenses resulted in little or no jail time. However, after graduating from the program, none of the VIS participants reengaged in criminal activity, sustaining a 0% post-graduation recidivism rate.



It is important to note that achieving success in the VIS may involve setbacks. Through treatment and support groups, our participants are learning new, healthier skillsets to cope with their mental health and/or substance use issues. Making these changes is not always a linear path, and the VIS does not automatically revoke a participant for a misstep.

Consider this story of participant Julian Duran, quoted from a 2022 article published in The Bulletin<sup>11</sup>:  
 “This started out as a horrible nightmare,” Duran told a small crowd composed primarily of his support network for the past year. “I made some bad choices, and never in a million years did I think it would turn out to be like this.”

After a decade of military service, including overseas deployments, Duran had moved to Redmond in 2018 but struggled to adapt to civilian life. Duran, 34, was arrested for fighting in a bar in Redmond, his fourth arrest involving alcohol and violence in two years. With three prior convictions for assault, the bar fight meant Duran likely would have been sentenced to at least a year in prison. Instead, Duran found a path to recovery.

Duran was raised in Carson City, Nevada, and went as far as eighth grade in school. In 2007, at 18, joined the U.S. Air Force. He served six years active duty, specializing as an F-15 crew chief. Always mechanically inclined, he then worked as a contractor for two years for NASA, before

<sup>10</sup> HB 3194 (2013), Section 45 (codified in ORS 423.557) [https://oregon.public.law/statutes/ors\\_423.557](https://oregon.public.law/statutes/ors_423.557)

<sup>11</sup> Andrews, G. (2022, March 16). Redmond man is Central Oregon vet program's first graduate. Bend Bulletin. [https://www.bendbulletin.com/localstate/crimeandjustice/redmond-man-is-central-oregon-vet-programs-first-graduate/article\\_4999d1e4-a564-11ec-9367-8f959df6b0dd.html](https://www.bendbulletin.com/localstate/crimeandjustice/redmond-man-is-central-oregon-vet-programs-first-graduate/article_4999d1e4-a564-11ec-9367-8f959df6b0dd.html)

returning to the military as a contractor for the Department of Defense. He supported special operations as a flying crew chief, traveling to conflicts in Syria and Africa. “We went on a lot of weird missions, and I was gone a lot,” he said.

Civilian life challenged him. “No meals provided. No scheduled downtime. It was just really different,” he said. “It was just complete disarray.” He had nightmares, too: “It was a lot of chaos.” He turned to drinking and found himself in bars night after night. He had no family in town, no human connections. And “trauma doesn’t mix well with alcohol.”

In the military, guys would go out at night in packs, he said. But, as a civilian, “when another man starts acting drunk or lippy toward you, you don’t have all your buddies there pulling you away,” Duran said. “I think that (fighting) was kind of typical in the military. It wasn’t like that big a deal,” he said. “But in the civilian sector, it’s totally unreasonable.”

Duran’s attorney, Casey Baxter, suggested he consider a new program offered by the district attorney’s office — Veterans Intervention Strategy. To Duran, the program sounded better than prison. “I wound up digging into some things, like PTSD and childhood trauma, that were causing me to not be functional in society.” He took part in eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy to treat his unaddressed post-traumatic stress disorder. He and his counselor focused on his dreams and that helped him develop a new, healthier way of thinking. Duran thinks he was successful because fellow veterans in the program met him at his level. His mentor, Roger Riolo, said it was because of something else: “He was ready.”

Duran, a father of three young children, now dates a preschool teacher with two children of her own. He’s an aircraft maintenance manager for AI Systems Inc. at Redmond Airport. He’s completed the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and is now a sponsor. He wants the next phase of his life to involve helping others.

## CONCLUSIONS

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### Participant Responses

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Participant feedback is collected through monthly self-progress reports and participant graduation applications and surveys. Anecdotally, through comments made on these reports and during VIS meetings, the veterans have indicated that their lives are better on account of the VIS. These reflections are best shared in the veterans’ own words:

“Before the program I was really depressed and alone. My anxiety was almost unbearable. I felt like I had no purpose and I was broken beyond repair. I didn’t want to be around other people and didn’t feel like I deserved to have my family. (After VIS), I have become so close to my family. We all communicate well with each other and I know how to open up and share myself with them. It is hard to explain how peaceful and healthy my life is. I no longer feel broken and realize now that I never was. I was just well used and needed a tune-up.”

“(Prior to VIS, my life was in) shambles. I was lost. I was in disarray and didn’t know what was going to happen. I regretted the past and feared the future. I found support in VIS. I used that support to inventory my moral and spiritual well-being.”

“(Prior to the program, my life) was chaotic and stagnating. There was no order and I was unhappy. (Now,) I have my sobriety, I have my job, and my mental condition is far better than it was (before) coming into the program.”

“(Prior to the program,) I didn’t feel worth the cost of the bullet to end my pain. I knew there was something wrong, but just thought it was me. I didn’t feel worthy of love, although I longed for it. Unproductive and unsatisfying. (VIS) made me feel worthy...it was like a switch being flipped. I know that showing my feelings is not weakness but instead a sign of incredible strength and healing.”

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## Insights

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Although the data demonstrates the achievement of the VIS program, the initiative is still in its infancy. Because the VIS was constructed around local constraints, including limited court staffing, the team was unable to implement a traditional VTC, thus did not strictly have a national program model to follow. Instead, the VIS was customized to fit the needs and barriers faced by Deschutes County, with leeway for program refinement and evolution. The VIS DA staff holds an annual review of the program manual, making additions, edits, and program modifications as noted throughout the year. This flexibility allows the team to adjust to the needs of the participants, mentors, the Interagency Team, and the VIS staff with the aim to identify areas for improvement and enhance the experience for everyone involved. Below are a few examples of successes and adaptations made throughout the first three years of the program.

From the beginning, the VIS team declined to formalize consequences (i.e. tethering sanctions and rewards to specific actions), as sometimes done in VTCs. The team recognized that each individual in the program would come with a unique mix of experiences, mental health challenges, and treatment needs. Although the VIS has a set list of sanctions and rewards, the consequences for actions are modified for best outcomes. As the program grew this directive proved appropriate, as it allowed the team to truly acknowledge each individual’s distinct set of challenges or successes and respond in a manner that is designed to address the individual’s personal circumstances.

The VIS accepts veterans charged with a crime in Deschutes County, who reside in Deschutes, Jefferson, or Crook County. However, in 2021 the VIS received a case involving an individual who originally resided in Deschutes County, but moved to Klamath County for treatment and decided to stay. The team permitted the individual to enter the eligibility process and when they completed their requirements,

the team concluded that this person would access treatment and support through the VIS that could produce substantial life benefits. Due to the fact that the program launched during the pandemic, the VIS program had already been modified to serve veterans in a remote capacity, and the participant made trips to Central Oregon for in-person treatment, support groups, and court, as needed. Again, the flexibility of the program and the team allowed for greater reach, and therefore, greater impact.

As noted in the *Metrics: Referrals* section, 10% of VIS referrals were sentenced or went to trial before the VIS had the opportunity to staff the case and begin the eligibility process. This is one of a handful of issues that was resolved when Judge Randy Miller added the VIS to his court docket. Since January 2023, when this occurred, the VIS has not been referred any cases where a veteran was interested in enrolling, but was sentenced prior to VIS review.

Certainly, adding the VIS to Judge Miller's docket improved awareness of the program within the Deschutes County Circuit Court. However, the VIS staff have deliberately worked to enhance program visibility within the county and the community, including hosting informational meetings for defense attorneys and sharing programmatic information within the DA's Office, other county departments, and via nonprofits serving veterans.

With limited data to draw from, the VIS team was unsure of expectations for program enrollment. From the outset, the team planned for a maximum of 20 enrolled participants at any one time. Throughout the first three years, the participant group averaged eight individuals. The VIS received 20 referrals in 2021, 18 referrals in 2022, and 15 referrals in 2023, reflecting a 25% decrease in referrals over three years. Data is unavailable to clarify the drop in referral rate. Nevertheless, the VIS team maintains their efforts to raise awareness through multiple channels in order to extend the reach of the program to veterans in need and increase safety within Deschutes County.

Moving forward, the VIS team will focus on securing sources of funding to:

1. Conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the program's impact,
2. Offer financial assistance for treatment for homeless and low-income VIS participants,
3. Offer mentor and staff training,
4. Provide financial assistance to cover transportation for VIS participants with no license or suspended license,
5. Cover installation and leasing of alcohol monitoring systems,
6. Offer coverage of additional, non-required treatment (PCIT Therapy) on the recommendation of the Vet Center readjustment counselor.

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### **Acknowledgments**

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The community and county identified a service gap and worked collaboratively to develop the Veterans Intervention Strategy, a sustainable initiative to address veterans' need for support and treatment. The DA's Office and the Vet Center contributed the staffing resources essential to develop and administer the program. The Sheriff's Office provided seed funds to purchase supplies necessary for program launch and management. Community Justice advocated for the participation of probation officers, who provide supervision for high-risk, high-need participants.

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### **Deschutes County District Attorney's Office**

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### **Deschutes Defenders**

Joel Wirtz, Executive Director, Attorney

### **Deschutes County Sheriff's Office**

Captain William Bailey; Sheriff Shane Nelson

### **Central Oregon Vet Center**

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### **U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs**

Peggy Kuhn, Veterans Justice Outreach Coordinator

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Raun Atkinson, Attorney

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