

THE FIELD REPORT

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TREATMENT COURTS SUCCESSFUL
AND GROWING ACROSS WISCONSIN

UNIQUE COURT PROGRAM AIMS TO BETTER VETERANS' LIVES

Since 2008, 16 court-connected programs covering 33 counties have been developed in Wisconsin, with a majority of Wisconsin's 72 counties adopting some type of designated court system for Veterans.

Applause filled the Milwaukee County Courthouse as the judge commended the defendant in the case. The raw emotions on the faces of those in the courtroom are evidence of the long journey that had just reached its climax.

The military Veteran sitting alongside a Veterans Justice Outreach Coordinator just found out that they had successfully graduated from a unique program aimed at bettering their lives.

Since 2008, 16 court-connected programs covering 33 counties have been developed in Wisconsin, with a majority of Wisconsin's 72 counties adopting some type of designated system for Veterans. The court program is designed to provide resources and opportunities

for military Veterans who commit criminal acts and may be suffering from addiction or mental illness. Upon successful completion of a court-ordered rehabilitation program, charges could be lowered or completely dropped.

"It's a rewarding place to be," Milwaukee County Veterans Justice Outreach Coordinator Michelle Watts said. "To see (the Veterans) when they come in; some are literally broken and sometimes helpless. But to see them change and to see that transformation, I don't know how to explain it. You see the change right in front of your eyes."

The court program is used to help diagnose Veterans using VA care and get them proper treatment. Services offered include assistance

[Treatment Courts Successful And Growing Across Wisconsin](#)

Photo credit: Ninth Judicial Circuit Court of Florida

for substance abuse disorders, mental health, and housing.

One of the initiatives offered, for example, is compensated work therapy. In that therapy program, VJOs such as Watts meet with a Veteran who may struggle with gaining employment and direct them to resources needed to get back on track.

“If you can help the Veteran connect with those services at the early point, it may prevent an arrest, becoming incarcerated and getting a criminal history,” Dane County VJO Edward Zapala said.

A 2016 study at the VA Palo Alto Health Care System found that 80 percent of Veterans who used the program had at least one mental health diagnosis and 80 percent had at least one substance use disorder. Fifty-nine percent of Veterans had depression and another 40 percent had post-traumatic stress disorder.

Zapala serves much of southwestern Wisconsin, including Dane County. He’s seen Veteran Treatment Courts grow throughout the state since he started as a VJO in 2009. He said that as the program has expanded, it’s been fine-tuned to have a better success rate.

“We’ve seen some pretty amazing, positive changes that Veterans have made,” Zapala said. “Some of the Veterans we’ve worked with have had chronic problems, so working with treatment courts provides an extra level of accountability.”

According to 2011-12 data from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, about 8 percent of all inmates in state and federal prisons served in the military. The idea of Veteran Treatment Courts is to get Veterans in the justice system assistance they may need to get better, and coordinators such as Watts and Zapala serve as social workers, to an extent.

“We’ve been pretty successful with getting Veterans to complete the program,” Watts said. “The goal is to reduce incarceration and increase the treatment that’s needed ... it allows

the Veteran to reintegrate back into society.”

The Veteran Treatment Courts aren’t mandated by the state of Wisconsin or the federal government. Instead, it’s individual counties that decide to offer rehabilitative resources to help Veterans. But the difficulty of dedicating those resources comes down to more than just funding.

Despite having one of the highest Veteran populations in the state, Waukesha County is one of the few counties in Wisconsin not to start a

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Veteran Treatment Court.

Another part of the VJO’s duty is to work with law enforcement officers to perform crisis intervention training, which helps them when responding to calls in the field. The goal of the training is to offer insight into how to appropriately deal with someone who may be suffering from past traumatic experiences.

“We’ve had a lot of positive feedback,” Watts said of her interactions with law enforcement.

Zapala said that one of the essential parts of ensuring Veterans programs run smoothly and offer positive results is collaboration between everyone involved.

“The key is partnership, state, federal and every level, working together improves things,” he said.

The WDVA’s Chief Legal Counsel

Chad Koplien has been in contact with VJOs around the state and other mentor programs. He’s used those opportunities to identify key assets VJOs need to further help Veterans. Among them is transportation to and from appointments or to court hearings, as some hardships on Veterans in the program make those aspects difficult.

Therefore, there’s a reliance on volunteers assisting with transportation and other resources, such as being mentors for those in the program.

“Mentors play a key role in Vets courts,” Zapala said, adding that they serve as pro-social peers. “We often have a need for them, especially identifying younger and female Veterans. In being a mentor, another Veteran really has a chance to put into action, Leave no Veteran behind.”

But while there’s a feeling of accomplishment for all involved whenever a Veteran completes the program, it’s only the beginning. Some Veterans don’t complete the program or end up relapsing on substances. For Watts, encouraging and offering motivation to her clients through their rehabilitation is vital.

“We just don’t give up on them and we continue,” she said. “I’ve had some that ask, ‘Why didn’t you give up on me?’ Can you imagine someone asking that?”

“Sometimes when I see them, it almost gives me goosebumps because I know where they were. I always try to just remind them that they are a Veteran and they’re a person as well. I just continue to try to focus on their strengths, which is always easy.”

Koplien met with the Board of Veterans Affairs and the Council on Veterans Programs. In return, those bodies are reaching out to their constituents to see how they can assist the program.

“The Warrior Ethos is to never leave a fallen comrade,” Koplien said. “Your help can truly make a difference saving a Veteran’s life and making a difference in the world.”