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Treatment offered over jail for offenders

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NEW CITY - Rockland officials yesterday announced a mental health and substance abuse prevention program as an alternative to jail for Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans accused of a nonviolent crimes.

So far, law enforcement and Veterans Affairs officials don't have any candidates for the program, administered through the criminal courts, but they expect to identify veterans who are arrested and in jail who may need assistance. An estimated 1,000 people from Rockland have served or are serving in the two war zones.

The program is modeled after the Rockland Drug Court, which involves a team of professionals who can provide drug, alcohol and mental health treatment instead of incarceration.

A veteran would have to meet criteria such as substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder or other mental health problems.

The Veteran's Alternative to Incarceration program was detailed at a news conference yesterday led by County Executive C. Scott Vanderhoef, District Attorney Thomas Zugibe and Veterans Affairs Director Jerry Donnellan.

Rockland's program is one of the nation's first, piggybacking on similar programs in Buffalo and several New York City boroughs, officials said.

Many veterans suffer from what Donnellan called "invisible wounds" from witnessing and participating in the horrors of combat.

Donnellan, who lost his right leg during the Vietnam War, said many young veterans don't know or want to admit they suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder - a diagnosis he said didn't exist during Vietnam.

Many veterans also don't want help, he said.

"We have asked these young Americans to go and peer into hell. It's right we help those whose demons follow them home," Donnellan said.

"These young people are afraid to go for treatment - a career killer," he said.

Donnellan and Zugibe said too many veterans handle their internal demons through displaying antisocial behavior and getting in trouble with the law.

"Instead, they self-medicate with alcohol or drugs," Zugibe said.

If the veteran is found to need treatment, he or she would be referred to Donnellan's office for

assessment and then to the Veterans Affairs hospitals for an evaluation and treatment.

Those accepted into the program would have to appear in court and plead to a violation, misdemeanor or nonviolent felony charge, with sentencing adjourned for a year to 18 months of treatment.

The program would not increase costs for taxpayers because the Veterans Affairs Department would provide the treatment and counseling, officials said.

The program would save money by keeping nonviolent offenders out of the county jail, which costs taxpayers about \$235 a day per inmate.

Zugibe said the county also is working on a Mental Health Court for nonveterans who commit crimes. It would have similar criteria as Drug Court or the veterans program.

The lack of money or federal grants has prevented the start of such a court, which has appeared across the country. Zugibe said his office is looking into alternative funding, such as using money forfeited by criminals.

Zugibe and Vanderhoef said that, like Drug Court, the program for veterans could go a long way to reducing crime by getting to people with problems early. The program would add to the list of potential prevention and early intervention programs initiated by Zugibe.

"This is not excusing criminal behavior," Zugibe said of the program for veterans. "This is not soft on crime. The purpose is to stop recidivism and get people on the road to a regular life."

Identifying veterans will be tricky, Donnellan said. Now, the question of being a veteran is not officially asked on arrest forms or jail commitments.

Donnellan said the irony is that returning Vietnam veterans of his era fought against being identified as veterans because of the stigma of serving back then.

Officials hope to identify veterans through arrests and at the jail, where some correction officers also served in the military.

Donnellan and other officials said they hoped the prospect of jail would persuade some veterans to get help through this program.

"Getting arrested and facing jail might be the push some of the guys need," Donnellan said. "This will increase our outreach for veterans."

Vanderhoef, the county executive since 1994, praised Donnellan and Zugibe for organizing the program. Vanderhoef said Rockland has been on the cutting edge of veterans issues during his tenure as county leader.

"This program is designed to make it easier for returning veterans to assimilate back into private life and to get them treatment and services they may need," Vanderhoef said.

Additional Facts

Different approach

Eligibility criteria for the Rockland Veteran's Alternative to Incarceration program:

- Participant must be a veteran of the war in Iraq and/or the war in Afghanistan.
- Participant must be in need of treatment for mental health, chemical dependency and/or co-

occurring disorder.

- Participant must face nonviolent criminal charges in Rockland County.
- Participant must not have a history of violent criminal convictions.
- Veterans taking part in the program will plead guilty to a charge and sentencing will be held in abeyance for 12 months for a misdemeanor and 18 months for a felony.
- When the defendant meets all required treatment conditions and completes other program requirements, the criminal charges will be reduced or dismissed.

Source: Rockland County government
