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## **LESSONS FROM CROATIA: BUILDING PRACTICE WITHOUT A BLUEPRINT**

Vesna Zelić Ferenčić brought thirteen years of experience in the Croatian probation service, including roles as a probation officer, head of a probation office, and earlier work in victim and witness support at a county court. Her contribution offered a frank account of developing practice with a complex population in the absence of formal protocols – and the lessons that generates for other countries now at an earlier stage.

### ***No formal protocols – and what that means***

Croatia's probation service did not have, and still does not have, specific guidelines exclusively for working with veterans. Practice developed through direct experience with real cases. This absence of a unified methodology creates inconsistency, increases pressure on individual professionals, and makes quality assurance across the system harder to achieve. Developing clear, shared guidelines is therefore not bureaucracy for its own sake – it is a direct support to the quality of work and the welfare of those involved [1].

### ***Veterans are not a uniform group***

Veterans in the probation system are highly heterogeneous. They differ in their war experiences, psychological functioning, social backgrounds, and the nature of their situations. A single standardised approach does not work. Any framework must be flexible enough to be applied individually, based on each person's specific profile, needs, and risk factors. Vesna identified several profiles she encountered in practice: those whose difficulties related to emotional dysregulation and rigid beliefs about gender roles, sometimes combined with alcohol use; those whose difficulties related to post-war economic

vulnerability and social marginalisation; and more serious cases involving war-related trauma.

### ***Key elements of effective practice***

Several elements proved most consistently useful. Understanding without excusing: professionals must understand the psychological context of a veteran's behaviour while still maintaining clear expectations of responsibility. Building a strong professional relationship based on trust, reliability, and consistency is fundamental, given the deep institutional distrust many veterans carry. Helping veterans with emotional regulation — identifying triggers and developing strategies for self-control — was a central intervention area. Working toward a new prosocial identity, building or recovering roles beyond the wartime self — as parent, partner, colleague, citizen — could restore structure and purpose. Multidisciplinary cooperation was identified as essential: probation cannot do this work alone [2].

### **References**

1. Finlay, A. K. et al. (2019). A scoping review of military veterans involved in the criminal justice system and their health and healthcare. *Health & Justice*, 7(1), 1–15.
2. Bosker, J., Menger, A., & de Vogel, V. (2026). *Forensic Social Work. Supporting Desistance*. Routledge.