

**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD OF
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VISN 4 NETWORK DIRECTOR
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DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
COMMITTEE ON CRIME AND DRUGS
U.S. SENATE
MARCH 1, 2010**

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Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to share with the courts and other interested parties the wide array of services available to our Veterans. Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) 4 is composed of 10 VA medical centers (VAMC) and 45 community-based outpatient clinics (CBOC). VISN 4 is based in Allegheny County and serves Veterans throughout Pennsylvania and Delaware as well as portions of West Virginia, New Jersey, Ohio and New York.

Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) have resulted in a new generation of Veterans with complex medical and mental health needs. VISN 4 has served more than 18,000 OEF/OIF Veterans since 2001. While many have reintegrated successfully into civilian society, many others continue to struggle with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI) and substance use disorders. For example, 12-15 percent of returning service members screen positive for alcohol abuse. Many of these factors increase the risk a Veteran will have an encounter with the criminal justice system.

The most recent U.S. Department of Justice (Bureau of Justice Statistics) *Survey of Inmates in Local Jails*, taken in 2002, indicated that 9.3 percent of those incarcerated are Veterans. These Veterans disproportionately suffer from mental health disorders. Three in five have substance dependency problems; almost one in three has a serious mental illness, and one in five is homeless. Seventy percent of incarcerated Veterans committed a non-violent crime. These statistics suggest there is a significant need for services for Veterans who are facing criminal charges.

VA is making a system-wide effort to ensure services are available for Veterans with problems with the criminal justice system. To that end, VAMCs must now provide outreach to these Veterans in the communities they serve. In communities where justice programs relevant to Veterans exist, we will build working relationships to ensure that eligible Veterans receive the help they need. In communities where no such programs exist, VA will reach out to potential justice system partners to connect eligible Veterans with VA services.

Our goal is to provide intervention on an ongoing basis to help Veterans become stable, employed and substance abuse-free while maintaining strong mental health follow up and case management. I am happy to report that VISN 4 is doing its part. Currently, all ten VAMCs in VISN 4 have a Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Specialist who is a licensed, independent health care practitioner. These individuals work with local law enforcement, corrections facilities and the local judicial system to provide needed services to eligible Veterans. Treatment options may include case management, substance abuse treatment, mental health treatment and housing assistance.

In November 2009, the Pittsburgh VAMC helped launch a Veterans' Treatment Court in Allegheny County, one of only 16 such courts in the nation. Pittsburgh's Veterans' Court is typically held on Wednesdays. Due to increased and ongoing efforts, we anticipate additional court times may be necessary. This program includes Veteran mentors, who are essential to the intervention process by facilitating the process and helping the Veteran with issues of accountability. We have a strong partnership with the Pittsburgh Veterans Leadership Program, which has agreed to provide oversight and assign each Veteran in Pittsburgh a mentor.

The Philadelphia Municipal Court began holding Veterans' Treatment Court on January 6, 2010. These proceedings are held one day a week in the afternoon; however, based on an increased forecast, there may be a need to move to an all day expansion. The Court now sends the docket of potential Veterans to our contact at the Veterans Benefits Office, who establishes the Veteran's eligibility. That information is relayed to the VJO specialist, who makes contact with the Veteran at his or her first court hearing, when a treatment plan is established. The Philadelphia VAMC has been able to connect with more and more Veterans who are experiencing mental health or substance abuse issues.

The Philadelphia VAMC also works with the Court of Common Pleas as the court identifies Veterans through its mental health court. This has resulted in Veterans being discharged from Norristown State Hospital and the Philadelphia Detention Center Infirmity with subsequent placement in VA treatment. The Philadelphia VAMC is also involved in the Crisis Intervention Training with the Philadelphia Police Department and serves on the Philadelphia Forensic Task Force.

The Lackawanna County Veterans' Treatment Court has been operational since September 24, 2009, and partners with Wilkes-Barre VAMC.

In addition to the Veterans Justice Outreach initiative, the Health Care for Re-Entry Veterans program recently provided training for staff from the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC). During this initiative, 339 Pennsylvania DOC staff members were trained at three community corrections centers and five state correctional institutions across VISN 4. This training educated DOC staff on Veterans' benefits and VA health care opportunities.

On February 3, 2010, a state-wide task force on Veterans met with representatives of the state's criminal justice system. I co-chaired this task force with Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Seamus McCaffery. At this meeting, we discussed opportunities for collaboration between the court system and our community partners. The task force was well received, and attendees included: Brigadier General Scott Wagner from the Pennsylvania Department of Veterans Affairs; Thomas Lastowka and Beth McCoy from the Veterans Benefits Office; Michael Piecuch from the District Attorneys Association; Mr. Douglas Hill, the Executive Director of the County Commissioners; Judge John Zatolla of Allegheny County; Judge Marsha Neifield of Philadelphia and several state legislators or their representatives. These individuals and others are coming together with one common goal: to strengthen our partnerships as we work toward ensuring access to services for Veterans with issues with the criminal justice system. This extensive, ongoing collaboration demonstrates the strong commitment that both VA and the community have to serving Veterans.

In conclusion I would like to thank you for the opportunity to show my support and commitment to the Veterans' Justice Outreach initiative.