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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Feb., 4, 2011

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LEHIGH COUNTY AUTHORITIES EXPLORING MENTORING PROGRAM FOR VETERANS IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Lehigh County authorities are considering establishing a mentoring program where veterans would be recruited to help other veterans who are in the criminal justice system. Participants in the program would work in conjunction with Lehigh County's Team MISA (Mental Illness & Substance Abuse), whose members in different areas of the criminal justice system review cases of defendants with special needs.

Team MISA, whose goal is to identify defendants with mental health, alcohol, drug or dual dependency problems, would identify veterans in need of social services and intervene to divert them from prison when appropriate and into treatment programs.

Court officials and members of Team MISA hope to pair veterans in the court system with veterans outside of the system who have the unique ability to understand the trauma of deployment and separation from family, war, persistent danger and re-entry into the community.

"Veterans have a bond that civilians who have not shared their experiences can only try to understand," said Lehigh County District Attorney James B. Martin. "We know the trauma they have faced and can sympathize with the struggles they have upon returning from military service. However, other veterans who have seen what they have seen and experienced what they have are in the best position to reach troubled veterans, no matter which theater of war they have served or whether it is a war long over or one continuing today."

Martin was among a group of people in the criminal justice system who met in January to discuss a mentoring program that would address the needs of veterans and focus on rehabilitation. Those at the meeting were Martin; Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Seamus P. McCaffery, who serves as the court's liaison for various problem-solving courts in the state; Lehigh County President Judge Carol K. McGinley; Lehigh County Judge Kelly L. Banach, administrative judge of the Criminal Division of the Lehigh County Court of Common Pleas and chairman of the Lehigh County Criminal Justice Advisory Board; First Assistant District Attorney Steven M. Luksa; Maureen McManus, executive director of Lehigh Valley Pretrial Services; Cynthia J. Egizio, Lehigh County's assistant director of corrections; P. Karen Blackburn, program administrator of the Problem Solving Courts Program, Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts; and Kim Sapolis Lacey, a Veterans Justice Outreach coordinator for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in Wilkes-Barre.

Team MISA is made up of employees in the District Attorney's Office, Public Defender's Office, Lehigh Valley Pretrial Services, the Adult Probation Department's SPORE (Special Programs for Offenders in Rehabilitation and Education) unit, Lehigh County Drug and Alcohol, Lehigh County Prison and mental health caseworkers.

Inmates or defendants usually are referred to the team by Common Pleas Court judges, the District Attorney's Office, district judges, police, prison staff, Pretrial Services, the county MH/MR, the Public Defender's Office and private defense attorneys. Team members meet once a week to discuss new referrals and updates with old referrals.

Luksa, chairman of Team MISA, said members discuss the problems and needs of a defendant, what drug and alcohol and mental health evaluations should be done and, where appropriate, early release on bail to treatment and therapy programs. If inmates are still in jail, team members try to ensure that they get necessary medications provided in the prison.

Luksa said the team tracks cases through the system and tries to get them resolved as quickly as possible by having a plan for inpatient or outpatient treatment, SPORE supervision, work release or incarceration in a state prison.

The team also addresses housing, financial and medication needs. "There is a reduced level of recidivism because the gravamen of the problem is being addressed," Luksa said. "This meets the individual's needs while ensuring the safety of the community at no additional cost to taxpayers. Proper case management also means fewer problems with prison inmates because their cases do not linger. A plan is in place, eliminating multiple continuances in court."

Team MISA, which was started in March 2005, has processed 447 defendants and managed the cases of 77 defendants from January 2010 to December 2010.

Luksa said that over the years, team members saw more veterans of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan being referred to the team. Those veterans, he said, had mental health problems and service-connected disabilities, and the team tried to determine what resources were available for funding for treatment, including the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Luksa said that Team MISA members discussed an untapped resource – other veterans in the community. He said that mentors could volunteer to talk with other veterans, drive them to medical and other appointments, and give them the support they need, which could prevent them from committing more crimes.

"Mentoring would be one part of an overall treatment plan to identify problems that veterans have so that post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and other mental health issues do not go undiagnosed and untreated," District Attorney Martin said. "The goal is to successfully re-integrate veterans into the community after they have entered the criminal justice system. We recognize that medical and mental health treatment is extremely important but can only do so much. There are times when a person may need the compassion that only another veteran with similar experiences can provide."

President Judge McGinley credited Justice McCaffery for supporting a mentoring program in Lehigh County. "We are grateful to Justice Seamus McCaffery, himself a veteran, for his leadership and encouragement in this venture," Judge McGinley said. "The hoped-for result is a better utilization of existing services."

In Pennsylvania and around the country, courts have increasingly explored ways to identify defendants with special needs and find solutions to meet those needs so the criminal justice process is streamlined and there are better outcomes in the long run for individuals and communities, District Attorney Martin said.

Several years ago, the first veterans' court was started in Buffalo, N.Y., and the concept has since spread to 20 states. Other specialty courts include DUI (Driving Under the Influence) courts and drug courts, which try to identify alcohol- and drug-dependent offenders, coordinate treatment programs, and impose appropriate sanctions and supervision.

The mentoring program will be coordinated by the Lehigh County District Attorney's Office, Lehigh County Court, the Public Defender's Office, the Lehigh County Prison, Lehigh Valley Pretrial Services, the Adult Probation Office and the Lehigh County Veterans Affairs Office and will receive input from local veterans' organizations.

Veterans who are interested in participating in the program can contact Debbie Garlicki in the District Attorney's Office at 610-782-3230.

Applicants for mentoring positions will be interviewed by the District Attorney's Office and will be subject to a criminal background check. Applicants will be required to provide a copy of Form DD 214.