

**Department of Pennsylvania
Veterans of Foreign Wars**

The Veterans Court Program

2024-2025



WHAT IS A VETERAN’S COURT:

A Veterans Court is a Special Court that handles cases of Veterans who’ve committed minor or certain felony offenses due to service-related mental or psychological disorders such as PTSD, Addiction, or Traumatic Brain Injury.

The Court is a Hybrid Drug and Mental Health or Wellness Court that’s designed for Veterans and promotes Sobriety, Recovery, and Stability. It’s done through a coordinated response that involves cooperation and collaboration with the Court System as well as the Department of Veterans Affairs, Volunteer Veteran Mentors, and Veterans and Veterans' Family Support Organizations.

The Court aims to address the underlying issues that affect Veterans and provide them with Treatment, Rehabilitation, and Education rather than Jail or Prison time. A Veterans Court also offers Veterans the support and structure of their Peers and Mentors.

The first Veterans Court was established in 2008 in Buffalo, New York.

Today there are 25 counties in Pennsylvania that have a Veterans Court.

WHY A VETERAN'S COURT PROGRAM:

Approximately more than half of the 2.6 Million Veterans Deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan have returned with mental health conditions related to their Service. One in six struggle with Addiction, and one in five suffer from PTSD or Major Depression.

Over 320,000 Veterans from these conflicts suffer from a traumatic brain injury. Many seek to self-medicate with alcohol and substance abuse, often leading them down a destructive path.

Currently, there are nearly 700,000 Veterans are in the Criminal Justice System with many incarcerated for crimes related to their injuries and conditions. While Veterans should and must be held to the same standards regarding Civil Law, a Veterans Court is a Veteran-Only option designed to provide them the help they need, stop the cycle of Law Enforcement Intervention, and improve not only their lives but the lives of their Families and Loved Ones.

HOW A VETERANS COURT WORKS:

Following an arrest if the offender is identified as a Veteran, they can be screened for VA Healthcare Eligibility. Suitability for the Program is determined thru a series of screenings to include factoring in public safety. Legal Counsel will explain the Program including the stringent requirements involved and advises the Veteran in the decision-making process to enter the Program or not.

Participants in the Veterans Court Program that will interact with the Veteran include but are not limited to the Court System (Judge, Probation/Parole, District Attorney, the Public Defender's Office or Defense Legal Counsel), the Department of Veterans Affairs, Social Services, and Volunteer Mentors.

Judges in Most Civilian Courts handle a wide range of infractions and Civilians on a daily basis. The Veteran's Court is a Veterans Only Docket that allows the Judge to specialize and build on their knowledge of the Military and Veteran Issues to make more objective decisions.

During Court Sessions a representative from the VA is often present and linked for access to confidential medical records. They can make Treatment Appointments as well as communicate important information to the Court. Probation/Parole is also present to validate the Participant is meeting required appointments and other mandated directives.

While a Veterans Court often allows the Veteran to remain in their Community while undergoing treatment, the Judge will regularly check on their progress. If the Veteran fails to meet the requirements of the program such as failure of a drug screening test or disobeys a Court Order or Requirement of the Program the Judge may impose Sanctions. These Sanctions include Community Service, Fines, Jail Time, or even Transfer out of the Program back to a traditional Criminal Court or to serve out their Sentence.

The Veteran is responsible for full payment of restitution to any victims of their crimes (the details and amount of which if any is owed are negotiated up front and included in the Veterans Treatment Court Contract). Participants are also responsible for all court costs, fines and fees and may be responsible for the cost of all treatment sessions and drug testing.

The Judge is often a Motivator who provides encouragement in helping the Veteran go thru the Program.

A Program typically consists of 3 Phases usually consisting of Six Months each.

Phase I. Initial Entry. This Phase includes mandatory Court appearances on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, usually a weekly or even daily drug testing, community service, counseling, and mandated appointments. Often considered the most stressful and potentially overwhelming Phase. Designed to start the concept of Teamwork and utilization of the tools provided to make smart independent decisions and avoid the pitfalls that got them into their situation.

Phase II. If the Judge determines the Participant is ready to move on then Phase II gradually allows for more independence and freedom. Drug tests may be random or bi-weekly, Court appearances may now be bi-weekly or monthly. Requirements vary from Court to Court.

Phase III. Usually entered after a year in the Program. Requirements continue to be lifted in preparation for graduation.

The Judge may move the Participant back to Phase II or I at anytime if he or she determines the Participant is regressing.

After Graduation the Judge in coordination with the District Attorney may reduce the original charges.

The intent of the Program is to enable the Veteran to return to the Community and their Loved Ones and Family as a Proud and Contributing member to Society. As one Judge stated “The Most Important Day of the Rest of Your Life is not Graduation, but the Day After”. He meant that after Graduation nobody would be looking over the Veteran’s shoulder to make sure they made appointments or avoided destructive decisions. The Program provides the Veteran with the Tools they need to make responsible decisions on their own and where to reach for help.

The Judge is the Final Authority on Determining if a Participant Graduates from the Program.

WHO IS ELIGIBLE FOR ENTRANCE INTO A VETERAN’S COURT PROGRAM

US Military Veterans of Any Service or Period of Service are Eligible.

Participants have included Veterans from World War II, the Korean War, Vietnam, Desert Storm, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Cold War.

A Veteran’s Participation and Entry into the Program is Voluntary.

VETERAN COURT MENTORS

Veteran Court Mentors are Veteran Volunteers who serve as a Participant's supporter, guide, and confidant.

They attend the Court Sessions with the Participant and help them resolve their issues and also meet with them outside of Court.

Confidentiality of conversations between the Mentor and Participant is paramount. However the Mentor is obligated to report any concerns of safety to the Mentor Coordinator or if deemed an emergency, report immediately to proper authority.

VFW DEPARTMENT OF PENNSYLVANIA VETERANS COURT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

- Expand the Mentor Program
- Increase Awareness of the Veteran Court Program
- Expand the Veteran Court Program (Thru County Memorandums of Agreement or Add Programs)

VETERAN COURT PROGRAMS BY VFW DISTRICT AND COUNTY

VFW District 1 – Philadelphia
VFW District 7 – Delaware
VFW District 9 – Chester, Lancaster
VFW District 10 – Lackawanna
VFW District 12 – Northumberland
VFW District 13 – Berks
VFW District 15 – Clinton, Lycoming
VFW District 16 – Montgomery
VFW District 18 – Dauphin, Lebanon
VFW District 20 – Carbon
VFW District 21 – York
VFW District 23 – Fayette
VFW District 24 – Washington
VFW District 25 – Beaver, Butler
VFW District 26 – Armstrong, Cambria, Indiana
VFW District 27 – Westmoreland
VFW District 28 – Erie, Mercer
VFW District 29 – Allegheny

A Total of 18 VFW Districts represent 25 Counties.

VFW DISTRICTS WITH A VETERAN TRACKING COURT

VFW District 11 – Luzerne (Adult Drug)
VFW District 25 – Lawrence (Adult Drug)

VFW DISTRICTS WITH NO VETERANS COURT IN THEIR COUNTIES.

VFW Districts 8, 11, 14, 17, 19, 22, and 30.



**If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact Jeff Puckett
VFW Department Chair of the Veterans Court Program
Email: jeffpuckett153@yahoo.com**



