

## Grant Outcomes Report

### Developing a Training Curriculum on the Needs of Veterans in the Criminal Justice System Using Results from an Evaluation of the Buffalo Veterans Treatment Court

#### The Problem:

National studies, including RAND's "Invisible Wounds of War" report,<sup>1</sup> have confirmed that many veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan face significant reintegration challenges.

They are at higher risk for mental health or substance use issues, and face formidable barriers to accessing behavioral health services. The barriers include navigating bureaucratic systems of care, pronounced stigma associated with mental health issues within the military, and a shortage of behavioral health workers. Returning veterans also face broader challenges, including family and marital strain, and confront difficulties related to financial, housing, and employment security when they return from active duty. These combined challenges put returning veterans at risk for encounters with the criminal justice system.

The Buffalo Veterans Treatment Court, the first such court in the nation, opened in January, 2008 specifically to address these issues. As a hybrid of drug treatment and mental health court models, the Veterans Treatment Court's mission is to address the mental health and addiction issues that often stem from the trauma of active combat and that can lead to criminal activity. The Veterans Treatment Court diverts eligible offenders from traditional criminal court case processing and provides the necessary tools to lead productive, law-abiding lives. Veterans charged with non-violent felonies or misdemeanors receive substance abuse treatment, counseling for mental health issues (such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and traumatic brain injury), mentoring from positive veteran role models, and educational and employment services, all under supervision of the court.

<sup>1</sup> Tanielian T and Jaycox LH, (Eds.) "Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery." Rand Center for Military Health Policy Research, 2008. Available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG720.html>.

#### KEY INFORMATION:

**GRANTEE**

New York State Unified Court System

**GRANT TITLE**

Process Evaluation of Buffalo Veterans Treatment Court

**DATES**

October 1, 2009 to December 31, 2009

**GRANT AMOUNT**

\$19,350

**FUNDING**

Integrated Services

As of July 2010, approximately 162 veterans had participated in the Veterans Treatment Court and none had been reincarcerated or had other involvement with the criminal justice system.

Other courts in New York expressed interest in establishing veteran's treatment courts, and more than 20 courts across the country had visited the Buffalo court. Federal legislation has been introduced to fund veteran's treatment courts.

## Grant Activities & Outcomes:

In 2009, NYSHealth funded the New York State Unified Court System's Buffalo City Court in collaboration with National Development Research Institutes, Inc. (NDRI), to conduct a process evaluation of the Buffalo Veterans Treatment Court in order to codify its key elements and then use those elements as the basis of a training curriculum focused on the needs of veterans in the criminal justice system.

The specific goals of the project were to:

- Define the roles of the Veterans Treatment Court team members.
- Describe the interaction of team members.
- Describe participants' actual experiences in the Veterans Treatment Court.
- Describe how participants move through the program, noting milestones and time frames.
- Document data available to the Veterans Treatment Court and to others so as to develop an evaluation component.



Staff at NDRI and Recovery Solutions, a consulting firm that specializes in addiction treatment services, conducted and recorded 21 group or individual interviews with 287 program participants, Veterans Treatment Court staff, treatment providers and others with experience interacting with veterans. They also convened one focus group of veteran mentors who work with the Veterans Treatment Court.

The evaluation identified 10 key components of the Veterans Treatment Court, which parallel the components of drug courts:

- Integrate alcohol, drug treatment, and mental health services, under court oversight.
- Use a non-adversarial approach.
- Identify participants early and enroll them promptly.
- Provide access to a continuum of treatment and rehabilitation services.
- Monitor abstinence frequently via alcohol and other drug testing.
- Respond in a coordinated fashion to participants' compliance.
- Maintain ongoing interaction between the veteran and the judiciary.
- Monitor and evaluate program goals and effectiveness.
- Provide continuing interdisciplinary education.
- Forge partnerships between court, public agencies, and community groups.

Based on these components and other insights from the process evaluation, the Veterans Treatment Court and NDRI proposed a two-day training curriculum organized around four half-day sessions on:

- Military Culture
- Key Issues Facing Veterans
- Mental Health (post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and traumatic brain injury) and Substance Use Issues Faced by Veteran Populations
- Effectively Adapting Treatment Courts to Veteran Populations
- Providing Positive Veteran Role Models as Mentors

They also developed guidelines for selection of courts to participate in training:

- Attendees should be experienced with treatment courts.
- All members of the veterans treatment court team should attend all training sessions.
- Participants should be familiar with veterans' issues and resources available to them.

## The Future:

In July 2010, the Foundation awarded the New York State Unified Court System \$241,118 to replicate the Buffalo Veterans Treatment Court model in at least 10 jurisdictions across the State. The Unified Court System will:

- Develop the two-day curriculum integrating the information gathered in the process evaluation.
- Train 10 teams to manage and sustain the veterans treatment court model: five from New York City/Albany and five from Western New York.
- Replicate the Veterans Treatment Court in 10 courts across the State.

This grant runs through December 2011.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

### ABOUT THE GRANTEE

In 1995, the Buffalo City Court, part of the New York State Unified Court System, launched a court-based jail diversion program in which all defendants are screened, assessed, and referred for appropriate treatment services. This Court Outreach Unit Referral and Treatment Services program (COURTS) links defendants needing treatment to problem solving, jail diversion court programs, such as drug courts or mental health courts.

The New York State Unified Court System (UCS) is administered by the New York State Office of Court Administration (OCA) under the authority of the Chief Judge of the State of New York. The UCS includes City, County, District, Family and Surrogate Courts and operates more than 250 specialized courts. It is divided geographically into four judicial departments and 12 judicial districts. In 2009, UCS had 1,200 judicial and 19,000 non-judicial personnel and an annual budget of \$2.5 billion

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### GRANT ID #

3193947