

## Veteran's Focus Group

**Facilitated by:** Alicia Nájera, LCSW, MHSA Coordinator with notes taken by Linda Betts, MHSA Administrative Assistant.

On December 10, 2008 we met with five Veterans advocate; four were Veterans, two were family members, and two worked with Veterans. (Some had multiple roles.) Participants were offered light snacks (fruit platter) and beverages (water and juice).

We provided an overview of MHSA and the components, focusing on the PEI guidelines. We shared the workgroup recommendations, and asked for feedback and recommendations.

### Issues/Concerns:

- It should be mandated that everyone put veterans first when planning strategies and services. Many felt that the Veterans needs are neglected/over looked.
- Most vets will not “present” just anywhere, but will run into trouble with law enforcement first, resulting in a criminal record. Need to train all first responders (Law Enforcement, EMT's) to recognize and learn how to deal with combat veterans.
- Discussed the fact there is a need to train on posttraumatic stress disorder, and other veterans issues that affect the entire family, their employment and their neighborhood. The question came up as how will we get medical professionals and law enforcement to attend trainings?
- To reach veterans through services may not be suitable. For the most part, many are not willing to discuss their problem in a clinical or group setting. A social event, where groups can gather over food (for instance), would be more conducive to creating an atmosphere of camaraderie and openness.

### Recommendations:

- **Training and education** about veterans issues for first responders, expanded to include families and clergy, regarding signs and symptoms of PTSD and mental illness
- **Leverage funds.** Coordinate with the VA or Dept of Defense for money. Also bridge services between community service providers and veteran services. We discussed how recommended services in PEI would not exclude veterans.
- **Intake Forms** should include “are you a veteran?”
- **Alternative sentencing Law.** This law allows judge discretion to recommend PTSD treatment in place of jail for those “identified” as a combat vet. Collaborate with system to offer alternatives through mental health services, public and county.
- **Outreach.** Where veteran's make the most impact is the place to reach out to them (a broader issue and the impact on the family). The most effective way of reaching out to veterans is through socialization. The Wellness centers provide this and could be developed with Vets in mind.
- **Use of VA Memorial Building.** The County owns the building on Front Street. Some brainstorming on how to use (and support) the building: establish an office there for downtown outreach workers; collaborate with entities that rent space a provision that enables (fixed number) veterans to participate free of charge (for instance, rock concerts would give away 10 tickets to vets).

- **Services to Veterans and their families.** Treatment for combat veterans should include immediate family members.

### **Final Thoughts:**

- **Veterans should be a focus in PEI.** While it is understood that Veterans and their families will not be excluded from any PEI program, it was strongly felt by everyone in the group that there should be a particular program that specifically focuses on Veterans.
- **Wellness Center.** Some members of the group like the ideas of the Wellness Center, such as exists in the mental health arena. There are some wellness activities, but could build on this. Part of the attraction is to draw out veterans that are isolated and not getting (needed) services. “The social aspect is at the heart of prevention and early intervention, and it’s a good way to get people to relax and talk.”
- **Trainings.** Many in our community need to have a better understanding of issues that veterans and their families face. The facilitator mentioned that the Workforce Education Training Academy should be able to include some training on veterans’ issues.
- **Alternative Sentence Law.** Would like to see all law enforcement trained. Facilitator mentioned that that might not be feasible under PEI, but that if the Training Academy has trainings they could be invited. Also discussed how mental health jail staff would be good targets for training on veterans’ issues, and the Alternative Sentence Law in particular.
- **“System of Care” for Veterans.** Everyone in our community that provides services for veterans should collaborate and coordinate. We are already working on how to improve this.
- **Advocate for Veterans.** There needs to be an advocate position between County services and the VA