

A Rocky Start for Veterans Project

Vietnam returnees say part of "early intervention" message demeaning

A Saratoga County project that would anticipate legal difficulties of troubled returning military members started badly after some veterans questioned its function and called part of its message demeaning.

Other veterans, however, call the "early intervention" effort by the county public defender's office important and useful. The tangle started earlier this month when county Assistant Public Defender Van Zwisohn sent a letter to area service providers, veterans groups and attorneys, saying the public defender's office and the county district attorney's office were seeking stories of troubled Iraq and Afghanistan vets who are at risk for committing violence or crime, or suffering other problems.

The goal is to gauge the need for a program that would assist returning service members before they break the law, Zwisohn wrote in a May 1 memo. It cited the experience of Vietnam veterans.

"Many will remember the distrust and fear that greeted many returning veterans from Vietnam when they got into legal trouble. The 'crazed Vietnam vet' was a caricature of young men who came back from combat with drug problems, emotional problems and adjustment problems" that made them more likely than civilians to land in court and jail, Zwisohn wrote in the opening paragraph.

Some veterans found the language insulting.

"I thought this was a slap in the face," said Bob Becker of Schenectady, a Vietnam-era Marine. "It just makes Vietnam vets and the veterans of today look bad, saying they are crazy."

Colonie attorney Mathew Tully, who served with the New York Army National Guard at ground zero and was disabled in Iraq, urged the public defender's office to recant the letter and apologize. He also criticized the plan's intent. "It appears they are playing favorites with criminal law with veterans and that's a very slippery slope," said Tully.

Zwisohn could not be reached for comment. After hearing Tully's complaints, Saratoga County Public Defender John Ciulla Jr. contacted veterans, and discovered some Vietnam vets found the letter's first paragraph offensive.

Ciulla issued an apology in a follow-up letter. But he and Saratoga County District Attorney James A. Murphy III defended what they say are pro-active steps.

Ciulla said he hoped criticism would not derail the prospective project, part of a statewide initiative of the New York State Defenders Association called "The Military and Veterans Defense Project."

Murphy said he would not treat vets differently: "My position is, like any criminal case, we'll

evaluate all the factors which may mitigate the conduct."

John Rowan, president of the Vietnam Veterans of America New York Chapter, replied to Tully's concerns in an open e-mail. Rowan said other cities, including Syracuse and Buffalo, have recently established "court diversion" programs for veterans so they can receive assistance.

"I find this an enlightened and far-reaching response to a serious problem," Rowan wrote. "Unfortunately, that did not happen during the Vietnam era, and many of my comrades were incarcerated."