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A VOICE FROM THE FIELD: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF A VETERAN IN PROBATION

Rob Dekker presented from a rare combination of standpoints: both as a probation professional working with veterans and as a veteran himself, having served in Iraq and Afghanistan. He made an important preliminary distinction: he had experienced combat, but not war on the scale currently experienced in Ukraine. His contribution focused on the practical implications of working with this population, grounded in personal and professional experience.

Not all veterans are affected in the same way

Many veterans cope well and reintegrate successfully. A smaller group face more serious difficulties, and it is important not to treat all veterans as inevitably damaged or potentially dangerous. Acknowledging this variation matters both for accurate assessment and for preserving the dignity of those who do not need intensive intervention.

Pathways to justice involvement

Drawing on research and his own experience, Dekker identified several pathways through which some veterans can end up in the justice system. Trauma and loss of trust in authorities can shift a veteran's worldview, producing hostility toward institutions. The loss of military brotherhood – the sense of belonging and shared purpose – is one of the most significant experiences of leaving service; if that bond is not replaced, some may seek it in other groups. Loss of identity and purpose can leave veterans feeling purposeless and disconnected from civilian life, creating conditions in which high-risk behaviour can offer a sense of structure or mission. Difficulty adjusting to ordinary civilian concerns – domestic routines and responsibilities that may feel trivial after combat – can also create serious tensions in relationships and daily functioning [1].

What veterans need from professionals

Professionals do not need to have experienced war to work effectively with veterans. What they do need is to listen seriously, recognise the experience the veteran has had, and acknowledge that it was real and significant. When veterans feel genuinely heard and respected, aggression toward authorities tends to decrease and cooperation becomes possible. Conversely, when veterans feel dismissed, the opposite occurs. The quality of the professional relationship is therefore not a secondary concern – it is a precondition for effective work.

Peer-to-peer practice

Dekker shared a Dutch practice example: when police respond to sensitive incidents involving veterans, efforts are made to have a responding officer who is also a veteran. The shared experience of military service can produce faster recognition, reduced confrontation, and better communication. This peer-to-peer principle – using shared experience as a resource – may have significant potential in the Ukrainian context as demobilisation increases.

References:

1. McFee, E. et al. (2024). Between frontline and home front: Reintegration, resilience and participation strategies for Ukraine's veterans. Corioli Institute.