Veterans Treatment Courts

What are Veterans Treatment Courts?

Veterans Treatment Courts (VTC) are a court-based jail diversion program designed to address the mental health and substance abuse needs of veterans charged with one or more crimes. The program connects such veterans with to the benefits and treatment they have earned, and provides the essential tools for veterans to become productive members of society. The Veterans Treatment Court Program provides an alternative to going to jail.

The Veterans Treatments Court idea was first introduced by Judge Robert Russell, who started the first court in 2008 in Buffalo, New York. After noticing the number of veterans who were appearing in drug and mental health courts, Judge Russell partnered with the Veterans Affairs Medical Center and several local agencies to start a court that could better address the needs of veterans. The VTC program has been successful in reducing recidivism, with recidivism rates below five percent in nearly all courts. Over 130 courts exist across the United States and many more are under development. To locate a VTC near you, visit Justice for Vets website.

What are the key components of Veterans Treatment Courts?

A partnership of community agencies work to provide services aimed at addressing the needs of justice-involved veterans. The partnership actively engages in keeping veterans out of jail, and helping to ensure that families and communities are involved in supporting justice-involved veterans to ensure they are successful.

The Veterans Treatment Court model requires veterans to fulfill court-ordered requirements that vary by court. Typical programs last one to two years, and require the veteran to attend court regularly with direct interaction with the judge. Requirements may also include drug testing, mentors, counseling, support groups and much more. Utilizing a structured approach allows these individuals to participate in a program that mirrors military life.

Veterans Treatment Courts work for veterans, families and communities

- VTCs help keep veterans with mental illness and substance abuse out of jail and into treatment. VTCs are cost effective to the community because all services are provided by the VA, using benefits the veterans has already earned but may not know how to access.
- VTCs allow the veteran to regain the dignity and honor they had when they volunteered for military service.
- VTCs promote family reconnection, repair and reintegration.
- VTCs serve justice by requiring the veteran to meet stringent requirements. The court is not a get out of jail free card.

Who is eligible for VTC?

An individual can participate in the VTC if he or she meets all of the following requirements:

- Has served in the United States Armed Forces,
- Has been charged with a crime in a jurisdiction with a VTC,
- Has been clinically diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI) or mental health and substance abuse conditions that are treatable and
- Is eligible for Veterans Administration benefits.

What is the process to enter a VTC?

- Typically individuals are referred by the local jail, public offender's office or law enforcement agency.
- The prosecutor's office decides if a veteran is eligible based on certain criteria - including public safety.
- The veteran must undergo an evaluation by the VA.
- The veteran must plead guilty.

What is the VTC structure?

- Court supervision is required for 12-18 months.
- Participants meet with the judge regularly on a pre-determined schedule for probation supervision and submit to random drug and alcohol testing.
- Participants follow treatment guidelines set up by the judge and the VA clinical specialist. Treatment may include substance abuse, mental health, family and other counseling.
- Participants sign an information release that allows the judge to track his or her progress.
- Participants stay actively engaged with an assigned VTC volunteer mentor for support and guidance.

What happens after completion of VTC?

- Participants are honored in a commencement ceremony upon completion of case plans and goals.
- Participants resolve their legal cases, typically through dismissed charges, reduced charges, shortened probation or a cleared record.

Additional Resources

To start a VTC in your area visit the Justice for Vets Website and contact your local Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) specialist.

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