



Veterans

Moving Forward



November 2018

What is VMF?

VMF is a veteran-only housing unit at the Vista Detention Facility in San Diego County for male inmates who have served in the U.S. military. Modeled after other similar units, VMF was designed by the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department, in partnership with the San Diego Veterans Administration (VA) in 2013. The core goals of VMF are to structure an environment for veterans to draw upon the positive aspects of their shared military culture, create a safe place for healing and rehabilitation, and foster positive peer connections. In 2014, SANDAG received a grant from the National Institute of Justice to conduct a process and impact evaluation of the program, with an emphasis on “lessons learned”.

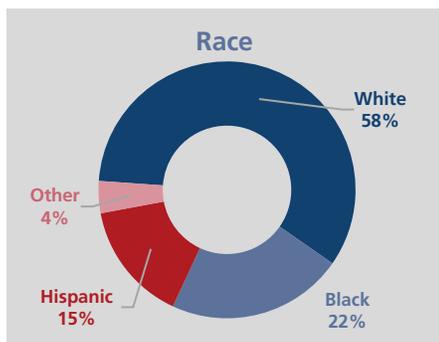
Core program components

- Selection of correctional staff with a military background
- Less restrictive and more welcoming environment
- No segregation of inmates by race/ethnicity
- Incentives, including extended dayroom time
- Mandatory rehabilitative programming that focuses on criminogenic and other underlying risks and needs or that are quality-of-life focused (i.e., yoga and meditation)
- A designated VMF Correctional Counselor located in the unit
- Regular availability of VA staff in the unit
- Guidance and assistance of a multi-disciplinary team for those needing additional help

Who were the VMF study clients?

A total of 141 clients who entered the program between March 1, 2015 and December 31, 2016, had a program exit and release from custody date prior to January 1, 2017, and agreed to participate in the study were included in this evaluation.

Instant criminal offense



41.89 average years of age

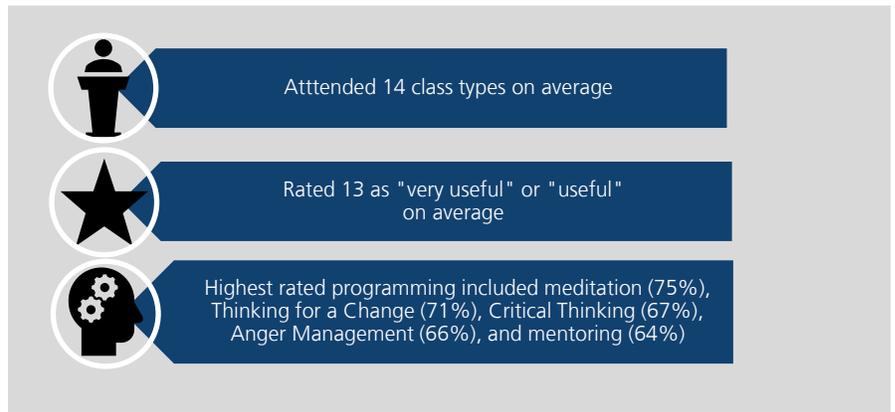
- 87%** prior adult arrest
- 72%** prior incarceration
- 71%** some post-high school education
- 55%** honorably discharged
- 45%** employed at time of arrest
- 29%** arrested as a juvenile
- 21%** living on street or public place at time of arrest

Client needs and how they were met

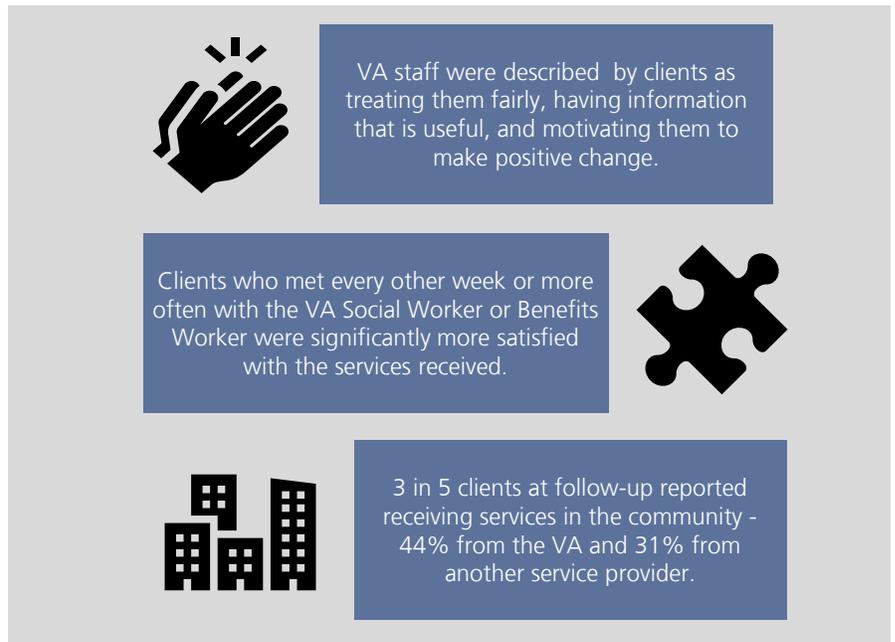
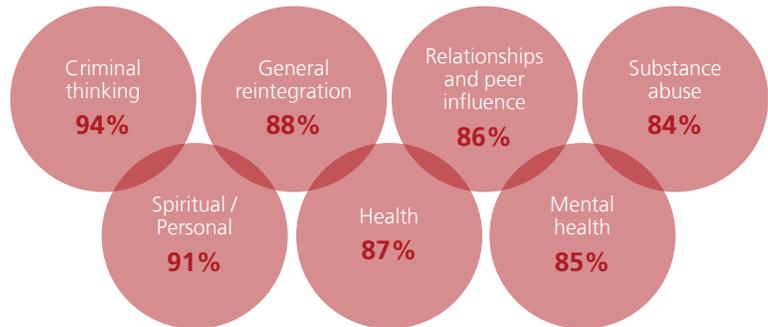
Highlight 1 Clients attended an average of 14 different classes and ranked an average of 13 as “very useful” or “useful”. The highest rated classes and programming included meditation, Thinking for a Change (i.e., cognitive-based therapy), and Critical Thinking.

Highlight 2 More than 4 in 5 clients surveyed at six-months following release from jail reported that many of their needs were met, either in custody, in the community, or both. However, as described in the full report, each of these needs was more likely to be met in custody, versus in the community, suggesting the need to strengthen the aftercare component of the program.

Highlight 3 The linkage between the Sheriff’s Department and the VA and the ongoing connection of the VA to the VMF clients are important program components. Feedback from clients revealed that the veterans appreciated the availability of the VA staff, but that satisfaction was related to availability and fewer clients than may have been expected received VA services upon release into the community.



Percent of clients that reported their need had been met by follow-up



Staff perception of the VMF unit compared to traditional units

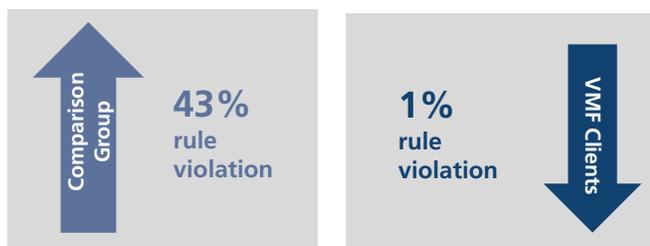


Outcome evaluation results

Highlight 1 Almost every client said he would recommend the program to another veteran, almost 9 in 10 reported that the program had prepared him for reentry, and 3 in 4 of those homeless at intake reported having a more stable living situation at follow-up.



Highlight 2 The theory that a veteran-only module would decrease behavior issues was confirmed with only one percent of VMF clients studied having a rule violation, compared to 43 percent of a historical comparison group of veterans.

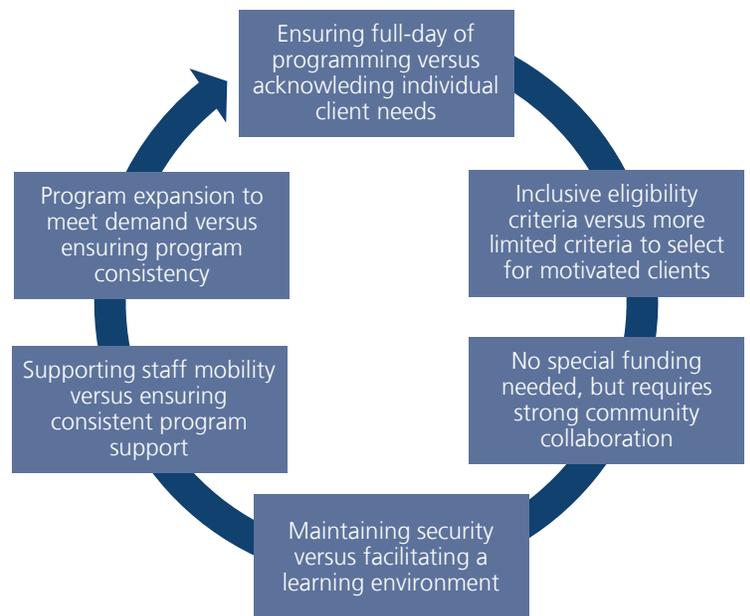


Highlight 3 When controlling for differences between the VMF clients and a historical comparison group of veteran inmates, VMF clients were significantly less likely to have a conviction for a new offense in the 12-months following release.



Lessons learned

Highlight 1 A number of the lessons learned from this evaluation focused on balance – that is, broad eligibility criteria versus more thorough screening to ensure clients who enter the program are motivated; not having to rely on grant funds, but then relying on strong collaboration and volunteers for programming; maintaining security while also creating an environment conducive to healing and learning; acknowledging senior facility staff will transfer and supporting this professional growth, while ensuring the program continues to be supported; expanding a program to meet need, while ensuring core components are able to retain their fidelity; and keeping clients engaged with full-day programming while also considering that some programming may not apply to every client.



Highlight 2 Three factors that were identified repeatedly as “what worked” by both staff and clients included the emphasis on classes (such as Thinking for a Change) that addressed criminal thinking, staff who had a military background and/or demonstrated their trust and respect for clients, and an environment where veterans felt safe to work through their issues.

Highlight 3 Two areas that were identified that could be strengthened included aftercare upon release and stronger linkages to such services as housing, employment, and basic needs, as well as more training for staff working in the unit – either on military culture or evidence-based practice.



What worked best

- Emphasis on classes addressing criminal thinking
- Staff with similar background and who care
- Environment that feels safe to work on issues



What could be strengthened

- Increased access to aftercare upon release
- Training for staff and volunteers

Final words

From staff:

"The inmates in the VMF program have shown me that once they are moved away from jail politics, they can succeed and make the changes in their lifestyle that they have previously failed because of bad influences."

From clients:

"I want to change the person I once was. This program is making a big change in my way of thinking and reacting. I like it."

"If you plan on staying out, the program will give you the tools to do so."

"VMF showed me that it's never too late for a person that committed a crime to change and live a normal life."

Factors for jurisdictions to consider if implementing a veterans-only module:

- **Enough veterans to house in a unit or module**
- **Staff with a military background or commitment to population**
- **Desire for a safer and more rehabilitative-focused environment**
- **Ability to coordinate with area VA and service providers in the community**



This project was funded by the U.S. Department of Justice (National Institute of Justice, 2014-IJ-CX-0103). Opinions or points of view expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.