

Veterans Treatment Courts Give Veterans a Second Chance

Veterans struggling with substance abuse problems who find themselves on the wrong side of the law have an alternative to incarceration

Jun 19, 2024

Approximately 3.3 million veterans have served since Sept. 11, 2001, and nearly half of them had deployments to combat zones. Not surprisingly, veterans with combat experience are more likely to have had traumatic experiences.

According to a PEW Research study in 2018, seven out of 10 of these veterans knew someone who had been injured or killed and nearly 45 percent believe that they had suffered PTSD from that exposure. In some cases, the related stresses faced by those veterans led to abuse of drugs and alcohol, as well as emotional behaviors that unfortunately brought them into contact with the criminal justice system.

Since 2008, criminal justice organizations have recognized the value of treatment programs for certain veterans.

Known as Veterans Treatment Courts (VTCs), now operating in more than 600 jurisdictions in the United States, these diversion programs are designed to give veterans an alternative to incarceration and the second chance the VTCs believe they have earned.

Research has demonstrated that an individualized approach is highly effective when resolving the criminal justice issues of veterans who are suffering from mental health, substance use disorder, homelessness and other problems.

With the active support of the VA, a VTC aims to return productive law-abiding veterans to their communities, reduce illegal behavior and improve public safety by leveraging the military culture of duty and honor that was ingrained in veterans during their service.

MENTORS ACT AS ADVOCATES

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

Helping guide veterans through VTCs are volunteer mentors. According to those involved in the VTC mission, mentors play an important role.

“Mentors are an essential part of our veterans treatment program,” Fairfax County General District Court Judge Susan Friedlander Earman said. “Our mentors, who also served, build a supportive relationship with participants to increase the likelihood that they will remain in treatment, attain and manage sobriety, maintain law-abiding behavior and successfully readjust to civilian life.”

Mentors have an opportunity to become a valuable and effective resource for veterans in a VTC, also known as “mentees,” seeking a better future. The mentor acts as a confidential coach, role model and advocate who provides support for the mentee during the treatment program.

This includes listening to the concerns of the mentee, making general suggestions and acting as a sounding board for the veteran, especially when the veteran may feel isolated, depressed or overwhelmed by his or her situation.

Most important, the mentor is not a therapist, counselor, treatment provider or legal advisor.

The mentor is there to simply be the mentee’s supporter inside and outside of the courtroom and available in person or via text, phone or email.

There also is a potential added benefit. In addition to a customized, often VA-funded treatment plan established for the veteran to address their various medical and psychological needs, a veteran in the program might have his or her criminal charges dismissed or reduced upon successful completion of treatment plan requirements.

Mentors also report that they receive a lot of satisfaction from helping fellow veterans succeed. Many say they get to observe an “incredible transformation” when a veteran receives comprehensive and personalized care. They say these veterans are more confident and determined as they build new lives.

Mentors themselves often find fellowship with each other as they share common goals and a desire to give back.

If you would like to find out more about volunteering at VTCs in your community, you can easily search for one in your state or county to get more information.

This article is featured in the 2024 June/July issue of VFW magazine, and was written by Don Sutherland. Sutherland is a Life member of VFW Post 8469, Fairfax Station, Virginia. He serves as the volunteer mentor coordinator for the Fairfax County, Virginia, Veterans

Treatment Docket, coordinating the activities of 42 veteran volunteer mentors. He can be reached at FCVTDMentor@gmail.com.