



## Veterans Justice Outreach in the VA

By: Edward Zapala\*

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA; a branch of the broader Department of Veterans Affairs [VA]) has recently intensified its connections with the criminal justice system. I would like to highlight some of these developments and what they may mean to attorneys in Wisconsin.

In 2007, the Health Care for Reentry Veterans (HCRV) program was developed. This provides outreach into state and federal prisons to assist eligible incarcerated Veterans in their reintegration back into the community. These full-time HCRV Specialists (two of which cover the state of Wisconsin) cannot provide clinical treatment in these settings, but they are able to provide information, advice, and assist in establishing connection to VA services.

On April 30, 2009, the VA Undersecretary for Health published an information letter regarding “Information and recommendations for services provided by VHA facilities to Veterans in the criminal justice system”. Citing the large numbers of potentially eligible ill Veterans with justice system contacts, the letter announces the Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Initiative, the purpose of which is “to avoid unnecessary criminalization of mental illness and extended incarceration among Veterans by ensuring that eligible Veterans in contact with the criminal justice system have access to: a. VHA mental health and substance abuse services when clinically indicated, and b. Other VA services and benefits as appropriate”.

The VJO Initiative is meant to complement the HCRV program, however focusing on Veterans *before* they become incarcerated. The Letter defined a justice-involved Veteran (the target of the VJO Initiative) as:

- a. A Veteran in contact with local law enforcement who can be appropriately diverted from arrest to mental health [or substance abuse] treatment;
- b. A Veteran in a local jail, either pretrial or serving a sentence; and
- c. A Veteran involved in adjudication or monitoring by a court.

On May 27, 2009, the VA Deputy Undersecretary for Health for Operations and Management published a memorandum regarding justice-involved Veterans. It required that VA medical centers provide outreach to justice-involved Veterans in their service area and it mandated that each center assign a VJO Specialist. These Specialists were to outreach, assess, and case manage Veterans in local courts and jails and liaison with law enforcement (even coordinating training on Veteran-specific issues).

There are three VA Medical Centers in Wisconsin (in Madison, Tomah, and Milwaukee) and many clinics.

**\*Edward Zapala** graduated from Smith College School for Social Work in Massachusetts, where he earned a MSW. He has worked in outpatient mental health and primary care at the San Antonio VA and in adolescent day treatment in Colorado, before coming to the Madison VA in January 2007, where he has been in the Homeless Program since. He is a certified Advanced Practice Social Worker.

However, depending on where he or she lives, the closest VA may be in a neighboring state. VA care may include services such as: medical care, mental health/substance abuse treatment, homeless services, specialized care for women, work therapy, and nursing homes. Unlike the HCRV Specialists (which are full-time positions), the VJO Specialists currently have these duties added on to other responsibilities. For attorneys, VJO Specialists can be good points of contact or sources of information about VA services. VJO Specialists may be case managing in a Veterans Court (or other treatment court). These Specialists are not able to serve Veterans that are ineligible for VHA care, nor are they able to write up extensive court reports.

Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists covering Wisconsin include:

Madison, VISN 12, William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital, Ed Zapala,  
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Milwaukee, VISN 12, Clement J. Zablocki Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Kevin Kavanaugh,  
[Kevin.Kavanaugh@va.gov](mailto:Kevin.Kavanaugh@va.gov)

Tomah, VISN 12, Tomah VA Medical Center, Erin Hibma, [erin.hibma@VA.GOV](mailto:erin.hibma@VA.GOV)

Minneapolis, VISN 23 (covering Northwest Wisconsin including the Eau Claire, Rice Lake, and Hayward areas), Minneapolis VA Medical Center, Faith Weiss, [faith.weiss@VA.GOV](mailto:faith.weiss@VA.GOV)

For more information on the Health Care for Reentry Veterans (HCRV) program and the Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Initiative (including a complete directory of VJO Specialists), please go to: <http://www1.va.gov/homeless/page.cfm?pg=49>.

