**The Veterans Defense Project**

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As the wars in **Iraq** and **Afghanistan** wind down, the **majority** of our new generation of **veterans** are returning home **stronger** and **wiser** from their service — becoming **immediate assets** to their communities. Many **others**, **however**, are **bringing their wars home** with them, **silently suffering** from **invisible injuries**.

More than **2.6 million** Americans **have now served** in Iraq or Afghanistan. A U.S. government study, released in July 2012 estimated that up to **20%**, approximately 500,000 of these veterans are **suffering** from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (**PTSD**), and a **similar number** of these veterans are **suffering** from Traumatic Brain Injury (**TBI**).[[1]](#footnote-1) The same study also concluded that **less than half** of these PTSD or TBI-suffering veterans had previously **reported** or **sought help** for their condition, and that the **true numbers are likely higher**.[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Untreated**, many of these psychologically injured veterans are acting out in **reckless**, **self-destructive** and, sometimes **violent** ways, victimizing the very communities and individuals they were once willing to sacrifice their lives to protect. **History tells us** that the **numbers** of troubled veterans **flooding** into our **criminal courts** will continue to **swell**. A **study** of Vietnam veterans receiving care for PTSD in the VA system during the mid-1980’s found that almost **half of all Vietnam veterans suffering from PTSD had been arrested at least once**, **34.2%** **more than once**, and **11.5%** reported being **convicted of a felony**.[[3]](#footnote-3) Moreover, Vietnam veterans’ involvement in the criminal justice system has **lingered for decades**. A **1998** Department of Justice **study** found that, more than **20 years** after the war, approximately a **quarter million Vietnam veterans** were still housed in our nation’s **prisons**.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The **question** we now face in criminal courts across the United States, including **Minnesota**, is **what to do with this generation’s veterans**, whose **criminal offenses** are **tied** to their **untreated** **psychological war injuries** and **related addictions?** **Do** we **repeat** the **mistakes** of the **past**, **demonizing and discarding this generation** as we often did **earlier generations** of troubled war veterans, especially after **Vietnam?** **Or** do we **pursue** a **more informed approach**: **harnessing** our newfound **knowledge** of combat trauma **to use a criminal justice contact as an intervention opportunity** to **ensure** troubled veterans receive the **help** they need to become **assets** to their communities, **while better protecting public safety?**

The **Veterans Defense Project (VDP)** is a Minnesota-based nonprofit organization, **dedicated** to **educating**, **advocating** and **providing legal assistance for veterans in the criminal justice system**. The VDP’s founders, **Brockton D. Hunter** and **Ryan C. Else**, are **lawyers** and **military veterans**, themselves, who have built a **national reputation** fighting for veterans in the justice system, including:

* **Defending** many high-profile **veterans criminal cases**;
* **Leading passage** of **veteran sentencing legislation** in many states, including **Minnesota’s pioneering 609.115, Subd. 10**, which was later **cited** by the **U.S. Supreme Court** in the landmark case, ***Porter v. McCollum***, 558 U.S. 30 (2009), the first case from the highest court to require that combat trauma be considered in criminal sentencing;
* Co-Authoring and editing ***The Attorney’s Guide to Defending Veterans in Criminal Court***, the only comprehensive **legal treatise** on this subject;
* **Briefing** the **leadership** of the **Departments of Defense** and **Veterans Affairs**, and **training** thousands of **attorneys**, **judges**, **prosecutors**, **law enforcement** and **mental health professionals** on doing a **better job** with veterans in the criminal justice system.

Through these public education efforts, the **VDP thrust a lightning rod up into a growing storm**. **Calls for assistance from veterans and their families** come into the VDP **daily** and their numbers are **growing**. **Requests** for **training** and **consultation** from **courts** and **attorneys** have also **grown exponentially**, far exceeding the VDP’s original scope and **limited budget**. **The funding sought through this grant will allow the VDP to expand it capacity to meet the ever-growing demand for its vital services.**

To learn more about the Veterans Defense Project, visit our web site at [www.veteransdefenseproject.org](http://www.veteransdefenseproject.org).

1. Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, Treatment for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Military and Veteran Populations: Initial Assessment 39 (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Richard Kulka, et al., National Vietnam Veterans Readjustment Study, VII-21-1 (1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Christopher J. Mumola, Bureau of Justice Statistics, Veterans in Prison or Jail, NCJ 178888 (2000), http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)