

## Letter About Vets Draws Apology

Saratoga County's top defender and prosecutor are working on a project aimed at helping returning war veterans, but a message about the effort has offended some people in the community.

Public Defender John Ciulla and District Attorney James Murphy III have asked local veterans' and service organizations and law enforcement officials whether they are seeing specific problems among men and women returning from Afghanistan and Iraq.

The letter begins, "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. They were not given real sympathy, real attention, or real care."

Ciulla said he felt bad that the letter from his office about the project had offended some veterans.

"We've had some complaints that the initial paragraph of our letter may have been offensive to Vietnam vets and I am extending a heartfelt apology for that," he said.

One veteran who said he is extremely offended by the letter is Albany attorney Mathew Tully.

Tully, who served as a federal law enforcement officer with the Department of Justice in the U.S. Army, returned from Iraq in 2005.

He said he understands the idea behind the effort, but the letter is problematic on several levels.

"I find the letter upsetting on a multitude of angles," Tully said Monday. "It appears the DA and public defender are offering special treatment to veterans, and that is concerning to me."

Ciulla and Murphy said they are looking to prevent returning veterans from getting into trouble with the law, not to give them preferential treatment if they are arrested.

Murphy said, "There's no preferential treatment for any defendant in Saratoga County. We do not prosecute on any status, whether financial, military, race, gender or anything else. We do not prejudge cases."

Ciulla said the veterans project is in its early stages and has the support of a number of statewide veterans organizations.

"I have a letter in favor of the project from the president of the New York State Council of Veterans Organizations," Ciulla said.

"The purpose of our letter is to inquire from a number of organizations and people whether or not there is a need for assistance."

The letter, sent May 1, asks attorneys, service organizations and veteran groups to reply if

they are aware of returning military personnel who are in trouble with the law, have not readjusted to civilian or family life, are struggling with substance abuse or who just “aren’t the same” after coming home from war zones.

“This an unusual opportunity for community organizations, the defense bar, district attorneys, courts and others to get an early start on an appropriate and humane response to what by all accounts will be a national issue,” according to the letter.

Tully said he forwarded his copy of the letter to more than 100 attorneys and veterans and said respondents agreed with his opinion that Saratoga County appeared to be offering special consideration of returning vets.

“This is a slippery slope,” he said. “The fact that people went overseas and did their job and got paid by the government to do that shouldn’t create a class of people treated preferentially.”

Ciulla said there have been cases of returning vets who have pointed to their time in combat as a source of problems when they got home.

One of the most notable cases was heard in Saratoga County Court in 2006 when a veteran admitted striking and killing a New Jersey woman with his pickup truck in front of the Saratoga Performing Arts Center.

Alexander Bennett, of Ballston Lake, is serving a prison sentence after pleading guilty to charges of manslaughter, vehicular manslaughter and leaving the scene of a fatal accident.

Tests of his blood after the accident found marijuana and cocaine in addition to alcohol above the legal limit for driving while intoxicated.

Ciulla said Bennett was part of an elite advance group of military personnel who were responsible for securing landing space in combat zones.

“He had seen some horrendous things,” Ciulla said.

He added that Bennett might have benefited from counseling or other services when he returned home.