

# Introduction to Public Safety De-Escalation Tactics for Military Veterans in Crisis

*Tips from the field, supported by current research*

COPS Office

**Officer Safety and Wellness.** De-escalation training and accompanying policies have been found to reduce officer injury and enhance officer safety. (Task Force on Policing 2021; Engel et al. 2020) Most veterans have received weapons and close combat training and are likely to have at least one weapon in their homes. (Donahue et al. 2019) It is important for everyone's safety that officers be trained so they can slow down and give a veteran in crisis an opportunity to de-escalate. (Donahue et al. 2019; Weaver et al. 2013)

**If you are not a veteran, what you need to know.** If you are not a veteran, you may not have the frame of reference of a fellow officer who has served to as effectively engage with a veteran in crisis. Here are some related tips from pilot participants:

- There are several questions you should seek answers to:
  - Have they served our country in uniform?
  - What branch of the military did they serve?
  - How many years did they serve?
  - When did they serve?
  - Did they serve overseas?
  - What was their rank?
- Unless you have been deployed to a combat zone, do not ask them about their deployments; if they bring this up, allow them to steer the conversation. However, should they seem uncomfortable with any of these questions, do NOT push the issue.

After you have established a baseline rapport with the veteran, you should inquire about their discharge status. (It may impact the benefits and services for which they may be eligible with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs [VA].)

- Ask the veteran if there is anyone they might speak with who understands what the veteran may be experiencing, such as a former team member, commanding officer, friend, or family member.

**Importance of gaining an understanding of what the veteran may be experiencing.** The more training, education, and experience you receive around the veteran's underlying mental health issues, military culture, and how a veteran's issues can be traced to their traumatic experiences, the better you are able to defuse situations and prevent harm to self or others. (Donahue et al. 2019; DeAngelis 2014) You are

encouraged to seek out additional research or speak with veterans you know about their experiences; you should ask for suggestions to help you understand what veterans may be experiencing. This can be helpful even if you are a veteran yourself, as each person's experiences are different.

- **The importance of connecting veterans with resources.** Veterans served and sacrificed for our country, so when they face trouble, we want to help them get back on track so they can be contributing members of their communities. They can reunite with family and friends, find gainful employment, and regain a sense of purpose that they once felt in the military. They like contributing, as noted by Tom Kirchberg, PhD, chief of psychology at the Memphis Veterans Affairs Medical Center. (DeAngelis 2014) "A referral when warranted is often a better option than an arrest and incarceration and the collateral consequences that come with involvement in the criminal justice system," says former Clayton (NC) Chief of Police Blair Myhand. (Donahue et al. 2019) It is important to know that some veterans (such as those who were dishonorably discharged or who served in a non-U.S. military) may not be eligible for benefits from the VA. You should become familiar with resources in your local community.
- Veterans Re-Entry Search Services (VRSS) is a secure web site that enables correctional and other criminal justice system entities to identify people who have served the U.S. military: <https://vrss.va.gov/>
- Related referral resources
  - Wounded Warrior Project: <https://www.woundedwarriorproject.org/>
  - National Alliance on Mental Illness: <https://www.nami.org/veterans>
  - Veterans Families United: <https://veteransfamiliesunited.org/>
  - PTSD program locations (state-specific): <https://www.va.gov/directory/guide/ptsd.asp>
  - Veterans Justice Outreach Program: <https://www.va.gov/homeless/vjo.asp>
  - Vietnam Veterans of America: <https://vva.org>

**Give them hope.** "When veterans are offered hope—for themselves and for their families—through specialized de-escalation measures, situations that could otherwise have become violent or get out of hand are more likely to result in peaceful outcomes that preserve public safety," Chief Myhand noted in *Veteran Response Teams*.

For additional resources, please visit the [University of Tennessee's Law Enforcement Innovation Center's De-escalation for Veteran in Crisis Resources list](#).

# Resources

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