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VA reaches out to courts to help veterans with PTSD

APPEALING TO COURTS: Veterans who are jailed may have unresolved combat trauma, and agency can help

By **DANIEL WOOLFOLK**
 TIMES STAFF WRITER
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FORT DRUM — The Department of Veterans Affairs is reaching out to local courts to help veterans who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

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Kynna L. Murphy, veterans justice outreach coordinator for the VA, works with veterans in Northern and Central New York who are in jail and screens them to see if they have issues related to combat trauma that aren't being addressed properly. If the veteran does, she coordinates a treatment plan and works with judges and lawyers to accept behavioral health treatment as an alternative to jail time if it fits the situation.

"Folks are coming back from overseas having PTSD and are not having treatment for it," she said. "They are having maladapted behavior having to do with it."

Problems she often sees include drug use, domestic violence and erratic driving.

"Police get involved and these veterans end up in jail when really, the underlying issue is they are suffering from trauma," she said.

Attorney Seth B. Buchman, Three Mile Bay, has seen clients lately who have displayed signs of post-combat stress and welcomes improved interactions between the VA and the legal system. He said he believes that often, illegal behavior by veterans is caused in part by traumatic brain injuries, frequently caused by improvised explosive device

PHOTOS



Murphy

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attacks, and PTSD.

“We have an obligation to these young men and women. So, what are we going to do, lock them all up?” he said in a letter to the Times. “When a person is a law-abiding citizen and then they get blown up with an improvised explosive device and then they commit criminal behavior, there is something wrong with us if all we can do for them is just lock them up and sweep the whole issue under the rug.”

The effort is part of a five-year plan put forth in 2009 by President Barack Obama. Last year, the Syracuse VA Medical Center, which oversees the Watertown clinic, received \$1 million for a three-year pilot program to screen veterans near Fort Drum.

Because about half of jailed veterans were homeless or are at risk of becoming homeless after they are released, the VA has begun focusing on finding options for the legal system, Ms. Murphy said.

Syracuse VA spokesman Gordon Sclar said the disorder plays a role in many facets of life.

“PTSD is intertwined with so many issues,” he said. “PTSD does not exist by itself, just as homelessness doesn’t exist by itself.”

Ms. Murphy began serving in her outreach position in February and visits Jefferson County weekly. While in other parts of the state, she sees many Vietnam veterans, she said, but locally she sees mostly veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

The younger veterans, she said, face more serious and violent charges, and she has been working with judges and lawyers to find options for them.

Not all veterans, such as some who were discharged with discipline problems, are entitled to VA care, so she finds behavioral health care providers from outside the VA for them, and, she said, that has been successful.

Ms. Murphy may be contacted by calling 1 (877) 424-3838.

Times staff writer Brian Kelly contributed to this report.

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