

# **Buffalo City Court Veterans Program**

## **Purpose**

The purpose of the Buffalo City Court Veterans Demonstration Project is to organize and coordinate government and community-based services which will provide assistance to combat veterans who have entered the Criminal Justice System (CJS). Contact with the CJS obviously has negative consequences for anyone who is subject to arrest, booking and incarceration. The perception of many veterans who have entered the CJS is that they are "overlooked", turned away or intimidated by the Veteran's System, employers and treatment systems. As a result they end up disconnected from community supports. Not surprisingly, the Judiciary within the City of Buffalo is hearing cases that involve veterans with increasing frequency.

For many of these veterans, the underlying issue is their need for basic services and supports delivered in meaningful ways. These services include medical, mental health, legal, drug and alcohol addiction, educational or employment. Access to these services can improve the quality of life within our community and more specifically for the veterans who have served in defense of the United States.

Our local Veteran's Administration system, community behavioral health providers, service and veteran's organizations, law enforcement and Courts have already begun the process of developing a shared understanding of the unique needs of combat veterans and available resources to meet those needs.

The Buffalo City Court Veterans Demonstration Project in collaboration with the Western New York Veteran's Network is an ad-hoc coalition committed to developing relationships, training, and procedures which will improve coordination, cooperation, and collaboration. Using the existent resources and expertise of the existing "Problem Solving Courts", the Department of Defense, the Veteran's Administration, Veteran's Service Organizations, Erie Community College, Community and Faith based agencies will meet the emerging needs of veterans, as well as their families. The Project has provided a forum to initiate the development of a coordinated response to current gaps in the service delivery system and opportunities for improvement.

While the initial focus was on those who are serving or have served in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, it is clear that many veterans of other eras and conflicts still continue to struggle.

## **Impact of Military Service in War Zones**

According to the President's Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors (Report, July 2007):

"A sizable fraction of service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from PTSD. Best estimates are that PTSD of varying degrees of severity affects 12 to 20 percent of returnees from Iraq and 6 to 11 percent of returnees from Afghanistan. To date 52,375 returnees have been seen in the VA for PTSD symptoms. Severe and penetrating head injuries are readily identified, but cases of mild-to-moderate TBI can be more difficult to identify and their incidence harder to determine. A recent report indicated that when some 35,000 returnees believed to be healthy received a screening test, ten to 20 percent had apparently experienced a mild TBI during deployment. Many have both PTSD and TBI. Multiple deployments increase the risk."

"The VA has a long history of treating combat-related PTSD. However, community based clinicians are not necessarily informed about state-of-the-art treatment or available resources, public and private. Other mental health-related problems, including substance abuse, depression, suicide and family disruption, often co-occur with PTSD and likewise merit attention.

In addition, the Report states: "The military's laudable efforts to prevent mental health problems and identify symptoms more quickly have severely stretched its already thin mental health program staff." In addition to problems of capacity, some veterans may choose to seek assistance outside of the Department of Defense or VA systems (or, worse still, not seek help at all) because, according to the Report "...for PTSD, the larger problem may be cultural, not clinical. Many service members believe it unmilitary or a sign of weakness to betray the symptoms of psychological distress. As recently as last month, a DOD Mental Health Task Force concluded that the stigma attached to mental health problems remains pervasive.

The first ever massive deployment of Guard and Reserve units into war zones creates new challenges for soldiers and families – the challenges faced by active duty soldiers. Prolonged and repeated separations create stress and anxiety for family members, who endure financial and emotional hardship while the soldier is deployed. Readjustment for returning soldiers can be rapid. Unfortunately, readjustment can also be marked by dysfunction, contact with the justice system, depression, alcoholism, drug abuse, and violence.



Our proposed Veterans Program has three distinct advantages in responding to the needs of veterans. The Veteran's Administration has an excellent hospital in Buffalo with an extensive network of community facilities, a Buffalo Court System nationally recognized as a leader of innovative Problem Solving Courts and Practices, and a Community College with Veterans Counselors & services. These Veterans Academic Counselors know about educational benefits, disability issues and accommodations for employment. Strengthening collaboration between these systems will ensure veterans who have unfortunately entered the criminal justice system will have access to the assistance they need immediately.

Our Veterans Program uses the 4 S's:

- Services
- Supports
- Skills and
- Spirit (not religious, but more internal stamina and courage)

Our experience is that when one of these S's (life areas) is weak or doesn't exist, then the alcohol, drugs, mental health and criminal problems become exacerbated.

For example, The Buffalo Court System & Erie Community College have recently partnered with the State Office of Temporary Disability Assistance to initiate a DADS/Fatherhood Program in Buffalo, one of five (5) pilot sites in New York State. The focus is on helping non-custodial fathers re-connect emotionally with their children. We will offer these services in our Veterans Program, as we are aware of the increasing cases of domestic violence and child support responsibilities these vets experience. Unfortunately, war fosters repressed and numbed emotions, which turn to anger, marital/family separation and behavioral problems. Our planned case management will need to heal the scars of war and re-light the emotions of home and family.

Buffalo City Court is uniquely situated to manage many of the veterans who have entered the justice system through their existing programs such as The Buffalo Drug and Mental Health Treatment Courts and the C.O.U.R.T.S. Program.

Our belief is that our community has a responsibility to be aware of the issues veterans and families face during deployment and on returning home, and to provide support whenever

possible. This responsibility is shared by the Veteran's Administration, the court system, community health and mental health providers, law enforcement, community groups, and veteran's service organizations.

### **Western New York Veterans Project Goals**

- To establish a Veteran's track within the Buffalo Drug and Mental Health Courts system that will divert 100% of eligible veterans who are charged with criminal offenses into a system of treatment, rehabilitation, education, employment and judicial monitoring.
- To establish an intervention and support "Network" to ensure easy and timely access to services for 200 veterans each year
- To support prevention, early intervention, and education that will reduce the negative impact of combat experiences on veterans and create individualized functional case management plans for 160 of the veterans engaged in the Veterans Program during the first year.
- To assist the military and the Veteran's Administration in providing transition assistance for these 160 individuals, reducing recidivism of re-arrest by 80%.

The Project will continue to work with the community to achieve these goals by providing a forum for the discussion of challenges and potential solutions, developing opportunities for training for systems and service providers, and improving communications across systems

### **Veteran's Court Diversion Project**

Many veterans, especially combat veterans, turn to drugs and alcohol as an effort to self-medicate service-related issues. Our experience with veterans who have entered the criminal justice system have shown that there is a need for greater supervision and support; increased collaboration with law enforcement; earlier referrals; more focus on faulty decision-making, tearing away the criminal identity and then helping the defendant build and achieve goals. Our program's goal is to reduce their criminal behavior while helping them turn their lives around. We will find them, offer them assistance, assess their needs, manage their care and help them solve their problems.

The need to gather all the resources necessary for this project to be successful and to open lines of communication is not only an ambitious undertaking, but is paramount if the returning veterans are to receive the help they deserve.



The “*Buffalo Veteran’s Court Diversion Project*” is a Judicially driven collaborate effort between the Buffalo Police Department, The Buffalo Veteran’s Administration Health System, The Buffalo Criminal Courts, The Buffalo Drug and Mental Health Treatment Courts and the C.O.U.R.T.S Program (Court Outreach Unite: Referral and Treatment Service).

Our mission is to successfully habilitate veterans by diverting them from the traditional criminal justice system and providing them with the tools they need in order to lead a productive and law-abiding lifestyle. Treatment and additional support systems will be provided through a Consortium that consists of licensed Substance Abuse and Mental Health Agencies, various other behavioral heath organizations and area veteran’s groups. Together, they will provide a seamless continuum of care that will provide counseling and other related services, to address and resolve the behaviors that led to the arrest, and avoid periods of incarceration. In addition, Educational Opportunities will be coordinated with the Erie Community College (ECC) Education to Recovery Program (E2R) and their other sponsored Workforce Development programs.

Our objective is to provide Veterans with substance abuse, alcoholism and mental health disabilities with academic/vocational skills improvement while actively participating in residential, outpatient and/or transitional services leading to job placement and job retention. All participants are court monitored by the Buffalo Drug Treatment Court and C.O.U.R.T.S. Programs for up to eighteen months. Treatment schedules are determined at the agency level with drug and alcohol testing on and off site at least twice a week.

### **Immediate Needs:**

The volume of veterans referred by Buffalo City Court Judges for diversion and or services is a clear indicator that Functional Skills Focused Case Management is the key to full implementation of the demonstration project.

Since January, 2007 the C.O.U.R.T.S. Program has identified, screened, assessed and referred 313 veterans as broken down below.

C.O.U.R.T.S.	211
D.A.D.S.	21
DRUG COURT	12
MENTAL HEALTH	12
DV PART	51
FAMILY	6

### Current Drug and Mental Health Court Participant Status

ACTIVE	27
DETAINED	3
WO	3

Interesting to note is that we have a 75% retention rate for vets in our Drug and Mental Health Courts and of the 23 graduates to date we have a 13% recidivism rate.

### Case Management

Our experiences have shown that Centralized (court based and court supervised) staff on site at Buffalo City Court within the C.O.U.R.T.S. Program (Court Outreach Unit: Referral and Treatment Service) is an effective coordinated means of navigating community resources and managing offenders. The proposed on site Case Management Team will link veterans to services in an effort to create a comprehensive continuum of care. A strong Case management component will bring the service to the veteran. The objective is to provide the greatest flexibility in helping veterans to achieve a law abiding life, independence and meet personal goals.

The primary tasks of the Veteran case management team will be the coordination of services with various agencies and service providers. The case manager may be the primary liaison between providers of different service systems, and often between the Alcohol and Substance Abuse, Mental Health, Education, Employment and social service system and the criminal justice system. For example, a case manager can be a liaison between a veterans job training and mental health treatment program. The case manager can facilitate ongoing follow-up, regular contact, and communication within the boundaries of Federal, state, and local confidentiality requirements.

Case management will allow us to match veterans' individual needs to available services. Typical needs include housing financial supports, treatment (therapy and medication), rehabilitation, medical assistance, education or training necessary for employment or meaningful activity, and support with legal issues.

Case managers may provide hands-on assistance with all aspects of daily life, but the specific activities with an individual will be dictated by the treatment plan. The Case manager will also provide a great deal of guidance, encouragement, and emotional support through informal counseling, which, not only build resilience but reinforces pursuit of individual recovery goals.

Case management as a discipline operates under the principle of empowerment. That is, case managers try to empower veterans to make their own decisions and take charge of their lives. Case managers are not caretakers, parental figures, or enforcement officers. They will help veterans to develop and/or utilize the skills necessary to fulfill their own obligations and take responsibility for their own behavior.