

The Best Course for Troubled Veterans: Treatment, Not Jail

By Philip Berroll

Sol Wachtler had a grim statistic to share with his audience: “After the Vietnam conflict, we had over 200,000 veterans who went to prison.” He added, “We’re determined to see that this doesn’t happen again.”

Judge Wachtler, former Chief Judge of the New York State Court of Appeals, spoke during a panel discussion, sponsored by the Veterans Mental Health Coalition of New York City, at which speakers described efforts to steer nonviolent veteran offenders away from imprisonment and instead offer them support services and mental health treatment. One such program drew a good deal of attention: the Veterans Project, a groundbreaking North Shore-LIJ Health System initiative developed by Judge Wachtler, a lifetime North Shore-LIJ trustee.

The Veterans Project is a collaboration between North Shore-LIJ’s Law and Psychiatry Institute, the New York State courts, the Brooklyn, Queens and Nassau district attorneys’ offices and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) New York Harbor Health Care System. It is the first in the state – and the largest in the nation – to create a standardized approach to providing services and treatment to veterans involved with the criminal justice system, with the goal of preventing veterans who land in court or jail for minor offenses from getting into deeper trouble with the law. At a time when many veterans are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression – 20 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans nationwide (300,000 men and women) have been diagnosed with those illnesses – there is an urgent need to steer them toward treatment rather than jail time.

During the panel discussion, held at Hunter College’s School of Social Work, several people involved in the Veterans Project – including Brooklyn District Attorney Charles J. Hynes, First Assistant D.A. Anne Swern, and veterans outreach specialists from New York Harbor – spoke in detail about their work. Several noted that a frequent challenge they face is convincing veterans to seek treatment; too many fail to do so, either out of embarrassment (they may worry about looking “weak” in front of their comrades) or fear that they will lose their benefits.

One way to counter this is through outreach from other veterans – the Veterans Project offers peer counseling to guide troubled former soldiers into treatment programs. Another strategy is to reach out to veterans who have been arrested for misdemeanors such as subway fare-jumping. “We want to use the arrest,” said Ms. Swern, “as the opportunity to get them the services they need.”

Judge Wachtler and District Attorney Hynes, both of whom are veterans, spoke movingly of their desire to avoid repeating the tragedy of the Vietnam era.

“What this country did to [Vietnam veterans],” said the district attorney, “was an absolute disgrace – especially the criminal justice system.”

The Veterans Project is one of a number of innovative programs run by North Shore-LIJ’s Office of Military and Veteran’s Liaison Services (OMVLS), whose Director, Army Lt. Col. (Ret.) Randy Howard, moderated the Hunter event. Other OMVLS initiatives include a treatment program for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans suffering from PTSD and/or traumatic brain injury and programs to help returning service members find employment in the health system.

District Attorney Hynes and the other speakers touted the Veterans Project as a model that can – and should – be replicated across the country.

“If you’re in a county rather than Brooklyn, Queens or Nassau, you have a moral imperative to demand from your district attorney why such services aren’t in place,” said Mr. Hynes. “I believe that the day will come when we have district attorneys across the country committed to the proposition that no man or woman who served their country will ever be criminalized again.”

Originally published in the newsletter of North Shore-LIJ Medical Center.