

Veterans Court

Progress is being made in Hamilton County to help veterans in criminal trouble. Presently, select veterans are processed using the structure and judges of the recently established Mental Health Court. But several General Sessions judges are studying the establishment of the separate Veterans Court to help veterans receive a second chance.

A Veterans Court diverts eligible veterans from the traditional criminal justice system and allows them to receive specialized support and rehabilitation under court supervision. The Veterans Administration and/or other private counseling organizations provide tailored counseling and treatment to the veteran.

A unique component of the Veterans Court is the use of mentors. Mentors are concerned veterans, and select civilians, who volunteer to provide encouragement and assistance to a veteran involved in the criminal justice system. (Veterans involved in the Mental Health Court receive mentors too.)

Please support the formation of the Veterans Court and consider being a mentor. For further information, contact Colonel Chris Dooley, USAF (retired), at ruffian19@gmail.com or 702-701-2858.

The following was obtained from <http://www.justiceforvets.org> for informational purposes. Justice for Vets is sponsored by the Department of Justice and offers certified training for mentors.

What is a Veterans Court?

Most veterans are strengthened by their military service, but the combat experience has unfortunately left a growing number of veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury. One in five veterans has symptoms of a mental health disorder or cognitive impairment. One in six veterans who served in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom suffer from a substance abuse issue. Research continues to draw a link between substance abuse and combat-related mental illness. Left untreated, mental health disorders common among veterans can directly lead to involvement in the criminal justice system.

The Veterans Court model requires regular court appearances (a bi-weekly minimum in the early phases of the program), as well as mandatory attendance at treatment sessions and frequent and random testing for substance use (drug and/or alcohol). Veterans respond favorably to this structured environment given their past experiences in the Armed Forces. However, a few will struggle and it is exactly those veterans who need a Veterans Court program the most. Without this structure, these veterans will reoffend and remain in the criminal justice system. The Veterans Court is able to ensure they meet their obligations to themselves, the court, and their community.



Why a Veterans-only Docket?

A Better Understanding: Veterans Courts allow jurisdictions to serve a large segment of the justice-involved veteran population as opposed to business as usual – having all veterans appear before random judges who may or may not have an understanding of their unique problems. Because a Veterans Court judge handles numerous veterans' cases and is supported by a strong, interdisciplinary team, he or she is in a much better position to exercise discretion and effectively respond than a judge who only occasionally hears a case involving a veteran defendant. A Veterans Court judge better understands the issues that a veteran may be struggling with, such as substance addiction, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Traumatic Brain Injury, and military sexual trauma. A Veterans Court judge is also more familiar with the Veterans Health Administration, Veterans Benefit Administration, State Department of

Veterans Affairs, Veterans Service Organizations, and volunteer Veteran Mentors and how they all can assist veteran defendants.

Camaraderie Among Those Who Served: Veterans Courts are tapping into the unique aspects of military and veteran culture and using it to the benefit of the veteran. Through these unique courts, those who served in our nation's Armed Forces are allowed to participate in the treatment court process with their fellow veterans, re-instilling a sense of camaraderie that they felt while in the military. The Veterans Court is the military unit: the judge becomes the Commanding Officer, the Veteran Mentors become fire team leaders, the court team becomes the company staff, and the veteran defendants become the troops. For those who have spent any time in traditional criminal courts, a visit to a Veterans Court is somewhat of a revelation. Veteran defendants are standing before the judge at parade rest, saying "Yes, ma'am/sir" or "No, ma'am/sir," and there is interaction with and support from their fellow veterans.



One-Stop Shop: In addition, Veterans Courts act as a "one-stop shop," linking veterans with the programs, benefits and services they have earned. For example, the Veterans Health Administration's Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist, or VJO, is present during the court docket with a laptop computer able to access confidential medical records, make treatment appointments, and communicate this information to the court. The Veterans Benefit Administration may provide a representative to ensure that veterans receive disability compensation, and education and training benefits. Veterans Service Organizations and State Departments of Veterans Affairs assist veterans with additional local and state resources, while volunteer Veteran Mentors provide morale and motivational support. These team members are not employed by the criminal justice system and are present at the courthouse at the discretion of the judge. Consolidating justice-involved veterans onto a single docket permits these individuals to actively support those in need of their help.