



News Release

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Judiciary Announces Veterans Assistance Project

Chief Justice Stuart Rabner today announced a pilot program to assist military veterans who enter the court system. The Veterans Assistance Project 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, to provide referrals to existing community services as well as mentors for veterans.

“We are pleased to work with other agencies to address the needs of veterans who come into contact with the criminal justice system,” Chief Justice Stuart Rabner said. “Veterans and their families have made sacrifices in defense of this nation, and we should provide them with appropriate services and support.”

Some veterans return from military service with physical, mental or personal issues and may turn to drugs or alcohol in an attempt to manage the stress of returning to civilian life. This initiative aims to connect service members who need help with existing programs and mentors to address those issues.

“Outreach to our veterans is a top priority,” said retired Army Col. Stephen G. Abel, United States Army (Retired), DMAVA deputy commissioner. “This is just another step in the process to make sure veterans receive the support they deserve.”

The project is being piloted in Atlantic County in the municipal courts and in the criminal division of Superior Court, and will be offered in Union County in the coming months.

“We thank Atlantic County judges and court staff, including Municipal Court Presiding Judge Lou Belasco, Assignment Judge Valerie Armstrong as well as DMAVA and DHS managers and staff for their roles in this initiative,” said Chief Justice Rabner.

The program is geared toward providing services to veterans, not diverting veterans 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.

Individuals will be asked whether they are veterans at the point of arrest or detention, when the person is remanded to the county jail, and at initial court appearances.

Persons identified as veterans will be referred to the Atlantic County Veteran Service Office for an assessment of their needs and then matched with existing service providers. In addition, the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs has agreed to assign a mentor to each veteran, as a critical component of this initiative. The mentors, who will be active or retired veterans themselves, will work with defendants while their criminal case is pending and afterward. Mentors will see that veterans receive proper assistance and try to head off the veteran's return to the criminal justice system on another offense.

Atlantic County was selected for the pilot because the municipal and Superior Courts work with an established network of mental health and veterans' services.

The state's Division of Mental Health Services has contracts with Jewish Family Service to provide mental health screening and assessment at the Atlantic County Jail. The mental health agency also offers outpatient services within the county. This existing mental health infrastructure will allow the program to be implemented without the need to reallocate existing resources or secure new funding.

"Veterans' psychological wounds often emerge and linger long after physical injuries have healed, but we know that with proper treatment, they can recover," said Kevin Martone, assistant commissioner for the Division of Mental Health Services at the Department of Human Services.

"We expect to raise the awareness of counselors, screeners and justice system personnel of the value of asking the simple question, 'Are you a veteran?' and to then make the proper referrals for the needed services," Martone said.

More than 7,000 veterans received mental health services through the mental health division in 2007. Mental health staff is working with DMAVA and the Governor's Council on Mental Health Stigma to train mental health providers with skills specifically geared to help veterans get the services they need to live healthier lives.

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