

We Are Transforming Wellbeing for Veterans

In many ways veterans are the bedrock of society. Their courage, resilience, and honor place them among our communities' most valuable assets. However, the journey home for many veterans is not always a smooth one as they silently suffer from the trauma of war.

The statistics illustrating distress are quite sobering. According to Justice for Vets, a division of the National Association of Drug Court Professionals, 181,000 veterans are currently in U.S. jails or prisons. One in five veterans have symptoms of mental illness or cognitive impairment, and 81% of veterans have a substance abuse disorder prior to incarceration.

That is why starting January 1 of 2018, veterans treatment courts were mandated in every judicial circuit in Illinois, as a way to offer a second chance to those that often suffer the consequences of military service, including PTSD, traumatic brain injuries and substance abuse. The voluntary program allows honorably discharged veterans to plead guilty to a crime in exchange for an intensive probation sentence that includes frequent court visits, mental health counseling, or substance abuse treatment. Upon completion, they can have their records expunged.

In our own backyard of McLean County, veterans residing in McLean, Livingston, Logan, Ford and Woodford counties can be identified as potential clients for the program during their intake process at county jails.

What makes this program so unique is the team supporting the veterans, including The Center for Youth and Family Solutions Veterans Court Case Manager, Nick Pate. "What strengthens this program is the common experiences we all have had in the military," stated Pate. Nick,

Nick enlisted in the U.S. Marines in 2003 and served until 2011 when he was honorably discharged and awarded a Purple Heart.

a former Marine who was awarded a Purple Heart while serving in Iraq. The team includes Judge Charles Feeney III, (who served as a U.S. Marine), public defenders, prosecutors, probation officers, police officers and Veterans Administration staff - almost all of whom are veterans. The team meets weekly to review progress of those enrolled, brainstorm ideas as to how to best support participants, and strategize how to keep them from further criminal behavior.

As a veteran, Nick finds clients trust him since he has firsthand experience with military life and the transition to civilian life.

And while the setting is the same as most courtrooms, the feeling one experiences in veterans court is one of positive affirmation, clear and transparent communication, and a feeling of hope. "In this program, we have two primary rules: be where you are supposed to be and on time, and be honest," said Judge Feeney.

"A lot of what we are doing is digging deeper to find root causes for the behaviors that got them in trouble," stated Pate. As Case Manager, Nick's role is primarily to insure participants are following their action plan, which for many includes drug and/or alcohol treatment, helping secure transportation to get to court, connecting them to mental health experts, and being their advocate throughout the entire process.

The McLean County program is new, but expected to deliver great success. According to the Chicago Tribune, two established programs in Illinois have seen great results. Out of the 200 Cook County veterans admitted between 2012 and 2015, 63% graduated from the program. In Will County, all but two of its 26 veterans that have entered the program since it started in 2012 have graduated.

While McLean County understands there will be highs and lows, one thing is for certain: the support team collectively agrees no one will be giving up on the veterans in the program.

Know a veteran who has become involved in the criminal justice system and could benefit from veterans court? For questions about eligibility or to learn more about the casework services we provide, contact Nick Pate at npate@cyfsolutions.org.

