

BUFFALO VETERANS TREATMENT COURT Program Mentor Guide

INTRODUCTION

Presiding Judge Robert T Russell

For the past 13 years, whether as presiding Judge of Buffalo's Drug Treatment Court or in Mental Health Treatment Court, it became apparent that veterans faced a number of challenges in addressing their combat related trauma. Approximately 1.6 million American troops have served in Afghanistan (operation enduring freedom) and/or in Iraq (operation Iraqi freedom). Noteworthy are national reports regarding the frequency of these returning veterans with diseases of Mental Illness and/or Substance Addictions. War related illnesses may contribute to escalated suicide attempts, arrest, incarceration, divorce, domestic violence, homelessness and despair. Rather than be reactionary to the anticipated increase of veterans appearing in our criminal courts, we in Buffalo decided to take a pro-active approach, whereby the court embarked on a plan to develop a specialized treatment court to meet the particularized needs of our veterans. After a year of planning, we established in Buffalo, New York, the first Veterans' Treatment Court in the United States, which began operating on January 15, 2008. The planning process included designing how the court would operate, exploring and obtaining the support needed, and engaging in extensive collaboration with the Veteran's Health Care Network, community health care providers, veterans service organizations, community based agencies and volunteer veteran mentors. A number of community seminars were also conducted acquainting our partners on the trauma of war, associated behavioral health diseases and the resulting side effects thereof.

Veterans Treatment Court seeks to divert eligible veteran-defendants with substance dependency and/or mental illness that are charged with typically felony or misdemeanor non-violent criminal offenses, to a specialized criminal court docket. The court substitutes a treatment problem solving model for traditional court processing. Veterans are identified through evidence based screening and assessments. The veterans voluntarily participate in a judicially supervised treatment plan that a team of court staff, veteran health care professionals, veteran peer mentors, AOD health care professionals and mental health professionals develop with the veteran. At regular status hearings treatment plans and other conditions are periodically reviewed for appropriateness, incentives are offered to reward adherence to court conditions, and sanctions for non-adherence are handed down. Completion of their program is defined according to specific criteria. Many will have their charges dismissed upon successful completions and others are assured of a non-incarcerative sentence upon completion.

Many Veterans are known to have a warrior's mentality and often do not address their treatment needs for physical and psychological health care. Often those who are referred to the Veterans' Treatment Court are homeless, helpless, in despair, suffering from alcohol or drug addiction, and others have serious mental illnesses. Their lives have been spiraling out of control. Without the collaboration of the VA Health Care Network, Western New York Veterans Project, the Veterans' Treatment Court, volunteer veteran mentors and a coalition of community health care providers, many would continue to have their illnesses untreated and would suffer the

consequences of the traditional criminal justice system of jail or prison. This Collaboration of unique partners affords the opportunity for these veterans to regain stability in their lives, to have their families strengthened, to have housing for the homeless, and to have employment for the employable. The treatment court team will find them, offer them assistance, assess their needs, manage their care and help them solve their problems.

Also, assisting the court is a team of twenty volunteer veteran mentors. The pool of veteran mentors includes those who have served in Vietnam, Desert Shield, Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. While in court, a mentor will be assigned to meet with a veteran participant, discuss any ongoing problems or issues of interest. They work to problem solve existing issues and bring to the attention of the court any issues that the court can assist in resolving. This relationship promotes and fosters through encouragement a “can do” attitude in the veteran, that the veteran can accomplish their goals in treatment, that the veterans are not alone and that the mentors are there for them. Before and since the court operation, the volunteer veteran mentors have not wavered in their commitment, time, or dedication, despite the fact they are not monetarily compensated for their time or expertise. Faithfully they are present, ready to serve at every Veteran’s Treatment Court session - without reservation. I am appreciative and proud of their commitment and eagerness to serve.

In conclusion, it is my hope that other jurisdictions will critically examine how they can better serve the veterans that are seen in our criminal court system. As my Project Director Hank Pirowski would say, “It’s the right thing to do”.

MENTOR PROCEDURES

An essential part of the Buffalo Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) Program is the addition of volunteer mentors as part of the support team that encourages, guides and motivates participants to enter and complete timely and appropriate treatment for physical, psychological and substance abuse conditions stemming from their military service.

We believe volunteer mentors will be a valuable addition to the Buffalo Veterans Treatment Court Program and have added positions for Mentor Program coordinator and Three team Leaders . We anticipate that trained and committed volunteer mentors who develop active and supportive relationships with the VTC participants will increase the likelihood that the veterans will remain in treatment. Longer treatment tenure has been shown to improve participants’ chances for a full and complete recovery that will restore them to health, reduce recidivism, and increase community safety.

Veteran Mentor Role Description

The role of the VTC Veteran Mentor is to act as a coach, guide, role model, advocate, and a support person for the individual veteran participant with whom he/she is working. Mentors understand the roles of other support team members and “fill the gap” to help keep the participant moving successfully toward completing the VTC program.

Additionally, the mentor will be a primary resource and referral provider to the participant by helping connect him/her with benefits, assistance and support services that are community based. The mentor will be a “Resource” to the veteran . Access to these support services will help reduce the participant’s stress that can be caused by distractions like housing or family needs, VA benefits, educational assistance, civil legal services, New York State Veterans Benefits and the like.

The mentorship relationship is intended to encourage, guide, and support the veteran as he/she progresses through the court supervised treatment program. One of the most important skills the mentor will bring to the program is his/her ability to be a good *listener*. A very important role is for the mentor to listen to the concerns of the veteran and help that person access their needs. Mentors should avoid lecturing the participants by imposing their own values/beliefs, but should work to understand the mentee’s own values/beliefs and encourage the mentee to solve their own problems before they become destructive to their treatment program or probation compliance.

The mentor must be ready to offer suggestions and general guidance to the participants for any concerns they may have as they progress through the program, but it is not the mentor’s job to solve the problem for the participant or ACT AS A COUNSELOR. Rather, the mentor can help the participant identify resources that might be helpful and encourage the participant to do the “footwork” to get the help they need to solve their own life’s challenges.

The mentor must be available and ready to support the veteran when he/she may feel alone, frustrated or anxious in a way that only another veteran can appreciate and understand. In doing this, the mentor should maintain close contact with the VTC Mentor Coordinator and their team leader and keep him/her informed of significant issues the mentee may have that could derail his/her treatment program success.

Finally, the mentor should be protective of sensitive information given to him/her by the veteran or the VTC Mentor Coordinator or Team Leader, and not reveal any information except as may be required by the court unless in a situation where safety of the participant or another human being may be at risk. In those critical situations, the mentor must make emergency contacts to prevent harm.

All mentors shall be screened and approved by the VTC Coordinator and will be expected to assist the VTC Mentor Coordinator and Mentor Team Leaders to cooperate fully with other members of the VTC Collaborative team and the participant’s treatment provider.

VTC Mentor Eligibility Requirements

In order to participate as a mentor in the VTC program, you must:

- A. Be a veteran¹ or active duty member of one of the branches of the United

¹ Veterans who have a dishonorable or bad conduct discharge are not normally eligible, but those with exceptional success stories are welcome to apply.

States Military, including Navy, Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, or the corresponding reserve branches of the aforementioned services and members of the National Guard.

- B.** Agree to follow and abide by all policies and procedures of the Buffalo Veterans Treatment Court and its Mentoring program
- C.** Commit to the VTC Mentoring Program for a minimum period of one year.
- D.** Complete the Mentor orientation program and any additional training that may be required by the program
- E.** Not be currently on probation for the conviction of any crime (felony or misdemeanor). Have no felony or misdemeanor convictions within the past three years and be able to pass a security background check.
- F.** Complete and file the application form with the VTC Mentor Coordinator and complete the screening process.
- G.** Understand and support the Mentee VTC participant's requirements, treatment plan and goals, and terms and conditions of probation and assist the Mentee in complying to make progress and achieve success.
- H.** Understand the psychological war wounds from which the Mentee suffers and the manner in which such will present challenges to the Mentee's path to success. Be able and willing to be a guiding influence toward recovery.

VTC Mentors Duties and Responsibilities

1. VTC Veteran Mentors shall have the following duties and responsibilities:

- A.** Attend all scheduled court sessions of their veteran participant unless excused by the VTC Coordinator.
- B.** Participate in and lead mentoring sessions with their assigned veteran, as required by the VTC Mentor Coordinator and team Leader.
- C.** Be supportive of the veteran's treatment progress and steer him/her towards program compliance and success.
- D.** To the extent possible, the mentor should assist the veteran to identify ways to resolve personal and family problems that may interfere with success in the court process or treatment program. The mentor should be knowledgeable and prepared to offer available community based resources, but coordinate them with the Mentor Coordinator and their Team leader . Team leader will then coordinate with the

Court Coordinator to avoid interference with other aspects of the VTC Program, specifically the Counseling sessions conducted at the VA Hospital

E. Be supportive of other mentors in the program.

F. Be honest with the Mentee, VTC team members, and the Court at all times.

G. Mentors shall take immediate action to encourage the participant to contact suicide resources, including dialing 911 yourself, if there are any indications of suicidal thoughts, attempts or plans on part of the participant. Mentors should keep current resource phone numbers on your person at all times and ensure they are updated by frequent contact with the VTC Mentor Coordinator and their team leader. The VTC Mentor Coordinator or Team Leader shall notify the Court Coordinator and participant's treatment provider team representative immediately if the mentor has any concerns that the mentee may be suicidal

2. The VTC Team Leader Responsibility:

- A. Will distribute cases at each court session to the mentors and abide by all duties and responsibilities of a mentor as listed above
- B. Will act as the go between the mentor and the Court Coordinator .Team leader will inform Court Coordinator of issues the mentor feels He should be aware of.
- C. Will work closely with Mentor Coordinator to ensure an orderly process during the court session
- D. Will assume role of Mentor Coordinator in his absence.

3. The VTC Mentor Coordinator shall have the following duties and responsibilities:

- A. Assume the major responsibility for recruiting qualified veteran mentors.
- B. Be responsible for coordinating the mentor orientation program and any specialized training required.
- C. Be responsible for matching and recommending particular mentors for each eligible veteran participant in the Veterans Treatment Court program.
- D. Provide all mentors with current contact information for suicide prevention resources, keep them updated, and provide frequent contacts with mentors to ensure they understand the importance of using these resources in appropriate situations.
- F. Attend all court sessions and Carry out any other duties assigned by the VTC Court Coordinator or the judge.

G. Appoint Team Leaders

How to apply to become a Mentor in the BUFFALO Veterans Treatment Court Program

Contact VTC Mentor Co-coordinator occonnorj@erie.gov 716-858-7345 to receive an application.