

## **Veterans Assistance Project (VAP)**

### **Introduction**

The New Jersey Veterans Assistance Project (VAP) is a combined effort of the Judiciary, the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, and the New Jersey Department of Human Services, Division of Mental Health Services. This project seeks to identify veterans as soon as possible after they enter the criminal justice system, and when needed, provide referrals to community resources to address the unique services required by veterans. Those services could include substance use/abuse treatment, mental health counseling, securing veterans' benefits and if necessary, mentoring by a fellow veteran. By connecting criminal justice involved veterans with these services it is the goal of this initiative that they will not repeat the behaviors that led to their criminal justice involvement.

Once a veteran is identified the court refers them voluntarily to a local Veterans Service Office (VSO) for available services. The veterans are not diverted from the courts. Veterans who are charged with indictable and non-indictable offenses, other than minor traffic matters, as well as veterans who are on probation, are eligible to participate in the program.

The project also contains a mentoring component that is coordinated by the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs. The local Veterans Service Officer, during the assessment process, will determine whether the service member could benefit from assignment of a mentor. If so, one will be assigned.

## **Collaboration**

The Veterans Assistance Project is a cooperative venture with several other state agencies.

The Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA) provides a range of programs, assistance and support services to veterans and their families. The DMVA operates 16 Veterans Service Offices that assist veterans in obtaining 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.

The Division of Mental Health Services (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, DMHS has contracts with over 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 required. Each of these entities assists in identifying veterans and recognizing the need for services.

## **Development of the New Jersey Judiciary Component**

In 2008, the New Jersey Judiciary piloted the Veterans Assistance Project (VAP) in the Municipal Court and Superior Court, Criminal Divisions in two counties (Atlantic and Union). Within the first year, three additional counties had implemented the project and five others were in the planning stages. Soon after the pilots in Atlantic and Union began the Judiciary recognized that the VAP could be beneficial to veterans involved with other divisions in the court system. County VAP planning teams now include representatives from the Civil, Family, Municipal, and Probation Divisions. Today, the Veterans Assistance Project is operating in more than half of New Jersey's counties and expected to expand statewide within the coming months.

## **Process for Linking Veterans to Services**

Veterans are identified at the earliest possible point as they enter the court system. 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. There are multiple points at which a referral to a local VSO can be initiated. Once a veteran has self-identified a referral to the VSO may be prepared if the veteran volunteers to participate. Completed referral forms are directed to the Superior Court, Criminal Division where the referral is entered into the Veterans Assistance Project database and then electronically sent to the local VSO.

## **Management and Coordination**

The Administrative Office of the Courts, Criminal Practice Division provides programmatic support and assistance in the planning, implementation and operation of the VAP as well as collecting and maintaining monthly statistics that reflect the number of unique referrals forwarded to the local VSOs by each county. The vicinage Criminal Division Manager provides local project management and coordination.

## **Potential Costs and Savings**

The Judiciary's role in this project is to act as an identification and referral service to the local VSO. This project operates with existing Judiciary resources. No additional staff or funds have been allocated to this project.