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# Holder lauds jail-diversion program in R.I.

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PROVIDENCE — There are times when Rhode Island’s small size can make it seem, well, a little confining. But there are other instances when its close quarters allow it to shine in a way that other, larger states can’t.

The latter was true Thursday, when U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder met with state court, military, mental-health and law-enforcement officials to discuss a pilot jail-diversion program geared toward veterans and active military suffering the aftereffects of trauma. Started late last fall in District Court, Warwick, the program aims to get people with posttraumatic stress disorder, including rape and abuse victims, into treatment as an alternative to jail.

“It was extremely impressive,” Holder said during comments at The Institute for the Study & Practice of Nonviolence.

The program is the result of a \$1.9-million federal grant and more than a year of meetings by diverse participants, many who joined the attorney general, Assistant Attorney General Laurie Robinson, Sen. [Sheldon Whitehouse](#) and former Rep. Patrick J. Kennedy for a closed-door discussion at the state Supreme Court.

“He was very gracious,” said Corinna Roy, a behavioral-health planner with the Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities and Hospitals. He indicated the program could be a model for other states for its collaboration, bringing defense lawyers, prosecutors and judges to the table, she said.

“It’s probably been the best case of collaboration I’ve seen in Rhode Island in a long time,” said Craig Stenning, director of the department. Holder observed that the state was on the “cutting edge of helping vets,” he said.

The idea is to catch potential candidates charged with misdemeanor crimes before they land in jail. A clinician assesses whether the individual suffers from PTSD. If so, the clinician arranges mental-health and substance-abuse treatment as an alternative to prison, with the prosecutor’s and a judge’s consent.

Clinicians have screened 65 people so far, 39 of whom were diverted to treatment, Roy said. All but three participants were military personnel; only one did not comply with the program, she said. Their charges include domestic abuse, driving under the influence and disorderly conduct.

“I think it’s a steppingstone to things we want to do in the future,” Chief Judge Jeanne E. LaFazia said, adding, “I’m hopeful we’ll see some support from Washington.” She said she hopes the program will expand to Providence County by October, and a calendar to hear veterans’ cases will eventually be established statewide.

LaFazia said the program emphasizes accountability, while seeking to lend a hand to those who volunteer to serve.

She notes that Rhode Island has the second-highest National Guard deployment rate in the country. National statistics show that 25 percent to 40 percent of service members deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan return with psychological and neurological injuries associated with PTSD.

“Each year, hundreds of Rhode Islanders serve in our nation’s military in combat zones. ... For many, the transition back to home is difficult and can result in bad choices that put them in conflict with the law,” state Attorney General Peter F. Kilmartin said. “It is incumbent upon us to provide a legal system that does not penalize our veterans, but rather provide access to treatment necessary to transition back to their families, their jobs, and their community.”

Whitehouse, who invited Holder, agreed: “We should do everything in our power to help these brave men and women, who sacrificed so much for our country, recover from the trauma of war and become successful in their civilian life.”

Jail-diversion courts for veterans, like Rhode Island’s, are being replicated throughout the country. Forty-six operate in 20 states. Another 50 are in the works.

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