

TESTIMONY OF ALBERT H. MERCER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA,
2417 EAST CARSON STREET, PITTSBURGH, PA 15203
([HTTP://WWW.VLPWPA.ORG](http://www.vlpwpa.org))

AT THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY,
COMMITTEE ON CRIME AND DRUGS FIELD HEARING TITLED,
“EVALUATING THE NEED FOR GREAT FEDERAL RESOURCES TO ESTABLISH
VETERANS COURTS”
HELD IN COURTROOM 6A AT THE U.S. DISTRICT COURT FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT
OF PENNSYLVANIA, 700 GRANT STREET, PITTSBURGH, PA
ON MONDAY, MARCH 1, 2010

THIS INVITATION WAS EXTENDED BY SENATOR ARLEN SPECTER ON FEB 22, 2010.

INTRODUCTION. GOOD MORNING. MY NAME IS AL MERCER, AND I AM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM (VLP) OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA. VLP IS A 501(c)3 NONPROFIT CORPORATION THAT PROVIDES ESSENTIAL HOUSING, EMPLOYMENT, AND OTHER VITAL SUPPORTIVE SERVICES TO ELIGIBLE VETERANS, SERVICE MEMBERS, AND THEIR FAMILIES TO IMPROVE THEIR SELF-SUFFICIENCY, SUSTAINABILITY, AND QUALITY OF LIFE. WE HAVE PROUDLY SERVED THOSE WHO HAVE SERVED AND SACRIFICED FOR US ALL SINCE 1982.

THANK YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO OFFER TESTIMONY ON THE VERY IMPORTANT TOPIC OF “VETERANS COURT”. I AM GRATEFUL THAT THIS ISSUE IS GETTING ATTENTION AND I WOULD LIKE TO SPECIFICALLY THANK STATE REPRESENTATIVE DON WALKO, JUDGE MICHAEL E. MCCARTHY, JUDGE JOHN A. ZOTTOLA, AND THE VLP BOARD OF DIRECTORS FOR THEIR LEADERSHIP IN BRINGING THIS ISSUE FORWARD LOCALLY.

ADDITIONAL THANKS GOES TO OUR COLLEAGUES AT THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY COURT ADMINISTRATOR’S OFFICE, THE DISTRICT ATTORNEY’S OFFICE, PUBLIC DEFENDER’S OFFICE, PROBATION DEPARTMENT, LAW ENFORCEMENT....THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES JUSTICE-RELATED SERVICES...AND THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS FOR THEIR HARD WORK IN ESTABLISHING VETERANS COURT IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY.

MY SPECIAL THANKS GOES TO MY STAFF AT VLP FOR STEPPING UP TO SUPPORT VETERANS ENCOUNTERING THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM. THE VLP STAFF HAS EMBRACED OUR COMMITMENT TO SERVE ALL VETERANS, NO MATTER THEIR SITUATION OR CIRCUMSTANCE, AND HAS DONE SO WITH MINIMAL RESOURCES. THIS THANK YOU IS ALSO EXTENDED TO THE MENTORS WHO HAVE VOLUNTEERED TO HELP THEIR COMRADES. THESE MENTORS PROVIDE WHAT I BELIEVE IS A KEY INGREDIENT FOR THE SUCCESS OF VETERANS COURT.

TODAY, I WANT TO CONVEY TWO KEY POINTS:

- FIRST, I WANT TO TELL YOU ABOUT VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA...A LITTLE ABOUT OUR HISTORY AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS...MORE ABOUT OUR IMPACT AND OUTCOMES IN SERVING OUR REGION’S HEROES...AND SPECIFICALLY, HOW WE CAN HELP OUR VETERANS WHEN THEY ENCOUNTER THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.

- SECOND, I WANT TO PROVIDE SOME BACKGROUND, INFORMATION, CONTEXT, AND PERSPECTIVE ABOUT THE COMPLEX VETERANS COURT NETWORK FROM VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM’S PERSPECTIVE, WITH THE UNDERSTANDING THAT THE NETWORK INVOLVES MUCH MORE THAN I AM ABLE TO COVER TODAY. BUT I DO WANT TO TAKE THE TIME TODAY TO HIGHLIGHT:

- THE CHALLENGES FACING OUR REGION’S SERVICE MEMBERS, VETERANS, AND THEIR FAMILIES WHILE IN SERVICE TO THEIR COUNTRY;

-- THE READJUSTMENT/REINTEGRATION PROBLEMS AFTER THEIR SERVICE THAT CAN LEAD TO ENCOUNTERS WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM, AND FINALLY,

-- I WANT TO PROVIDE SOME SPECIFIC INFORMATION ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCE WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.

VLP HISTORY. VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA WAS FOUNDED 28 YEARS AGO BY A GROUP OF VIETNAM VETERANS WHO JOINED TOGETHER TO MEET A NEED. AT THAT TIME, MILLS WERE CLOSING, MANUFACTURING JOBS WERE DISAPPEARING, AND MANY VETERANS WERE OUT OF WORK AND OUT OF HOPE. THE ORIGINAL CONCEPT WAS TO PROVIDE JOB PLACEMENT AND TRAINING FOR VIETNAM VETERANS WHO WERE DISPLACED IN A CHANGING ECONOMY. AT THAT TIME, NONE OF VLP'S FOUNDERS IMAGINED THE AGENCY WOULD STILL BE MEETING THAT NEED TODAY. BUT HERE WE ARE...
...AND TODAY'S VETERANS, SERVICE MEMBERS, AND THEIR FAMILIES ARE FACING EVEN GREATER, MORE COMPLEX, AND UNPRECEDENTED CHALLENGES...: A RAPIDLY CHANGING ECONOMY IS CERTAINLY PRESENT TODAY AS IT WAS IN 1982; WE HAVE HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT; MISPLACED STEREOTYPES ABOUT VETERANS' FITNESS FOR EMPLOYMENT; HOUSING FORECLOSURES; MORE FREQUENT AND LONGER DEPLOYMENTS BY MEMBERS OF OUR NATIONAL GUARD AND RESERVE; AND, THE TREMENDOUS AND ALL-TOO-FAMILIAR READJUSTMENT AND REINTEGRATION PROBLEMS FACED BY MILITARY PERSONNEL WHEN THEY RETURN FROM OVERSEAS PRESENT THIS COMMUNITY AND OUR COUNTRY WITH EXTRAORDINARY

CHALLENGES. THESE CHALLENGES CAN LEAD TO ENCOUNTERS WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.

WITH OVER 300,000 VETERANS RESIDING IN SOUTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA (142,000 IN Allegheny County), THIS REGION HAS ONE OF THE HIGHEST PER CAPITA CONCENTRATIONS OF VETERANS IN THE UNITED STATES (Source: Department of Veterans Affairs, Veteran Data and Information (<http://www1.va.gov/vetdata/>), Census 2000).

Veteran Population by County - Overall

STATE	CIVILIAN POPULATION 18 OR OVER	CIVILIAN VETERANS	CIVILIAN VETERANS AS A PERCENTAGE OF CIVILIAN POPULATION 18 OR OVER
Pennsylvania	9,354,471	1,280,788	14%
COUNTY	CIVILIAN POPULATION 18 OR OVER	CIVILIAN VETERANS	CIVILIAN VETERANS AS A PERCENTAGE OF CIVILIAN POPULATION 18 OR OVER
Allegheny County, Pennsylvania	1,000,087	142,638	14%
Beaver County, Pennsylvania	140,286	22,655	16%
Butler County, Pennsylvania	131,144	18,354	14%
Cambria County, Pennsylvania	120,523	18,918	16%
Fayette County, Pennsylvania	114,874	16,849	15%
Greene County, Pennsylvania	31,667	4,649	15%
Somerset County, Pennsylvania	62,099	8,747	14%
Washington County, Pennsylvania	157,686	23,986	15%
Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania	288,713	45,270	16%
Total	2,047,079	302,066	15%
Percent Southwestern PA Counties of State Total	21.88%	23.58%	

Source: Department of Veterans Affairs, Veteran Data and Information (<http://www1.va.gov/vetdata/>), Census 2000

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Veteran Population in PA, OH, WV, NY, NJ

State	Civilian Population 18 or Over	Civilian Veterans	Civilian Veterans as a Percentage of Civilian Population 18 or Over
Pennsylvania	9,354,471 (5th of 52)	1,280,788 (5th of 52)	14%
Ohio	8,458,130	1,144,007	14%
West Virginia	1,404,936	201,701	14%
New York	14,278,716	1,361,164	10%
New Jersey	6,321,650	672,217	11%

Source: Department of Veterans Affairs, Veteran Data and Information (<http://www1.va.gov/vetdata/>), Census 2000

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Veteran Population - Metropolitan Statistical Area

Metropolitan Statistical Area	Civilian Population 18 or Over	Civilian Veterans	Civilian Veterans as a Percentage of Civilian Population 18 or Over
Pittsburgh	1,832,790 (20th of 279)	269,752 (14th of 279)	15%
Johnstown	182,622	27,665	15%
Erie	210,357	29,306	14%
Harrisburg, Lebanon, Carlisle	480,347	70,555	15%
Lancaster	345,201	41,565	12%
Allentown, Bethlehem, Easton	488,084	67,982	14%
Philadelphia, Wilmington, DE Atlantic City, NJ	4,614,298	570,281	12%

Source: Department of Veterans Affairs, Veteran Data and Information (<http://www1.va.gov/vetdata/>), Census 2000

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OTHER FACTORS EXIST IN PENNSYLVANIA THAT HAVE AN INFLUENCE ON THE VETERANS COURT PROGRAM. ACCORDING TO A VETERANS FOR AMERICA REPORT,

(Source: <http://www.veteransforamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/10/vfa-pang-prelim-findings-10-27-08.pdf>, Oct. 27, 2008):

- PENNSYLVANIA HAS BORNE A DISPROPORTIONATE SHARE OF THE BURDEN IN SUPPORTING THE CURRENT CONFLICTS IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN, AND, IS CURRENTLY EXPERIENCING THE LARGEST DEPLOYMENT SINCE WORLD WAR II, WITH MORE THAN 5,000 PENNSYLVANIA NATIONAL GUARD MEMBERS DEPLOYING IN SUPPORT OF OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) OR OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) WITHIN THE NEXT TWO YEARS (Also reported by the Pittsburgh Tribute Review on Jan 26, 2009

(http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/s_608815.html)).

-- LOCALLY, WITH 3,139 OIF/OEF VETERANS, ALLEGHENY COUNTY HAS THE LARGEST NUMBER OF OIF/OEF VETERANS IN THE STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA (OUT OF 67 COUNTIES), AND

RANKS AN AMAZING 45TH IN THE COUNTRY OUT OF 3,218 COUNTIES. OF NOTE, IF YOU TALLY UP THE NUMBER OF OIF/OEF VETERANS IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY AND OUR EIGHT SURROUNDING COUNTIES, THE 7,279 OIF/OEF

OIF/OEF Veterans By County

County	OIF/OEF Veterans
Allegheny	3,139
Beaver	640
Butler	553
Cambria	642
Fayette	348
Greene	132
Somerset	282
Washington	539
Westmoreland	1,004
Total	7,279

1,082,579 OIF/OEF veterans in the U.S.

67 counties in PA; 3,218 counties in the U.S.

Allegheny County is #1 in PA; #45 in the U.S.:

§ #2 Philadelphia County: 2,564

§ #3 Montgomery County: 1,532

§ #4 York County: 1,389

§ #5 Bucks County: 1,354

OIF (Operation Iraqi Freedom)/OEF (Operation Enduring Freedom)
Source: Department of Defense as of August 31, 2009 based on last known home address at time of discharge

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VETERANS IN WESTERN PA WOULD RANK 13TH NATIONALLY. (THE TOP 15 COUNTIES NATIONALLY INCLUDE: #1 IS SAN DIEGO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA WITH 27,080; #2 IS LOS ANGELES COUNTY, CALIFORNIA WITH 14,232; #3 IS BEXAR COUNTY, TEXAS WITH 11,793; #4 IS HONOLULU COUNTY, HAWAII WITH 10,750; #5 IS VIRGINIA BEACH COUNTY, VIRGINIA WITH 10,306; #6 IS MARICOPA COUNTY, ARIZONA WITH 10,181; #7 IS BELL COUNTY, TEXAS WITH 9,966; #8 IS PIERCE COUNTY, WASHINGTON WITH 9,849; #9 IS EL PASO COUNTY, COLORADO WITH 9,818; #10 IS CUMBERLAND COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA WITH 9,014; #11 IS HARRIS COUNTY, TEXAS WITH 8,089; #12 IS DUVAL COUNTY, FLORIDA WITH 7,367; #13 IS COOK COUNTY, ILLINOIS WITH 7,081; #14 IS SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA WITH 6,953; #15 IS ONSLOW COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA WITH 6,754). WESTERN PA DOES NOT HAVE A LARGE ACTIVE DUTY MILITARY PRESENCE LIKE THOSE IN THE TOP 15 NATIONALLY, BUT IT IS CLEAR THAT WESTERN PA HAS BORNE A DISPROPORTIONATE BURDEN IN SUPPORTING THE CURRENT CONFLICTS AND IS BEARING A DISPROPORTIONATE BURDEN IN SUPPORTING OUR REGION'S RETURNING HEROES. (Source: Department of Defense as of August 31, 2009 based on last known home address at time of discharge)

- THE PENNSYLVANIA NATIONAL GUARD HAS LOST MORE MEMBERS IN SUPPORT OF THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERRORISM THAN ANY OTHER STATE. (43 deaths since 9/11/01).

- SOME PENNSYLVANIA ARMY NATIONAL GUARD UNITS HAVE BEEN DEPLOYED ABROAD THREE TIMES SINCE 9/11/01 AND WITH EACH SUCCESSIVE DEPLOYMENT, THE READJUSTMENT PROCESS BECOMES MORE DIFFICULT. I ALSO NOTE THAT BECAUSE THERE IS NO MAJOR ACTIVE DUTY MILITARY INSTALLATION IN

WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA, THERE IS NO NATURAL SUPPORT SYSTEM IN PLACE AS YOU WOULD FIND IN NORFOLK, VA OR FORT BRAGG, NC.

-- AND TO PUT THE ISSUE OF MULTIPLE DEPLOYMENTS INTO PERSPECTIVE, PLEASE CONSIDER THE EXPERIENCE OF ARMY STAFF SERGEANT BOBBY MARTIN JR. WHO HAS BEEN FIGHTING INSURGENTS IN IRAQ OR AFGHANISTAN LONGER THAN THE ENTIRE THREE YEARS THE KOREAN WAR LASTED. THIRTY-EIGHT CUMULATIVE MONTHS IN COMBAT TAKE A TREMENDOUS TOLL ON THE SOLDIER, HIS FAMILY, AND HIS COMMUNITY. NEARLY 13,000 SOLDIERS HAVE SPENT THREE TO FOUR CUMULATIVE YEARS AT WAR WITH ABOUT 500 SOLDIERS SPENDING MORE THAN FOUR YEARS IN COMBAT. (Source:

http://www.armytimes.com/news/2010/01/gns_iraq_afghanistan_multiple_deployments_011310/, Jan 15, 2010)

- POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD) AND OTHER POST-DEPLOYMENT READJUSTMENT ISSUES APPEAR PREVALENT AMONG RETURNING PENNSYLVANIA NATIONAL GUARD MEMBERS. IN JUNE 2007, THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE REPORTED THAT ALMOST HALF OF THE MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL GUARD AND RESERVES WHO HAD SERVED IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN SUFFER CONSIDERABLE PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS (Source: Department of Defense Task Force on Mental Health, "An Achievable Vision: Report of the Department of Defense Task Force on Mental Health," June 2007, p. ES-2). IN SEPTEMBER 2009, THE VETERANS ADMINISTRATION REPORTED THAT WE SHOULD EXPECT UP TO 35 PERCENT OF THOSE SERVING IN IRAQ TO SEEK PTSD TREATMENT. (<http://www.military.com/news/article/study-35-pct-of-iraq-vets-to-get-ptsd.html?ESRC=eb.nl>). AND CONTINUING INTO 2010, NEWSWEEK REPORTED

(<http://www.newsweek.com/id/233415>, Feb 11, 2010) THAT DEPENDING ON THE STUDY YOU READ,

BETWEEN 20 AND 50 PERCENT OF VETERANS FROM THE IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

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WARS SUFFER FROM POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS AND OTHER MENTAL DISORDERS-AND HALF DON'T SEEK MENTAL-HEALTH CARE. THOSE WHO DO DON'T ALWAYS RECEIVE THE KIND OF CARE THEY NEED. THE RESULTS OF THESE SYSTEMIC FAILURES ARE INCREASED INSTANCES OF RAPE, ASSAULT, ADDICTION, AND OTHER CRIMINAL ACTS THAT TANGLE UP VETERANS IN THE CRIMINAL COURTS. THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS ESTIMATES THAT VETERANS ACCOUNT FOR 10 PERCENT OF THE PEOPLE WITH CRIMINAL RECORDS. WITH NEARLY TWO MILLION VETERANS OF THE WARS IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN, WE CAN EXPECT LARGE NUMBERS OF READJUSTMENT AND REINTEGRATION CHALLENGES FOR MANY YEARS TO COME...AND WE MUST ALSO REMEMBER THAT SPOUSES AND CHILDREN EXPERIENCE THESE CHALLENGES AND ARE NOT INCLUDED IN THESE ESTIMATES.

-- REGARDING FAMILIES, WIVES OF SOLDIERS SENT TO WAR SUFFERED SIGNIFICANTLY HIGHER RATES OF MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES THAN THOSE WHOSE HUSBANDS STAYED HOME. WHEN SOLDIERS WERE DEPLOYED ELEVEN MONTHS OR LONGER, THEIR WIVES HAD A 24 PERCENT HIGHER RATE OF DEPRESSION. IT IS CLEAR THAT WHEN A SERVICE MEMBER DEPLOYS, THE ENTIRE FAMILY DEPLOYS WITH THEM AND THEY FACE THEIR OWN UNIQUE CHALLENGES. (Source:

http://www.armytimes.com/news/2010/01/gns_military_wives_011410/, Jan 14, 2010)

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<http://www.military.com/news/article/mullen-slams-dod-va-mental-health-failures.html?ESRC=eb.nl>

Mullen Slams Mental Health Treatment Failures

September 16, 2009 Stars and Stripes by Leo Shane III

WASHINGTON -- Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen said Wednesday he's frustrated and disappointed with the slow pace of treatments for post-traumatic stress and other "unseen" combat injuries, saying after eight years of war military officials should have better answers.

"Shame on us if we don't figure this out in time," he told a crowd of military and veterans officials. **"We need to find a way to avoid another generation of homeless veterans."** **N**

Mullen's comments set the tone for a day of debate among mental health experts and military leaders at the Military Officers Association of America's annual defense forum. The chairman said that while millions of dollars have been invested into research on PTSD, traumatic brain injuries and mental health issues, military leaders have not produced enough treatment options and outreach programs to stay ahead of the problems.

"We owe them a response," he said. "This is a debt the country owes [these troops] for their service, as far as I'm concerned. It needs to be the first check we write."

A recent study by researchers at the Naval postgraduate school and Stanford University, suggests that nearly 35 percent of U.S. troops returning from Iraq will suffer PTSD, and urges VA leaders to invest more in counselors and response teams.

Conference speakers pushed for better "gold standards" for post-deployment assessments, ongoing monitoring of returned veterans, and early treatment models, all resources that currently exist but are unevenly administered.

Mullen said he wants to see better coordination between VA programs and Defense Department mental health offerings, and more efforts to publicize what options are available to suffering troops and their families.

He also said both agencies must work more to reach out to community resources, finding ways for private charities and concerned citizens to help local veterans through the rehabilitation process.

Regardless, Mullen said, caring for the wounded veterans will take decades of funding and attention from government leaders.

"These are 20-somethings who are wounded ... they have 50, 60, 70 years left to live," he said. "That's where the sustained effort from us must come in."

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<http://www.military.com/features/0,15240,201083,00.html?wh=news>

Wounded, Families Need 'Community' Help

Tom Philpott | September 17, 2009

The profound strain of eight years of war on the volunteer force permeated a day-long conference of military leaders, policymakers, health experts and family advocates as they shared ideas to address the "unseen injuries" of post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.

A theme struck by many participants, including Navy Adm. Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, was that government must seek greater involvement from communities across the country to support wounded warriors, traumatized veterans and damaged military families.

Mullen expressed concern over rising numbers of homeless veterans, slow expansion of a pilot program to streamline the disability evaluation system and a lack of solutions from medical research for timely diagnosis and treatment of PTSD and traumatic brain injury.

Mullen said he and his wife Deborah also are seeing more families \hat{S} both spouses and children \hat{S} being worn down by the strain of long and frequent deployments by loved ones to Iraq and Afghanistan.

"When they go home after the parade, when they go home after the recognition ceremony, their dreams haven't changed \hat{E} to raise a family, go to school, send their kids to school, own a home \hat{E} **The only way I can see us meeting [those needs] is through a community-based connection, a broad connection, that is sustained for them over the entirety of their lives."** Mullen told the 2009 Defense Forum in Alexandria, Va. \hat{Z} It was sponsored jointly by the U.S. Naval Institute and the Military Officers Association of America.

"When I talk about a long time, think decades," Mullen said. "These are 20-somethings who are wounded [and] these are 20-something spouses with a couple of children who have 50, 60, 70 years to live. \hat{Z} That's where this sustained effort has got to come in."

Leslie Kammerdiener, mother of severely wounded Army Cpl. Kevin Kammerdiener, visibly moved attendees with her account of how the VA has failed to provide adequate support to her and her son on multiple occasions since Kevin was injured in Afghanistan in May 2008. Leslie told the forum, "It's a very sad thing that this country \hat{S} your Army or your VA or whatever \hat{S} has let us down so incredibly. \hat{Z} And I am asking you to step up to the plate and take care of somebody who went over there and did what you asked him to do."

Koch said current wars are presenting unique difficulties for the military because of duration and because the fight is by a relatively small force of volunteers who must deploy over and over again. \hat{Z} The fact that "less than one percent of our population" defends the nation today, Koch said, creates special obligations and special frustrations.

"We don't know how to deal with the ones with traumatic brain injury or PTSD. \hat{Z} PTSD has been around, under various names, forever, back to at least the First World War" when it was called shell shock. \hat{Z} "To this day we don't really have a good sense of it," Koch said, describing how a Vietnam veteran like him can be sitting alone 40 years later and begin to cry.

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<http://www.military.com/news/article/marine-suicides-up-sharply.html?ESRC=eb.nl>

Marine Suicides up Sharply

October 9, 2009, | by Mark Abramson

Recently released figures show Marines are taking their own lives at alarmingly high rates, and deployments appear to be taking a toll.

Through September, the Marines have recorded 38 confirmed or suspected suicides in 2009. Should the pace continue through the end of the year, the Marines would be facing a 20 percent increase from 2008 figures. Suicides also rose 27 percent from 2007 to 2008.

Ten suspected suicides this year remain under investigation, but those are classified as suicides because there is strong evidence to suggest that those Marines took their own lives, said Navy Cmdr. Aaron Werbel, suicide prevention program manager for the Marine Corps.

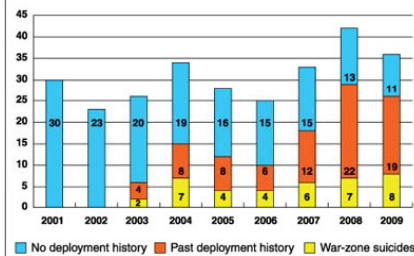
And while a recent Marine Corps report indicates that fewer than 42 percent of Marines who have committed suicide since 2001 had a deployment history, 56 of the 80 Marines who have taken their lives in the last two years have been to the war zones. That 70 percent figure is higher than Army figures for 2008, during which 61 percent of those who committed suicide were either deployed or had a deployment history.

Marine officials said they could not pinpoint an exact cause for the increase.

But, Werbel said, "A significant contributing factor is the operational tempo."

U.S. Marine Corps suicide rate rising

Suicides within the Marine Corps ranks in 2009 are on pace to surpass 2008 totals. Through September, 38 Marines committed suicide or are suspected of having committed suicide. The Marines have instituted training programs to help combat the problem.



SOURCE: U.S. Marine Corps Headquarters

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TODAY'S VETERANS AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM. WHILE IT IS CLEAR THAT THE OVERWHELMING MAJORITY OF RETURNING SERVICE MEMBERS ARE LAW-ABIDING CITIZENS WHO HAVE NOT RUN AFOUL OF THE LAW, THERE IS NO QUESTION IN MY MIND THAT WE ARE SEEING AND WILL CONTINUE TO SEE AN INCREASING NUMBER OF VETERANS ENCOUNTERING THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM. IN ADDITION TO THE FACTORS I JUST MENTIONED, THERE IS MORE EVIDENCE OF THIS DISTURBING TREND:

- JUDGE MCCARTHY ESTIMATES THAT THREE-QUARTERS OF THE VETERANS HE SEES SERVED IN IRAQ OR AFGHANISTAN;
- THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE ESTIMATES THAT 1.16 MILLION OF ALL ADULTS ARRESTED LAST YEAR-OR NEARLY 10%-SERVED IN THE MILITARY;

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- THE BUFFALO VETERANS COURT ABSORBED 82 VETERANS INTO ITS VETERANS COURT PROGRAM IN 2008, WITH 65% OF THOSE VETERANS HAVING SERVED IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN;

- 158 VETERANS WERE ARRESTED IN JUST ONE MONTH IN TULSA, OK IN OCTOBER 2008; (FOR COMPARISON PURPOSES, IN 2006, TULSA, OK POPULATION ESTIMATED TO BE 382,872; PITTSBURGH, PA POPULATION ESTIMATED TO BE 312,819

(Source: Census Bureau (<http://www.census.gov/popest/cities/tables/SUB-EST2006-01.csv>))

(Source for the four bullets above: <http://www.law.com/jsp/nlj/PubArticleNLJ.jsp?id=1202426915992>, Jan 22, 2009);

- MORE THAN TWENTY JURISDICTIONS AROUND THE COUNTRY ARE CONSIDERING ESTABLISHING A VETERANS COURT IN RESPONSE TO THIS GROWING NEED. (Source: <http://www.lasvegassun.com/news/2009/feb/05/county-seeks-insulate-veteran-defendants/>, February 5, 2009)

An Example from Texas

<http://www.statesman.com/news/content/news/stories/local/2009/12/15/1215veterans.html>

Travis County looking to set up court for veterans

BY JEREMY SCHWARTZ, AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2009

In hopes of helping veterans suffering from mental illness and substance abuse, Travis County authorities are looking at creating a special veterans court docket, which would channel those charged with certain crimes into treatment and social services rather than incarceration.

A handful of such courts have been created across the country since 2008, as officials respond to growing numbers of veterans returning from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. *As many as 30 percent are thought to suffer from illnesses ranging from post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury to major depression*. Too many, officials say, turn to alcohol and drugs to self-medicate, often leading to entanglements with the criminal justice system.

Last month, Harris County set up a veterans court pilot project, and Tarrant County last week decided to accept a \$200,000 grant from Gov. Rick Perry's office to hire staffers to manage a veterans court there. The Texas Legislature passed a law this year allowing counties to create veterans courts.

Travis County officials say not enough is being done locally to identify veterans in need of mental health treatment.

"Obtaining a criminal conviction or serving jail time ... will not resolve the problems underlying the offense," said Travis County Constable Maria Canchola. "Intervention for our veterans is essential."

The possible creation of a local veterans court was hailed by veterans groups as a vital step. *"Treatment is far more effective and far less expensive,"* said Paul Sullivan, head of the Austin-based group Veterans for Common Sense.

Travis County Attorney David Escamilla said a team of prosecutors, defense lawyers and judges will need to work out several details before a veterans court becomes reality, including determining which offenses would be eligible and what services would be offered. Officials will also need to identify funding for the court.

"But there's a great deal of momentum to move forward with this," Escamilla said, adding that the court would probably begin handling misdemeanor cases but could take on felony cases.

He said the court would be *modeled on the county's mental health court*, which handles offenders suffering from mental health problems in hopes of preventing repeat offenses.

The nation's first veterans court began in January 2008 in Buffalo, N.Y., where veterans are typically ordered to undergo counseling, find work and stop using drugs or alcohol instead of being sentenced to jail or prison time.

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An Example from Texas (con^{ti})

<http://www.statesman.com/news/content/news/stories/local/2009/12/15/1215veterans.html>

Travis County looking to set up court for veterans (con^{ti})

BY JEREMY SCHWARTZ, AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF, TUESDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2009

The court isn't the only program local officials hope will reach veterans. This month, Travis County embarked on a six-month pilot program that requires veteran offenders to get evaluated and treated by the Department of Veterans Affairs as part of their pretrial release from jail.

The efforts stem from a two-year Travis County program called the Veterans Intervention Project, which on Monday released the results of a 90-day study of veterans booked into the Travis County Jail.

The study, which relied on self-reporting through questionnaires, found that about *150 veterans were booked into the Travis County Jail each month, or 3.4 percent of total bookings. Of those, 18 percent served in Iraq or Afghanistan, 13 percent in Vietnam and 54 percent in noncombat zones. Most charges N 73 percent N were for misdemeanor crimes*, with driving while intoxicated, assault and drug possession the most frequent charges. Of the felony charges, aggravated sexual assault, aggravated kidnapping and delivery of a controlled substance were the top ones. *About one-third of the veterans were arrested two or more times during the 90-day study, highlighting the need for early intervention*, officials said.

The jail study found that *few locked-up veterans were accessing help through the VA*, which offers services for mental health issues and substance abuse. *While 86 percent of the arrested veterans were eligible for such services, just 35 percent had received them*. Officials said the reasons the veterans did not seek help include the *stigma within the military attached to seeking mental health help and other-than-honorable discharges*, in which veterans are not allowed access to VA services.

Some veterans advocates point to a vicious cycle in which active-duty service members suffering from post-traumatic stress and other maladies turn to drugs to self-medicate, which can lead to a dishonorable discharge and inability to access needed mental health help.

Maj. Darren Long, who represents the Travis County sheriff's office on the veterans task force, said there needs to be more understanding of the issues facing veterans, especially those fresh from combat tours. "We come across them when they are in a mental health crisis," he said. "We owe it to them. *They take care of us and our freedoms. Now it's our turn to take care of them when they come back home.*"

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- NATIONALLY, IT IS ESTIMATED THAT VETERANS FORM ABOUT 10% OF THE NATION'S JAIL AND PRISON POPULATION. OF THOSE VETS, ABOUT TWO-THIRDS HAVE SUBSTANCE ABUSE PROBLEMS AND ONE-FIFTH ARE HOMELESS. (Source: Mr. Jim

McGuire, Department of Veterans Affairs Veterans' Justice Outreach program, are reported in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/09006/939806-85.stm>, Jan 6, 2009).

- THE UNEMPLOYMENT RATE FOR IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS IS 21 PERCENT HIGHER THAN THE RATE FOR ALL AMERICANS. A LABOR DEPARTMENT REPORT SHOWS AN UNEMPLOYMENT RATE OF 11.3 PERCENT FOR IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS IN JULY (2009), UP FROM 5.9 PERCENT ONE YEAR AGO AND WELL ABOVE THE 9.7 PERCENT OVERALL U.S. UNEMPLOYMENT RATE. TO PUT THAT IN ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE, THE NUMBER OF OUT-OF-WORK BUT JOB SEEKING IRAQ

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AND AFGHANISTAN VETERANS IS AT 185,000—JUST 9,000 FEWER THAN THE NUMBER OF TROOPS DEPLOYED TO THOSE TWO COMBAT OPERATIONS. (Source:

http://www.armytimes.com/news/2009/09/air_unemploy_092109w/)

HISTORICAL DATA ABOUT VETERANS IN STATE AND FEDERAL PRISON. IT IS IMPORTANT TO PROVIDE SOME HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVE ABOUT VETERANS IN PRISON TO HELP US UNDERSTAND THE MAGNITUDE OF THE CHALLENGES AHEAD AS WE PREPARE TO ABSORB A VERY LARGE NUMBER OF VETERANS RETURNING FROM OVERSEAS, AND, CONTINUE TO SERVE THE VERY LARGE POPULATION OF SERVICE MEMBERS, VETERANS, AND THEIR FAMILIES THAT ARE ALREADY HERE. IN A MAY 2007 REPORT (“Veterans in State and Federal Prison, 2004” (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/vsfp04.htm>)), THE DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE’S BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTICS REVEALED THE FOLLOWING:

- THE PERCENTAGE OF VETERANS AMONG STATE AND FEDERAL PRISONERS HAS STEADILY DECLINED OVER THE PAST THREE DECADES. IN 2004, 10% OF STATE PRISONERS REPORTED PRIOR SERVICE IN THE U.S. ARMED FORCES, DOWN FROM 12% IN 1997 AND 20% IN 1986. (OVERALL, AN ESTIMATED 140,000 VETERANS WERE HELD IN THE NATION’S PRISONS IN 2004, DOWN FROM 153,000 IN 2000.)

- VIETNAM WAR-ERA VETERANS WERE THE MOST COMMON WARTIME VETERANS IN BOTH STATE (36%) AND FEDERAL (39%) PRISONS.

- VETERANS OF THE IRAQ-AFGHANISTAN ERAS COMPRISED 4% OF VETERANS IN BOTH STATE AND FEDERAL PRISON.

- VETERANS HAD SHORTER CRIMINAL RECORDS THAN NONVETERANS IN STATE PRISON, BUT REPORTED LONGER PRISON SENTENCES AND WERE EXPECTED TO SERVE MORE TIME IN PRISON THAN NONVETERANS. (THE AVERAGE MAXIMUM SENTENCE REPORTED BY VETERANS IN STATE PRISON (147 MONTHS) WAS TWO YEARS LONGER THAN THAT OF NONVETERANS (119 MONTHS). ON AVERAGE, VETERANS EXPECTED TO SERVE 22 MONTHS LONGER THAN NONVETERANS (112 MONTHS COMPARED TO 90 MONTHS)). AND FINALLY,

- VETERANS (30%) WERE MORE LIKELY THAN NONVETERANS (24%) TO REPORT A RECENT HISTORY OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES.

Veterans & the Criminal Justice System

<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/08060/861421-85.stm>

1 in every 100 Americans in jail

Pennsylvania leads way in Northeast as U.S. rate sets record

Friday, February 29, 2008

By Moriah Balingit, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pennsylvania had the largest prison population growth in the Northeast last year, part of a national trend of proliferating prison populations in which more than one in 100 American adults now is incarcerated, according to a study released yesterday by the Pew Center's Public Safety Performance Project.

WHILE IT IS ENCOURAGING TO READ THAT THE PERCENTAGE OF VETERANS IN STATE AND FEDERAL PRISONS IS DECLINING, I ALSO NOTE THAT PENNSYLVANIA HAD THE

LARGEST PRISON POPULATION GROWTH IN THE NORTHEAST IN 2007 (Source: "1 in every 100

Americans in Jail-Pennsylvania leads way in Northeast as U.S. rate sets record" Feb 29, 2008, (<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/08060/861421-85.stm>)),

AND I WONDER HOW MANY VETERANS COULD HAVE BEEN DIVERTED INTO ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS AND AVOIDED THIS FATE. WITH HIGH RECIDIVISM AND A COST OF APPROXIMATELY \$40,000 TO KEEP ONE INMATE IN STATE PRISON PER YEAR, IT SEEMS A NEW APPROACH SHOULD BE SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED. MORE SPECIFICALLY, THIS DATA SUGGESTS TO ME THAT EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVE-SENTENCING PROGRAMS COULD PREVENT VETERANS FROM THE IRAQ AND

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AFGHANISTAN CONFLICTS FROM SUFFERING THE SAME FATE OF VIETNAM-ERA VETERANS WHO ARE THE MOST COMMON WARTIME VETERANS IN BOTH STATE AND FEDERAL PRISONS. WE LEARNED A LOT OF LESSONS THE HARD WAY IN CARING FOR OUR VIETNAM VETERANS AND NOW HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO CORRECT THOSE MISTAKES FOR THIS GENERATION OF VETERANS, SAVING BOTH LIVES AND DOLLARS.

SOME OF THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF MILITARY SERVICE. AT VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM, WE SEE THE EFFECTS EVERY DAY FROM POST TRAUMATIC STRESS, DEPRESSION, ISOLATION, SUBSTANCE ABUSE, AND OTHER READJUSTMENT/REINTEGRATION PROBLEMS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL MANY VETERANS CAN'T ESCAPE. THIS DOWNWARD SPIRAL INCLUDES REPEATED CYCLES OF ALCOHOL OR DRUG ABUSE, A FRACTURED FAMILY, JOBLESSNESS, HOMELESSNESS, AND CRIMINAL ACTIVITY.

TO EMPHASIZE JUST ONE OF THESE POINTS, IT HAS BEEN REPORTED THAT RECENT HOMELESSNESS WAS 7.5 TO 11.3 TIMES MORE COMMON AMONG JAIL INMATES THAN IN THE GENERAL POPULATION, AND, THAT HOMELESSNESS AND INCARCERATION APPEAR TO INCREASE THE RISK OF EACH OTHER (Source: "Jail Incarceration, Homelessness, and Mental Health: A National Study," PSYCHIATRIC SERVICES, Vol. 59, No. 2, Feb 2008). THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS 2007 CHALENG (Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups) REPORT

(<http://www1.va.gov/homeless/page.cfm?pg=17>, http://www1.va.gov/homeless/docs/CHALENG_14th_annual_Rpt_7-7-08.pdf) ESTIMATES THAT NEARLY 154,000 VETERANS ARE HOMELESS ON ANY GIVEN NIGHT, AND MORE THAN HALF A MILLION EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS OVER THE COURSE OF A YEAR.

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ADDITIONALLY,

THE NATIONAL

COALITION FOR

HOMELESS

VETERANS

([http://www.nchv.org/docs/Homeless](http://www.nchv.org/docs/HomelessVeterans_factsheet.pdf)

[sVeterans_factsheet.pdf](http://www.nchv.org/docs/HomelessVeterans_factsheet.pdf)) HAS

COMPILED

EXTENSIVE DATA

THAT IS USEFUL IN

UNDERSTANDING

THE CHALLENGES

WE FACE. FOR EXAMPLE:

- 26% OF THE OVERALL HOMELESS POPULATION ARE VETERANS.
- 33% OF THE MALE HOMELESS POPULATION ARE VETERANS, ALTHOUGH THEY COMPRISE ONLY 13% OF THE ADULT MALES IN THE GENERAL POPULATION.
- VETERANS ARE TWICE AS LIKELY AS OTHER PEOPLE TO BE CHRONICALLY HOMELESS.
- 47% SERVED DURING THE VIETNAM ERA.
- 70% SUFFER FROM SUBSTANCE ABUSE PROBLEMS.
- 45% SUFFER FROM MENTAL ILLNESS.
- 89% RECEIVED AN HONORABLE DISCHARGE.
- 15% SERVED BEFORE THE VIETNAM ERA.

Employment & Housing Challenges

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/11/03/AR2009110303615.html?wpisrc=newsletter&wpisrc=newsletter>

Shinseki cites plight, plan to help homeless veterans

By Ed O'Keefe and Garance Franke-Ruta Wednesday, November 4, 2009

The Department of Veterans Affairs laid out Tuesday an ambitious five-year goal of curbing the number of homeless veterans, pledging \$3.2 billion to an issue that is more rapidly affecting those who served in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars than by any from past conflicts.

"No one who has served this nation as veterans should ever be living on the streets," VA Secretary Eric K. Shinseki said.

"In the past, VA focused largely on getting homeless veterans off the streets," Shinseki said. "This plan is different. It aims as much, if not more, on preventing as it does on rescuing those who live on the streets."

Roughly 131,000 of the nation's 24 million veterans may be homeless on any given night, and about twice as many are homeless each year, according to VA estimates. About 3 percent of homeless vets served in Iraq or Afghanistan, but a 2007 study by Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America found that they become homeless faster than do other veterans. While homeless Vietnam veterans first spent, on average, five to 10 years trying to readjust to society, Iraq and Afghanistan veterans can end up homeless within 18 months, the study said.

Government officials and homeless experts worry that the number of homeless veterans could climb another 10 to 15 percent in the economic downturn.

"The economy's hitting our people very hard. Unemployment rates are over 12 percent now," said Paul Rieckhoff, executive director and founder of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "Mortgage foreclosure rates around military bases is four times the average. And it's hard to keep a job if you're getting deployed every 12 months if you're a national guardman."

The new VA commitment adds \$400 million to its current efforts to prevent homelessness. Eighty-five percent of the funds will go toward health-care costs, an acknowledgement that homelessness is often secondary to health problems, especially mental health issues and substance abuse.

The department will expand current partnerships with the Small Business Administration, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, and other federal, state and community veterans programs. It will also assist veteran-owned businesses in qualifying for federal contracts and surviving the downturn.

Shinseki invited thousands of government, nonprofit and faith-based homelessness experts and advocates to Washington this week to tackle the issue, which he vows to fix during his tenure.

"I'm the newcomer here today, so let me reiterate that this is not a summit on homeless veterans, it's a summit to end homelessness among veterans," he said. "That's our purpose."

Vietnam Veterans of America applauded the goal. But Richard Weidman, head of policy and government affairs, added, "There are additional things that we think need to be addressed to be successful in achieving that goal, although it's a good start."

Weidman cited a need for the Pentagon and the Veterans Affairs Department to do more to diagnose and treat post-traumatic stress disorder; improve treatment for substance-abusing veterans, who comprise about a third of the homeless veterans population; and eliminate a backlog in providing compensation to veterans too ill to work. Fresh attention to the needs of women veterans, who comprise an increasing portion of the homeless veterans population, would also be a boon, he said.

"If you add those other elements, you're never gonna get to zero, but we can do a hell of a lot better than we are doing," Weidman said.

Shinseki — a former Army chief of staff who once clashed with the Bush administration over its Iraq war policy — has earned praise for his tough approach to reviving a department described as moribund by lawmakers.

"We've seen responsiveness from the VA that we haven't seen in the past," said Terry Howell, an editor at Military.com, a veterans news and social-networking site.

"They're quick to try new and interesting approaches to solving the issues that they're facing right now," Howell said.

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- 17% SERVED AFTER THE VIETNAM ERA.
- 79% RESIDE IN CENTRAL CITIES.
- 67% SERVED THREE OR MORE YEARS.
- 33% WERE STATIONED IN A WAR ZONE.
- 25% HAVE USED VA HOMELESS SERVICES.
- 85% COMPLETED HIGH SCHOOL/GED COMPARED TO 56% OF NON-VETERANS.
- 46% ARE AGE 45 OR OLDER COMPARED TO 20% OF NON-VETERAN HOMELESS CITIZENS.

HOMELESSNESS AMONG VETERANS IS JUST ONE OF THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL WE SEE EVERY DAY AT VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM. IT IS A TRAGEDY AND DISGRACE THAT ANY VETERAN SUFFERS IN THIS WAY, BUT IT IS ALSO A FACT AND WE MUST BE PREPARED TO ADDRESS IT.

VETERANS COURT CAN HELP. WITH A FOCUS OF TEMPERATE JUSTICE, TREATMENT, AND GUIDED REHABILITATION VERSUS PUNISHMENT, VETERANS COURT OFFERS A REAL OPPORTUNITY TO STOP THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL FOR MANY VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES, AND CORRECT THE MISTAKES FROM OUR PAST. AND WE MUST REMEMBER, UNLIKE THE VIETNAM-ERA WHERE A MAJORITY OF SERVICE MEMBERS WERE YOUNG AND SINGLE, TODAY'S VETERANS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE OLDER, MARRIED, AND HAVE CHILDREN. SO, WHEN A VETERAN ENTERS THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL, IT IS NOT JUST AN INDIVIDUAL IN CRISIS, IT IS A FAMILY.

WITH A LARGE, EXISTING POPULATION OF VETERANS IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA, AND WITH DISPROPORTIONATELY LARGE DEPLOYMENTS OVERSEAS BY MILITARY PERSONNEL FROM PENNSYLVANIA, WE MUST BE PREPARED TO ABSORB A GREAT NUMBER OF RETURNING SERVICE MEMBERS THAT WILL HAVE READJUSTMENT AND REINTEGRATION PROBLEMS, INCLUDING ENCOUNTERS WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM. AND WE MUST NEVER FORGET THAT THE FAMILIES THAT REMAIN BEHIND ALSO EXPERIENCE PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES WHEN A LOVED ONE IS DEPLOYED TO A FAR AWAY, DANGEROUS PLACE FOR A LONG PERIOD OF TIME. EVERYDAY, ORDINARY LIFE IS ANYTHING BUT ORDINARY UNDER THESE CIRCUMSTANCES.

VETERANS COURT OFFERS A THERAPEUTIC, SUPPORTIVE, AND SUCCESS-ORIENTED ENVIRONMENT THAT IS MODELED AFTER EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVE-SENTENCING AND JAIL DIVERSION PROGRAMS. VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA IS TOTALLY COMMITTED TO HELPING VETERANS SUCCESSFULLY READJUST, REINTEGRATE, AND ASSIMILATE. IT IS OUR MISSION...OUR SINGULAR FOCUS...AND, IT IS NOT NEGOTIABLE. WE VIEW VETERANS COURT AS A RESPONSIBILITY AND OBLIGATION TO THOSE WHO HAVE SERVED OUR COUNTRY AND SACRIFICED ON OUR BEHALF.

VETERANS INCARCERATED IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY. THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY BUREAU OF CORRECTIONS 2006 ANNUAL REPORT (<http://www.county.allegheny.pa.us/jail/report05.aspx>) DOES NOT IDENTIFY THE NUMBER OF VETERANS IN CUSTODY, BUT IT DOES CONTAIN SOME

IMPORTANT INFORMATION RELATIVE TO VETERANS COURT THAT I'D LIKE TO SUBMIT:

- THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY JAIL'S AVERAGE DAILY POPULATION HAS STEADILY INCREASED FROM 1,639 IN 1996 TO 2,584 IN 2006.

- RECEPTIONS IN 1996 WERE 21,097; IN 2006, RECEPTIONS WERE 25,586.

- IN 2006, MALES = 20,957 (82%); FEMALES = 4,629.

- IN 2006, AFRICAN AMERICANS = 12,685 (49.5%); CAUCASIAN = 11,882.

- 18,302 (72%) OF THE 25,529 RECEPTIONS WERE RELEASED FROM THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY JAIL (ACJ) IN 14 DAYS OR LESS. THE VOLUME OF MOVEMENT IS ONE FACTOR THAT DISTINGUISHES A COUNTY JAIL FROM A PRISON FACILITY THAT HOUSES SENTENCED PRISONERS. THERE IS MUCH LESS MOVEMENT IN AND OUT OF A PRISON FACILITY. ANOTHER DISTINGUISHING FACTOR IS LENGTH OF STAY. IN PRISONS, LENGTH OF STAY IS PREDICTABLE AND USUALLY LONGER THAN IN JAILS. IN JAILS, THE LENGTH OF STAY IS USUALLY UNPREDICTABLE AND SHORTER. SHORTER LENGTH OF STAY (30-31 DAYS AT ACJ) RESULTS IN A TRANSIENT POPULATION THAT MAY BE VOLATILE. THIS HAS IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS AND SERVICES AND FOR MANAGEMENT AND OPERATIONS PROCEDURES.

- 20,479 (80%) OF THE 25,586 RECEPTIONS WERE SINGLE; 2,757 (10.7%) WERE MARRIED; 1,459 (5.7%) WERE DIVORCED.

- AVERAGE AGE IS 33 YEARS OLD.

- THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY JAIL OFFERS AN IMPRESSIVE ARRAY OF PROGRAM SERVICES TO ITS PRISONERS INCLUDING: EDUCATION, FAITH-BASED SERVICES, REINTEGRATION AND HOUSING PROGRAMMING, MEDICAL SERVICES, AND OTHER

PROGRAMS AND SERVICES WITH THE INTENTION TO OFFER TOOLS AND CHANGE OPPORTUNITIES FOR OFFENDERS WHO MAY STRIVE TO LIVE CRIME FREE IN IMPROVED CONDITIONS AFTER RELEASE.

- THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY JAIL COLLABORATIVE HAS BEEN A JOINT EFFORT BETWEEN THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY JAIL, THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY OF DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES, AND THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT SINCE 2000. THIS GROUP HAS UTILIZED SCREENING TOOLS TO IDENTIFY THE NEEDS OF INMATES AND TO DEVELOP CREATIVE SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS THESE NEEDS. THE COLLABORATIVE HAS BUILT AN INFRASTRUCTURE SPECIFICALLY TO PROVIDE THE SUPPORTS AND SERVICES TO FILL THE GAPS AND REMOVE THE BARRIERS THAT RELATE DIRECTLY TO THE HIGH RATE OF RECIDIVISM.

BUT GIVEN THE TRANSIENT NATURE OF THE COUNTY JAIL POPULATION, HIGH RECIDIVISM RATE, AND THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES AND CULTURE OF VETERANS, I BELIEVE VETERANS COURT WILL IMPROVE THE OUTCOMES OF THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY JAIL COLLABORATIVE AND PROVIDE OUR REGION'S HEROES A CHANCE TO GET THEIR LIVES BACK IN ORDER.

SO, WHILE WE DON'T KNOW EXACTLY HOW MANY VETERANS ARE PROCESSED THROUGH THE COUNTY JAIL, WE CAN ASSUME THAT 2,558 (10%) OF THE 25,586 RECEPTIONS IN 2006 WERE VETERANS. WE CAN FURTHER ASSUME THAT MANY ARE REPEAT VISITORS. WITH THAT MANY VETERANS ALREADY INVOLVED WITH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM, VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM IS COMMITTED TO

SERVING THEM....AND....TO PARTICIPATE IN VETERANS COURT WHERE WE KNOW WE CAN MAKE A POSITIVE DIFFERENCE BY HELPING VETERANS ACCESS THE PROGRAMS, SERVICES, BENEFITS, AND ENTITLEMENTS THEY HAVE EARNED, DESERVED, AND THAT WE ARE OBLIGATED TO PROVIDE.

ALTERNATIVE-SENTENCING PROGRAMS. VETERANS COURT WILL TARGET NONVIOLENT OFFENDERS WHOSE VIOLATIONS STEM FROM POST TRAUMATIC STRESS AND OTHER CONTRIBUTING FACTORS THAT RESULT FROM MILITARY SERVICE. IT IS BASED ON ALTERNATIVE-SENTENCING AND JAIL DIVERSION PROGRAMS THAT FOCUS ON TEMPERATE JUSTICE, TREATMENT, AND GUIDED REHABILITATION VERSUS PUNISHMENT. SELECTED DEFENDANTS ARE OFFERED THE OPPORTUNITY TO PARTICIPATE IN COURT-SUPERVISED, COMMUNITY-BASED TREATMENT IN LIEU OF TYPICAL CRIMINAL SANCTIONS. VETERANS COURT IS NOT A ‘GET-OUT-OF-JAIL-FREE’ CARD....IT IS AN INTENSELY SUPERVISED PROGRAM OF TREATMENT AND REHABILITATION. I WOULD NOW LIKE TO PROVIDE SOME EVIDENCE ABOUT THE NEED FOR AND EFFECTIVENESS OF ALTERNATIVE-SENTENCING PROGRAMS.

ALLEGHENY COUNTY SET UP A MENTAL HEALTH COURT IN 2001 THAT PLACES MENTALLY-ILL PEOPLE CHARGED WITH NONVIOLENT CRIMES WITH COMMUNITY SOCIAL SERVICES. A 2007 RAND CORPORATION REPORT, (“Justice, Treatment, and Cost: An Evaluation of the Fiscal Impact of Allegheny County Mental Health Court” (http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR439/, <http://www.rand.org/news/press/2007/03/01/index.html>) OF THE COUNTY’S MENTAL HEALTH COURT SHOWED THAT:

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- ONLY 14 PERCENT OF PARTICIPANTS COMMITTED A CRIME AFTER GOING THROUGH THE PROGRAM. THE RECIDIVISM RATE FOR THE GENERAL POPULATION OF INMATES IS 67 PERCENT (also reported in The Pittsburgh Tribune Review

(http://www.pittsburghlive.com/x/pittsburghtrib/s_605775.html) on Jan 6, 2009)

-- A PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE REVIEW ARTICLE ALSO REPORTED THAT A 2003 NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE STUDY THAT COMPARED A DRUG COURT IN MULTNOMAH COUNTY, OREGON TO CRIMINAL ADJUDICATION SHOWED THE DRUG-COURT MODEL SAVED THE PUBLIC MORE THAN \$2,300 PER YEAR FOR EACH PARTICIPANT.

- ACROSS THE UNITED STATES, PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS ARE OVER-REPRESENTED IN PRISONS AND JAILS. ACCORDING TO ONE JUSTICE DEPARTMENT STUDY, WHILE APPROXIMATELY 5 PERCENT OF THE U.S. POPULATION HAD A SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS, APPROXIMATELY 16 PERCENT OF PEOPLE IN JAILS AND PRISONS HAD A SERIOUS MENTAL ILLNESS.

- NEARLY ONE-QUARTER OF ALL JAIL INMATES WHO REPORTED HAVING A MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEM HAD SERVED THREE OR MORE JAIL TERMS;

- IN THE SECOND YEAR AFTER SENTENCING THE SUSTAINED DECLINE IN TIME THAT MENTAL HEALTH COURT PARTICIPANTS SPENT IN JAIL IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY MORE THAN OFFSET THE COSTS TO GOVERNMENT OF THEIR CONTINUING MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT.

PERHAPS JUSTICE CENTER CHARTER GROUP CO-CHAIR AND TEXAS PRESIDING JUDGE SHARON KELLER SAID IT BEST: “THE RAND STUDY CONFIRMS THAT MENTAL

HEALTH COURTS MAKE GOOD FISCAL SENSE,”...“BY CONNECTING PEOPLE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS WHO HAVE COMMITTED LOW-LEVEL CRIMES WITH COMMUNITY-BASED TREATMENT, WE CAN MAKE BETTER USE OF OUR JAILS AND TAX DOLLARS, INCREASE PUBLIC SAFETY, AND MAKE OUR COMMUNITIES HEALTHIER.”

ADDITIONAL DATA SUPPORTING THE NEED FOR EFFECTIVE DIVERSION ALTERNATIVES FOR PERSONS IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM IS COMPELLING. FOR EXAMPLE, FOR ADULTS IN THE KING COUNTY (SEATTLE) CORRECTIONAL SYSTEM, ACTIVE SUBSTANCE ABUSE IS REPORTED AMONG 60 TO 80 PERCENT OF THOSE ADMITTED TO JAIL. UP TO 15 PERCENT OF THE LOCALLY INCARCERATED POPULATION SUFFER FROM A MAJOR MENTAL ILLNESS, AND A RECENT STUDY OF A RANDOM STRATIFIED KING COUNTY JAIL SAMPLE REVEALED THAT 23 PERCENT OF “HIGH IMPACT” (I.E., DEMONSTRATING REPEATED CYCLING THROUGH THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE, MENTAL HEALTH, AND CHEMICAL DEPENDENCY SYSTEMS) JAIL INMATES ARE DIAGNOSED WITH CO-OCCURRING SUBSTANCE USE AND MENTAL DISORDERS.

(Source: “Creating Integrated Service Systems for People with Co-Occurring Disorders Diverted from the Criminal Justice System, The King County (Seattle) Experience, Summer 2000/Revised Fall 2004).

ONE STUDY (Source: “What Can We Say About the Effectiveness of Jail Diversion Programs for Persons with Co-Occurring Disorders?”,

Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, April 2004) OF THE

EFFECTIVENESS OF JAIL DIVERSION PROGRAMS SUGGESTS:

- JAIL DIVERSION ‘WORKS’ IN TERMS OF REDUCING TIME SPENT IN JAIL, AS EVIDENCED BY DIVERTED PARTICIPANTS SPENDING AN AVERAGE OF TWO MONTHS MORE IN THE COMMUNITY.

- JAIL DIVERSION DOES NOT INCREASE PUBLIC SAFETY RISK. DESPITE MORE DAYS IN THE COMMUNITY, DIVERTED PARTICIPANTS HAD COMPARABLE RE-ARREST RATES IN THE 12-MONTH FOLLOW-UP PERIOD.

- REGARDING THE ‘SUCCESS’ OF VETERANS COURT, THE FIRST "VETERANS' COURT" WAS LAUNCHED IN BUFFALO, N.Y., IN JANUARY 2008 BY JUDGE ROBERT RUSSELL. HIS PROGRAM WAS BASED ON THE VARIOUS "PROBLEM SOLVING" TRIBUNALS AROUND THE COUNTRY, RANGING FROM SPECIALIZED DRUG COURTS TO MENTAL-HEALTH AND DOMESTIC-VIOLENCE COURTS. DRUG COURTS, FOR INSTANCE, INTEGRATE TREATMENT WITH JUSTICE-SYSTEM CASE MANAGEMENT, AND CLOSELY SUPERVISE AND MONITOR PARTICIPANTS. STUDIES SHOW THEY HAVE DECREASED RECIDIVISM RATES AS WELL AS THE COST OF INCARCERATION. IN RECENT TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE, RUSSELL SAID HIS PROGRAM TEAMS VETERANS GUILTY OF NONVIOLENT FELONY OR MISDEMEANOR OFFENSES WITH VOLUNTEER VETERAN MENTORS, REQUIRING THEM TO ADHERE TO A STRICT SCHEDULE OF REHABILITATION PROGRAMS AND COURT APPEARANCES. ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY VETERANS ARE ENROLLED IN THE BUFFALO PROGRAM; 90 PERCENT OF PARTICIPANTS HAVE SUCCESSFULLY COMPLETED THE PROGRAM, AND THE RECIDIVISM RATE IS ZERO. (Source: <http://www.newsweek.com/id/233415>, Feb 11, 2010)

IN SUMMARY, THE NEED FOR AND EFFECTIVENESS OF ALTERNATIVE-SENTENCING AND JAIL DIVERSION PROGRAMS IS WELL-ESTABLISHED. CLEARLY, TREATMENT WORKS BETTER THAN INCARCERATION FOR PEOPLE WITH DRUG AND MENTAL

HEALTH PROBLEMS. TO BE SUCCESSFUL, AN INTEGRATED, COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH IS NEEDED, AND I'D LIKE TO TELL YOU NOW HOW VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THAT SUCCESS.

VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM AND VETERANS COURT. VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA HAS SERVED OUR VETERANS FOR NEARLY THREE DECADES—THERE IS NO MORE IMPORTANT, MEANINGFUL, OR PURPOSEFUL WORK. WE HAVE DEEP CONNECTIONS IN THE PUBLIC, PRIVATE, AND NONPROFIT SECTORS TO HELP SERVE OUR CLIENTS AND PUT THEM ON A PATH OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY, SUSTAINABILITY, AND A BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE. IN 2009: NEARLY 5,000 VETERANS AND FAMILY MEMBERS WERE SERVED BY VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM WITH DIRECT AND REFERRAL SERVICES. A FEW OTHER HIGHLIGHTS FROM 2009 INCLUDE:

- 304 JOB READY CLIENTS WERE SUCCESSFULLY PLACED INTO POSITIONS OF UNSUBSIDIZED EMPLOYMENT. THE DIRECT ECONOMIC IMPACT FROM THESE JOBS WAS \$6,135,001.

- 239 (183 VETERANS/56 DEPENDENTS) CLIENTS WERE PROVIDED HOUSING ASSISTANCE THROUGH SEVEN HOUSING PROGRAMS. VLP IS THE LARGEST PROVIDER OF SUBSIDIZED HOUSING TO HOMELESS VETERANS IN THE REGION. THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT FROM OUR \$1.4 MILLION HOUSING PROGRAMS IS CONSERVATIVELY ESTIMATED AT \$2.9 MILLION.

- 1,003 CLIENTS WERE PROVIDED A WIDE RANGE OF SUPPORTIVE SERVICES, INCLUDING: RENT, UTILITIES, TRANSPORTATION, CLOTHING, FOOD, AND OTHER BASIC NECESSITIES.

- 3,975 CLIENTS WERE PROVIDED REFERRAL SERVICES TO DOZENS OF SOCIAL SERVICES AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES, PRIVATE SECTOR BUSINESSES, AND OTHER SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS.

IN SUMMARY, WITH A BUDGET OF APPROXIMATELY \$2 MILLION, VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM PROVIDED A DIRECT ECONOMIC RETURN ON INVESTMENT OF OVER \$10 MILLION, AND, WE ALSO PROVIDED A MEANINGFUL AND SUBSTANTIAL SOCIAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT, MEASURED BY THE IMPROVED LIVES OF OUR DESERVING CLIENTS.

I MUST NOTE THAT WHILE I AM EXTREMELY PROUD OF OUR ACCOMPLISHMENTS, I AM CONCERNED WITH THE TRENDS I HAVE SEEN IN MY TWO AND A HALF YEARS AT VLP. WE SAW MORE CLIENTS THIS YEAR THAN THE PREVIOUS YEAR...OUR HOUSING PROGRAMS REMAIN FULL AND OUR WAITING LIST IS AS LONG AS IT HAS EVER BEEN...IN SHORT, THE DEMAND FOR OUR SERVICES CONTINUES TO GROW AND WE ARE SEEING THE DEMAND FOR SERVICES FOR VETERANS ENCOUNTERING THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM GROW AS WELL.

VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM DELIVERS ITS CORE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES THROUGH A NUMBER OF PUBLICLY-FUNDED GRANTS INCLUDING FOUR JOB

TRAINING AND PLACEMENT GRANTS, SEVEN HOUSING GRANTS, AND FOUR ADDITIONAL GRANTS THAT ADDRESS THE PROVISION OF CASE MANAGEMENT SERVICES, EMERGENCY SHELTER, SERVICE TO DISABLED VETERANS AND VETERANS IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM. WE ARE EXPERIENCED IN SUCCESSFULLY MANAGING AND OPERATING GOVERNMENT PROGRAMS.

OUR EMPLOYMENT, HOUSING, AND SUPPORTIVE SERVICES PROGRAMS ARE DESIGNED AFTER PROVEN MODELS USING BEST PRACTICES AND AN INTENSIVE CASE MANAGEMENT APPROACH. WORKING WITH EACH CLIENT WE SERVE, WE CREATE AN INDIVIDUALIZED SERVICE PLAN TO SET GOALS AND MONITOR PROGRESS. WE UNDERSTAND THAT SUCCESS FOR MANY OF OUR AT RISK CLIENTS IS MOST OFTEN FOUND IN SMALL STEPS AND WE HAVE LEARNED THAT EACH STEP TOWARD A MORE STABLE LIFE IS IMPORTANT, BOTH FOR THE INDIVIDUAL AND FOR OUR COMMUNITY. VETERANS COURT WILL BE NO DIFFERENT AND WE WILL BE ABLE TO OFFER THOSE WHO HAVE SERVED AND SACRIFICED ON OUR BEHALF—A CHANCE TO BE SAFE...TO RECOVER...AND TO LIVE THEIR LIVES WITH RESPECT, DIGNITY, AND PEACE. THEY ARE NO DIFFERENT THAN I AM—THEY WANT TO HAVE A GOOD LIFE, AND WE CAN HELP THEM ACHIEVE THAT THRU VETERANS COURT.

WHILE THERE HAS BEEN DISCUSSION ABOUT ‘VETERANS COURT’ FOR SOME TIME, A CONCERTED EFFORT BEGAN IN JANUARY 2009 TO GET THINGS MOVING. (Source:

<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/09006/939806-85.stm>, Jan 6, 2009). JUST TEN MONTHS LATER, ON NOVEMBER 10,

2009 (THE MARINE CORPS BIRTHDAY AND DAY BEFORE VETERANS DAY), THE FIRST VETERANS COURT WAS HELD IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY.

Veterans Court Launched Nov 10, 2009

Allegheny court program for veterans gets first participants

By Walter F. Roche Jr. TRIBUNE-REVIEW Wednesday, November 11, 2009

On the eve of Veterans Day, the first defendants appeared in the *inaugural session of an Allegheny County court program* aimed at keeping veterans out of jail for nonviolent offenses through a *tightly supervised counseling program*.

The three men, facing driving under the influence or similar charges, appeared before Common Pleas Judge John A. Zottola shortly after 11 a.m. Tuesday.

"This is a chance for you to have someone else look at your case, another set of eyes ... from someone who has been there," Zottola said.

Under the program, defendants will be placed in supervised counseling programs with mentors and report back to Zottola in early December, when they have completed 50 percent of the program.

The mentors, all veterans, "know more about what you're going through than I," Zottola told one of the men, a 43-year-old Army veteran.

The special court is the result of a nearly yearlong effort by government officials and veterans advocates.

Ray Webb, who appeared on behalf of one of the defendants, said the veterans will be placed in programs run by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Webb is a volunteer advocate for the Veterans Leadership Program of Western Pennsylvania, a driving force in establishing the court.

If the veterans comply with the treatment program, that will be taken under consideration when they come before a judge for sentencing, Webb said.

Graduation could lead to dismissal of the charges.

"It's still up to the judge and, if he (the defendant) doesn't comply with the program, then the hammer will come down," Webb said.

"The *sentencing judge remains in control*," said Common Pleas Judge Michael E. McCarthy, who led judicial efforts to establish the program, said the judge controls the sentence.

"We wanted to do this for Veterans Day," said McCarthy, a Navy veteran who served in Vietnam. "This is a little more than putting a flag out on your lawn."

Court officials have expressed hopes the county program, the first in Pennsylvania, will serve as a state model. Advocates say the program can not only help veterans stay out of jail, but also reduce costs.

Officials estimate about 10 percent of people incarcerated nationally are veterans.

Albert Mercer, executive director of the Veterans Leadership Program, said hundreds of county veterans could be diverted to the program each year and avoid jail time.

District Attorney Stephen A. Zappala Jr.'s office sees the program as "a *progressive way to improve the system*," spokesman Mike Manko said.

McCarthy said funding remains to be resolved, but a pending bill in Congress could provide a permanent funding stream. He said that for the moment, the VA is placing participants in programs already funded.

"The VA has money for these programs, so this actually can save money for the state," he said.

Veterans Leadership Program (VLP) of Western Pennsylvania

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Veterans Court Mentor Program, February 23, 2010

Veterans Court Launched Nov 10, 2009

<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/09315/1012486-455.stm>

Program would help veterans on probation

Wednesday, November 11, 2009 By Gabrielle Banks, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Michael Danny can't say whether he learned anything the July night police arrested him at his Monroeville home for bloodying his wife's nose and arms and choking his 18-year-old daughter.

Mr. Danny, a Marine Corps veteran who works in roofing and construction, can't say whether his guilty plea to simple assault and harassment charges yesterday marked a moment for change.

But the 47-year-old who has a history of heavy drinking said "it can't hurt" that during his two years' probation he will get special oversight through a new diversionary sentencing program in Allegheny County Common Pleas Court.

Mr. Danny was one of a handful of defendants who appeared in court yesterday for the first official day of Veterans Court before Judge John A. Zottola. The special adjudication program, which eventually will take place every second Wednesday afternoon, began this week in honor of Veterans Day.

The county program joins about 10 nationwide that identify veterans once they enter the criminal justice system -- as long as their offenses meet certain criteria -- for *comprehensive supervision, treatment and review* while they are on probation. Defendants are ineligible if they are charged with homicide, rape or drug dealing, for example.

But, at prosecutors discretion, the program may adjudicate individuals charged with crimes like drug possession, retail theft, receiving stolen property or simple assault -- as in Mr. Danny's case -- if the victims are amenable.

Judge Zottola said the program is partly modeled after Mental Health Court, which he also runs each week. He said the program intersects with defendants' lives at a turning point "where you figure your resources are best placed at getting a bang for your buck." The individuals plead to the crimes and then transition to probation and treatment programs.

The idea is to check in with them regularly and, through programs and monitoring, help them get their lives on track and prevent them from re-offending.

The Veterans Court also adds what Al Mercer, of the Veterans Leadership Program, calls a key element: Every defendant who opts to be in the diversionary program will be assigned a fellow veteran as a *volunteer mentor*, whose job it will be to coach the defendant through the process.

So when the court's minute clerk called Mr. Danny's case yesterday, his lawyer stood at his side. There was also a social worker from the Department of Veterans Affairs and James Snider, a disabled Air Force veteran who was assigned to be Mr. Danny's mentor.

If Mr. Danny complies with the terms of his probation, which include substance abuse treatment and anger management, he could be released early from probation. His mentor will be there to help him through the rough spots.

Mr. Danny's wife, Barbara, teared up when she spoke about his addiction.

"I just want it gone. His dad drank, too. He went to AA, and it didn't work," she said.

Veterans Leadership Program (VLP) of Western Pennsylvania
Veterans Court Mentor Program, February 23, 2010

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VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM PROVIDES VOLUNTEER MENTORS TO THE COURT. THESE MENTORS ACT AS COACHES, ADVOCATES, AND ROLE MODELS TO GUIDE AND SUPPORT THE VETERANS DEFENDANT. MENTORS LISTEN TO CONCERNS AND MAKE GENERAL SUGGESTIONS TO ASSIST IN DETERMINING THE DEFENDANT'S NEEDS. MENTORS ARE VETERANS THEMSELVES WHO CAN RELATE TO THE DEFENDANTS.

VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM CONTINUES TO CONDUCT EXTENSIVE RESEARCH ON ALTERNATIVE-SENTENCING AND JAIL DIVERSION PROGRAMS AND WILL USE THE

Veterans Leadership Program of Western Pennsylvania (<http://www.vlpwpa.org>) Testimony at the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Committee on Crime and Drugs field hearing titled, "Evaluating the Need for Great Federal Resources to Establish Veterans Courts" March 1, 2010

BEST PRACTICES AND PROVEN MODELS FROM THIS RESEARCH TO AUGMENT OUR CORE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES THAT ALREADY ADDRESS MANY OF THE NEEDS OF THIS POPULATION. THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF DRUG COURT PROFESSIONALS (NADCP) HAS TREMENDOUS RESOURCES ON THEIR WEBSITE (<http://www.nadcp.org/node/439>) THAT HAS HELPED US DEVELOP OUR MENTOR PROGRAM. ONE OF THE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS THAT VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM SUPPORTS IS A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH FOR JUSTICE-INVOLVED VETERANS. THE AUGUST 2008 RECOMMENDATIONS (http://www.nadcp.org/sites/default/files/nadcp/GAINS_Report%5B1%5D_0.pdf) FROM THE CENTER FOR MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES' NATIONAL GAINS CENTER (<http://www.gainscenter.samhsa.gov/html/>) INCLUDE: (1) SCREEN (INDIVIDUALS ARRESTED) FOR MILITARY SERVICE AND TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES; (2) LAW ENFORCEMENT, PROBATION AND PAROLE, AND CORRECTIONS OFFICERS SHOULD RECEIVE TRAINING ON IDENTIFYING SIGNS OF COMBAT-RELATED TRAUMA AND THE ROLE OF ADAPTIVE BEHAVIORS IN JUSTICE SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT; (3) HELP CONNECT VETERANS TO VHA (VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION) HEALTH CARE SERVICES FOR WHICH THEY ARE ELIGIBLE, EITHER THRU A COMMUNITY-BASED BENEFITS SPECIALIST OR TRANSITION PLANNER, THE VA'S OEF/OIF (OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM/OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM) COORDINATORS, OR THROUGH A LOCAL VET CENTER; (4) EXPAND COMMUNITY-BASED VETERAN-SPECIFIC PEER SUPPORT SERVICES; AND, (5) IN ADDITION TO MENTAL HEALTH NEEDS, SERVICE PROVIDERS SHOULD BE READY TO MEET SUBSTANCE ABUSE, PHYSICAL HEALTH, EMPLOYMENT, AND HOUSING NEEDS;

WE ARE ALSO CONTINUING DISCUSSIONS WITH POTENTIAL PARTNERS AND STAKEHOLDERS TO ENSURE CLARITY OF PURPOSE AND UNITY OF EFFORT. WE UNDERSTAND TEAMWORK AND BUILDING CONSENSUS ARE CRITICALLY IMPORTANT IN BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL COURT-DIRECTED, COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAM.

OUR 28-YEAR HISTORY OF SERVING AN AT RISK POPULATION HAS RESULTED IN PARTNERSHIPS AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH PUBLIC, PRIVATE, AND NONPROFIT SECTOR AGENCIES AND ORGANIZATIONS THAT PROVIDE THE SERVICES WE CAN'T ENSURING A COMPREHENSIVE SAFETY NET IS FORMED AROUND EACH CLIENT. WE UNDERSTAND THE GREAT IMPACT THAT THESE KINDS OF RELATIONSHIPS CAN HAVE. FOR EXAMPLE, IN AUGUST 2008, WE LED A COMMUNITY-WIDE EFFORT TO SERVE OUR HOMELESS VETERANS AND OTHER CITIZENS IN NEED WHEN WE CONDUCTED THE FIRST STAND DOWN HELD IN PITTSBURGH SINCE 1995. AT THIS ONE-DAY EVENT, OVER 20 ORGANIZATIONS FROM THE PUBLIC, PRIVATE, AND NONPROFIT SECTORS, AND OVER 100 VOLUNTEERS, CAME TOGETHER AND PROVIDED EVERYTHING FROM HAIRCUTS TO FOOD TO HEALTH EXAMS TO REFERRALS TO SOCIAL SERVICES AGENCIES TO 227 INDIVIDUALS. STAND DOWN 2009, OUR SECOND STAND DOWN SINCE 1995, SERVED 253 INDIVIDUALS IN ONE DAY,... AND WE EXPECT STAND DOWN 2010 TO BE AN EVEN MORE IMPACTFUL EVENT. CLEARLY, AN INTEGRATED, COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE. THE SAME POWERFUL, MULTI-SYSTEM STAKEHOLDER APPROACH CAN WORK IN THE VETERANS COURT FRAMEWORK, AND VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM HAS THE KNOW HOW TO BE A BIG PART OF THIS TEAM.

OUR CASE MANAGERS, MANY WHO ARE VETERANS THEMSELVES, UNDERSTAND THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES FACED BY VETERANS AND RESPECT THE UNIQUE CULTURE IN THE VETERAN COMMUNITY. THIS IS A KEY SUCCESS FACTOR OF THE BUFFALO VETERANS COURT AND IS ACHIEVED BY ASSIGNING VETERANS TO MENTOR THE DEFENDANTS, OFFERING THEM SUPPORT AND ADVICE. WE HAVE 20 VOLUNTEERS WHO HAVE AGREED TO SERVE AS MENTORS. VETERANS WILL TALK TO OTHER VETERANS... THAT BOND BREAKS DOWN BARRIERS. ADDITIONALLY, WE HAVE BEEN ASKED TO EXTEND OUR PROGRAMMING TO SERVE VETERANS IN THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY JAIL, AND WE ARE SUPPORTING THE MENTOR PROGRAM AND PROGRAMMING AT THE JAIL WITH LITTLE FINANCIAL SUPPORT.

IT IS MY BELIEF THAT DIVERTING ELIGIBLE VETERANS FROM THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AND PROVIDING INTENSIVE, INTEGRATED, COURT-DIRECTED, COMMUNITY-BASED TREATMENT AND SUPPORT OFFERS FAR MORE HOPE TO IMPROVING THE LIVES OF INDIVIDUAL OFFENDERS, THEIR FAMILIES, AND THE WELFARE OF THE LARGER COMMUNITY.

VETERANS LEADERSHIP PROGRAM OF WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA WILL SUPPORT VETERANS COURT WITH UNCOMPROMISING DEDICATION, PROFESSIONALISM, AND PASSION. WE OWE OUR VETERANS NOTHING LESS. THANK YOU AGAIN FOR THE OPPORTUNITY TO PRESENT THIS TESTIMONY.