

New Jersey Judiciary Veterans Assistance Project

The Veterans Assistance Project (VAP) is a voluntary referral service for veterans who come in contact with the court system and who may be in need of veterans services from their local Veterans Service Office. The goal is to get services and support to improve the quality of life for the men, women, and families who have made sacrifices in the defense of the United States. Available services can include mental health counseling, addiction services, legal services, and housing.

Highlights

- The project targets court-involved persons who have served in the military.
- It is a collaborative effort involving the Judiciary, the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMAVA), and the New Jersey Division of Mental Health Services (DMHS).
- The Judiciary component offers voluntary identification and referral to one of 14 state veterans services offices (VSOs).
- The project has been spearheaded by the criminal division.
- The Judiciary began a county-by-county rollout in December 2008.
- The project now operates statewide.
- The mentoring component was developed by the New Jersey “Battle Buddies” program.

Statewide Referrals since Inception = 3,402 (as of 08/01/2016)

Facts

- DMAVA estimates that, as of Sept. 30, 2015, there were 413,188 veterans in New Jersey, of which 33,258 were women.
- The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has identified substance use disorders as one of the three most common diagnoses amongst veterans, with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury in second and third place.
- The January 2008 National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that approximately one out of six veterans from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom have a substance use disorder.
- A Veterans Health Administration National Center for PTSD fact sheet reports that PTSD symptoms can indirectly lead to criminal behavior or through direct linkage of a traumatic incident to a specific crime.
- 19 percent of the veterans who returned from Iraq and Afghanistan, roughly 300,000 people, reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder or major depression.
- The Survey of Inmates in Local Jails reports that 9.3 percent of people incarcerated in jails are veterans.

- The primary offense for 70 percent of incarcerated veterans was a non-violent crime, and 45 percent had served two or more state prison sentences.
- At minimum, 90,000 of the 9 million unique inmates annually released from U.S. jails are veterans. A large majority (82 percent) are eligible for VA services, having been discharged either under honorable (65 percent) or general with honorable (17 percent) conditions.

Overview

The New Jersey Veterans Assistance Project is a combined effort of the Judiciary, DMAVA, and DMHS, to connect service members who come into contact with the courts and who need help with existing community services as well as mentors to address those issues.

It is not a diversionary program. The project is geared toward identifying veterans who have come into contact with the courts and referring them voluntarily for available services.

The project also involves a mentoring component that is being developed by the New Jersey “Battle Buddies” Program. During the assessment process, the local veterans service officer will determine whether the veteran could benefit from assignment of a mentor. If so, one will be assigned.

Collaboration

DMAVA provides a range of programs, assistance and support services to veterans and their families. DMAVA operates 16 VSOs that help veterans access federal and state benefits to which they may be entitled. For this project, once a veteran has been identified in the court system and volunteers to participate, the local VSO is notified and assists in determining and providing the services needed by the veteran.

DMHS is the state mental health authority that oversees and has primary responsibility for funding the public adult mental health system. In addition to various psychiatric hospitals and units, the division has contracts with more than 120 not-for-profit community providers. For this project the DMHS and its service providers assist in identifying veterans and providing mental health services for those veterans in need of such services.

The cooperation of municipal prosecutors and public defenders, county jail personnel, health service providers, and superior court public defenders and prosecutors is also crucial. Each of these entities assists in identifying veterans and recognizing the need for services.

History of the Program

In 2008, the New Jersey Judiciary piloted the VAP in the Municipal Court and Superior Court Criminal Divisions in the Atlantic and Union counties. Within the first year, three additional counties had implemented the project and five others were in the planning stages.

The pilot project was designed to identify veterans as soon as possible after they entered the criminal justice system and when needed, provide referrals to the local VSO to connect those veteran to community resources to address the unique services they need. Those services could include a thorough assessment, identification of specific military entitlements, referrals for individual and family counseling, medical and legal assistance, educational and vocational training aid, and other community services.

The intention was to connect defendants with services to which they are entitled and to help alleviate negative factors that may have contributed to their involvement in the criminal courts.

Soon after the pilots in Atlantic and Union began the Judiciary recognized that the VAP could be accessible to other court-involved veterans. Counties that were creating VAP planning teams and hosting meetings included representatives from the civil, family, municipal, and probation divisions. Today, the project is statewide and operates in all 21 counties.

Process for Linking Veterans to Services

Veterans are identified at the earliest possible point as they enter the court system. There are multiple points at which a referral to a local VSO can be initiated. For example, self-identification as a veteran is solicited when persons enter county jails, municipal and superior courts, and as existing probationers report to the probation department. Once a veteran has self-identified, a referral to the VSO can be prepared if the veteran volunteers to participate. Completed referral forms are directed to the criminal division, where the referral is entered into the VAP database and then electronically sent to the local VSO.

Management and Coordination

The Criminal Practice Division of the Administrative Office of the Courts provides programmatic support and assistance in the planning, implementation and operation of the VAP and collects and maintains monthly statistics that reflect the number of unique referrals forwarded to the local VSOs by each county. Each vicinage criminal division manager and staff provides local project management and coordination.

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