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Veterans Treatment Court Continues To Serve Veterans and Accept New Applicants

CLEARWATER – Veterans charged with certain crimes as a result of substance abuse or mental health issues are encouraged to take advantage of a special court designed exclusively for them.

It's called Veterans Treatment Court, or VTC, and it functions in both Pinellas and Pasco counties.

The aim of this special court is to help veterans deal with their current criminal charges and stop them from getting into further trouble. It also is designed to help with substance abuse or mental health issues that may have caused or contributed to their legal problems.

Only veterans charged with misdemeanors and certain felonies, such as drug-related charges, burglary, grand theft, and battery, may qualify. Those interested should fill out an application available at the Pinellas-Pasco State Attorney's Office.

Among the criteria considered by the state attorney's office are the victim's point of view, the veteran's criminal history and the veteran's service record.

The Veterans Treatment Court was established in the two counties with state funding provided in 2013, and served 96 veterans through mid-June.

Participating veterans are first evaluated. If appropriate, they are then treated for substance abuse, a mental illness, or both. Often, their families are brought in to help provide a support system.

Among the community partners providing services for the initiative are the Veterans Administration; WestCare, a national nonprofit organization that focuses on treating mental illness and drug addictions; and Solutions Behavioral Healthcare Consultants, which also provides drug treatment services. Catholic Charities is also involved and has a program where well-adjusted veterans act as mentors, helping troubled ex-soldiers adjust to civilian life. The Pinellas County Ex-Offender Re-Entry Coalition, which helps participating veterans secure employment, also participates.

And through its Veterans Law Institute, Stetson University College of Law provides free legal advice.

The average age of the clients served thus far is 43, but veterans as young as 25 and as old as 73 have been provided help. Roughly half were in stable living arrangements, with the remainder either homeless or staying in transition housing or in other people's homes.