

HEALTH

Cutting through the red tape

New veterans program reaches out to inmates and corrections officers suffering from PTSD

By Max Bowen

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For some veterans returning home, the transition can be tougher than others.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) affects thousands of people, many of whom have served in the armed forces. This condition can have a variety of symptoms and effects, one of which is addictive behavior which can make integration in society a challenge. A new program being employed at the Billerica House of Corrections is seeking to stem the tide of veterans who become offenders due to the condition, as well as corrections officers that guard them.

Middlesex Sheriff **Peter Koutoujian** said better services are needed for incarcerated veterans while in jail and after they are released to reduce their risk of re-offending.

"We need to provide better services to them while incarcerated and after," Koutoujian said. "Many return home with PTSD and are never diagnosed."

Koutoujian said 25 corrections officers have signed up for the program so far. His office is working with the Bedford VA Medical Center to help coordinate treatment for both inmates and officers.

"Being a corrections officer is a very difficult job," Koutoujian said. "We need to be thoughtful about how their service to our country affects their family."

Kevin Casey of the Bedford

VA Medical Center wrote that they meet with veterans six months away from being released to put together an after-care plan.

Post traumatic stress disorder

PTSD is a severe anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to any event that results in psychological trauma. This event may involve the threat of death to oneself or to someone else, or to one's own or someone else's physical, sexual, or psychological integrity, overwhelming the individual's ability to cope. As an effect of psychological trauma, PTSD is less frequent and more enduring than the more commonly seen acute stress response.

Larry Guertin of the Bedford VA Medical Center wrote in an e-mail that those suffering from PTSD have trouble with edginess, anger, insomnia, and disruption in their interpersonal relationships. A variety of treatments are used at the center, including psychotherapy, medication treatment, and case management.

Guertin wrote that psychotherapy focused specifically on the traumatic event has proven to be helpful, but in some cases, the veterans aren't yet ready to face it, in which case supportive psychotherapy is used.

"PTSD sometimes has had such a broad impact on the veteran's life that some social work consultation and help, or Case Management, will be useful for untangling serious

life problems and accessing various kinds of help," wrote Guertin. "Homelessness is a particular focus of VA help."

Guertin wrote that family and friends of a PTSD patient can't always understand why the person becomes so angry or overreacts to certain events. He said many veterans can lose the symptoms of PTSD as they become more integrated with their civilian lives.

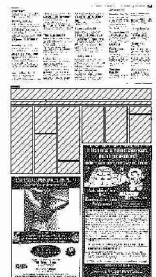
"Part of the sufferer's brain is still busy saving his or her life" wrote Guertin. "Without effective briefings and treatment, many marriages break up, jobs are lost, and bad habits develop (like isolation or substance abuse) which can have their own devastating consequences."

Challenges to veterans

A similar program is being run on a larger level called Statewide Advocacy for Veterans' Empowerment (SAVE) through the office of Secretary of Veterans Affairs Coleman Nee. A Marine veteran who served in Operation Desert Storm, Nee said his office has received calls from police and court officers reporting the high numbers of veterans being arrested or arraigned for crimes.

"Prior to deployment we never see them," said Nee, adding that when his office began to reach out to the courts and jails, it was found that many inmates were in need as well as the corrections officers.

Nee added that a criminal record hurts the veterans



when they apply for jobs.
“We need to not only get them out of jail, but out of that mentality,” said Nee.

Kevin Lambert, which works with the office of Veterans’ Affairs, said even admitting they have PTSD can be difficult for a soldier. Lambert, who served in the armed forces until December 2007, said being in the military offers a unique camaraderie that doesn’t exist in civilian life.