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For Immediate Release

Media contacts below

Veterans Treatment Court Celebrates Ten Years of Success

Court Addresses Mental Health Issues Affecting Veterans in San Diego

Celebrating and building upon 10 years of success, the Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) takes probationers who are Veterans or active-duty service members with criminal convictions and unique mental health conditions stemming from their military service and places them on a separate and specialized track of treatment rather than incarceration.

Since the program began in February 2011, 141 Veterans have successfully completed the program with some graduates becoming mentors in the program and now helping fellow Veterans follow their lead. The 10-year milestone will be commemorated with a virtual celebration on Tuesday, Feb. 23 at 1:30 p.m. with highlights of stories from program graduates and their mentors ([link to ceremony](#)).

The criminal court considers treatment rather than incarceration when sentencing a defendant who has served in the military and shows symptoms of one or more of the following: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Military Sexual Trauma (MST), Depression, Anxiety Disorder, or other mental health conditions. VTC participants take part in a three-phase treatment program that lasts a minimum of 15 months and up to 60 months. Each phase consists of a set of requirements, including treatment specific to the individual's needs and a project giving back to the community. Upon successful completion of VTC, fees can be waived, felonies can be commuted, and the judge may expunge charges completely.

“San Diego County is home to the nation’s largest number of Veterans returning from wars and has the second-largest population of Veterans in the state of California with many of these heroes suffering from wartime injuries and mental health struggles that lead them to feel isolated and end up homeless.” said District Attorney Summer Stephan. “Veterans Treatment Court is a great example of a fair and responsible criminal justice reform that holds offenders accountable by addressing the root causes of the criminal behavior in a treatment model focused on the particular challenges faced by returning Veterans such as PTSD and successfully interrupting the revolving door to prison.”

On average, the rehabilitative process takes nearly two years and continues even after the judicial process is over. Along the way, each Veteran is assigned a mentor, provided an individualized treatment plan, and carefully monitored by the County Probation Department, Superior Court, and Veterans Administration.

“The past 10 years of the Veterans Treatment Court have demonstrated that through the coordinated work of several agencies together with dedicated mentors, military service members who may have otherwise fallen by the wayside are instead supported through their struggles and redeemed in the eyes of the law, their community and their families,” said San Diego Superior Court Presiding Judge Lorna

Alksne. “Each participant’s VTC journey requires difficult work, honest introspection and a willingness to find the strength to meet treatment goals – this is no small feat, but the reward is immeasurable when a graduate completes their last VTC hearing and we can all share in that pride.”

“Veterans Court has been a major collaborative effort between the courts, district attorney, public defender, and probation department,” said Denise Huffhines, San Diego County Probation Department Deputy Chief, Adult Reintegration and Community Supervision Services. “In the past 10 years, Veterans Court has helped quite a few individuals in San Diego County get the help they need while still meeting the requirements of their probation period. The counseling and support these Veterans receive as part of Veterans Court helps to lower crime, reduce recidivism, rebuild lives, and ultimately helps them to complete their probation period as part of sentencing.”

Veterans Treatment Court is a collaborative effort between the Superior Court, District Attorney's Office, San Diego City Attorney's Office, San Diego County Probation Department, the Defense Bar, including the Public Defender, the San Diego Vet Center, the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Veterans Village of San Diego as well as all of the Veteran mentors who volunteer their time to guide participants through the program.

“Since its inception, Veterans Treatment Court has been an incredible, indeed lifesaving, asset to our community’s Veterans, who, because of military service-connected trauma, have found themselves involved in the criminal justice system. For the past 10 years, eligible clients have been provided much needed therapeutic treatment in lieu of lengthy incarceration. This rigorous recovery milieu includes treatment, mentorship by Veterans, and accountability to the court,” said Angela Bartosik, Chief Deputy Public Defender for San Diego County. “Each graduate has been provided support for PTSD, substance abuse, physical trauma, and other health issues through program partnerships with the Veterans Administration and local non-profits which specialize in care for former service members. This program has truly been a miracle in action, returning countless Veterans to productive citizenship.”

“Treatment provides the best opportunity for Veterans struggling to overcome mental health and substance use disorders to regain control of their lives,” said Akilah Templeton, president and CEO, Veterans Village of San Diego. “Treatment is both compassionate and effective. With the help of programs like the Veterans Treatment Court, the Veteran is made whole again and the entire community is better off.”

“The San Diego VA Healthcare System is honored to have been a part of this successful endeavor since its inception,” said Dr. Robert M. Smith, director, VA San Diego Healthcare System. “Veterans Treatment Court has assisted Veterans with reclaiming their lives, and continues to provide high quality treatment options for justice-involved Veterans. With the Court, we would like to recognize the tireless efforts of the Veteran mentors as they walk side-by-side with participants along their treatment journey.”

Veterans often have difficulty readjusting to civilian life after deployment. They cope with injuries and psychological problems, which can lead to substance abuse or issues with the law. Those who are accepted into the program are monitored with regular court hearings and supported by Veterans Affairs and other community-based organizations. Participants are rewarded for successes and can be dropped from the program for non-compliance with the rules.

Participants must plead guilty but are diverted away from costly incarceration and into programs that will give them the tools to treat mental health issues and become productive citizens. There are about 1.7 million Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans, and according to a 2009 RAND study, about one in five of them have mental health issues from their time at war. San Diego County is home to the largest population of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans in the nation, and second only to Los Angeles for overall Veteran population.

Veterans Treatment Court began in February 2011 and meets weekly. San Diego Superior Court Judge Laura J. Birkmeyer presides over Veterans Treatment Court and cases are handled on behalf of the District Attorney’s Office by Deputy District Attorney Harrison Kennedy and on behalf of the City Attorney’s Office by Michael Ficken. The Office of the Public Defender is represented by Solomon Rouston.

Veterans Treatment Court is one of the several collaborative courts that advocate for the best solutions to protect public safety while transitioning offenders back into the community, with appropriate treatment and supervision to reduce the likelihood of recidivism. Additional collaborative court programs include Behavioral Health Court, Drug Court, Reentry Court, Veterans Treatment Court, Homeless Court, and Veterans Stand Down.

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