



Community mental health pilots for veterans

20 November 2008 (WP/182)

Introduction

This paper provides a brief overview of the community based mental health service for veterans currently being piloted around the UK and the Legion's policy position on the pilots. This should help to ensure that the Legion's approach to the pilots is consistent across the various sites.

Community mental health pilots

As you will be aware, the community mental health pilots for veterans are currently running at six locations across the UK. Each pilot is scheduled to run for two years, after which time successful models will be replicated in other areas. The aim is to provide evidence based mental health services in the community for veterans throughout the UK. The six pilot areas are South Stafford and Shropshire, Camden and Islington, Newcastle, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Cornwall (contact details at the end of the paper).

Each pilot is purposefully different, in order that the most effective ways to engage veterans with local mental health services can be identified. Some pilots act as a simple signposting service, while others provide their own therapeutic treatment to veterans via a specialist NHS Community Veterans Mental Health Therapist with an understanding of the particular issues for those who served in the Armed Forces. The main aim of each pilot, however, is to provide a point of access to a choice of treatment for veterans with a mental health problem, whether that is mainstream treatment from the local NHS, more specialist NHS treatment or treatment from another organisation such as Combat Stress. **All the pilots welcome any veteran with any mental health problem.**

There are various ways into the pilots. Veterans can be referred by their GP, they can contact the pilots themselves and they can also be referred by other organisations such as the Legion and SSAFA. As such, it is important that Legion staff and volunteers who have contact with veterans are aware if there is a pilot running in their area and are able to pass on details.

The NHS is responsible for veterans' health and therefore for the delivery of the mental health pilots. The MoD was the driving force behind setting up the pilots, recognising that there was a perception that neither they nor the NHS had anything to offer veterans with mental health problems. However, while the MoD remains involved, overall responsibility for funding and delivery of both the pilots and future services for veterans lies with the NHS and the Department of Health.

Legion policy on the pilots

The Legion's policy position on the community mental health pilots is that we welcome and support them. There is no evidence that veterans with mental health problems need fundamentally different interventions to other people with similar problems. As such, the Legion believes that veterans should be encouraged to utilise local, free NHS services, rather than calling for the creation of new specific services only for veterans.

However, successful treatment depends on the willingness of veterans to engage with local services and follow the advice provided and the ability of local services to cater sensitively for veterans who are wary of the NHS. It is well known that some veterans feel that treatment in mainstream services alongside people without a Services background and by health professionals without Services experience will be unsuccessful. It is also the case that some health professionals have been uncomfortable treating veterans with mental health problems in the past. Therefore, a setting that is sensitive to veterans, where they feel that they are understood properly, and where staff have a deeper understanding of veterans' issues, is likely to enhance the effectiveness of treatment. The pilots are looking at the best ways in which to provide this culturally sensitive service within the NHS and the Legion supports this work and should actively encourage veterans to engage with the pilots.

Legion involvement with the pilots

Organisations with expertise in the welfare of veterans have a central role to play in the pilots. Combat Stress has been involved with the pilots since their inception, but other organisations such as the Legion will have a growing significance in helping veterans access the pilots and addressing their wider welfare needs as the pilots develop. It is hoped that the pilots will not just help with mental health problems, but will take an holistic approach, helping veterans tackle other problems such as financial issues, relationships, housing and job seeking and so a wide variety of organisations will need to take part. It is important that we are aware of the opportunities available to get involved with the pilots locally and centrally.

Legion regional staff, in some of the pilot areas, attend steering committees and other meetings regarding the pilots. This helps to strengthen relationships with staff running the pilots and ensures the Legion is playing an active role in the development and delivery of the pilots where possible. If there are any pilot areas where we are not engaged with the pilot, the appropriate County Manager should make contact. The outcomes of meetings and committees should be reported to Jenny Priest, Policy Adviser (Health and Care), located in the Public Policy Unit at Head Office, who is the policy lead for this area of work, and is working with the Camden and Islington pilot and also with MoD and NHS officials on how the Legion can support the pilots nationally.

It is vital that the Legion does all it can to encourage veterans to use their local pilot, so the Department of Health (DH) cannot cite a supposed lack of demand as an excuse not to roll out effective services in the future. The DH has been avoiding fulfilling its duty to veterans for many years, letting the MoD remain the primary target for criticism when services have been overstretched, ineffective and non-existent. This should no longer be accepted. The pilots provide an opportunity to show the DH that veterans do need this sort of service and can be successfully treated, but it is crucial that enough veterans come through the pilots to prove this. There is a very real danger that if the pilots are under-used due to a lack of awareness, the DH will decline to roll-out any of the models tested and veterans with mental health problems will be no better off.

For more details on the mental health pilots or to feedback on your involvement, please contact Jenny on jpriest@britishlegion.org.uk or 020 3207 2126.

Community mental health pilots contact details

More details on the pilots and contact details can be found on the SPVA website at www.veterans-uk.info/mental_health/announcement.html

South Stafford and Shropshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust
Coton House
St George's Hospital Site
Corporation Street
Stafford ST16 3AG
Tel: 01785 257888 ext 5280

Community Veterans' Mental Health
Assessment Service
The Traumatic Stress Clinic
73 Charlotte Street
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The Waterfront
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Veterans First Point
NHS Lothian Traumatic Stress Centre
Edinburgh
No further details available