

**SHELBY COUNTY, ALABAMA
VETERANS COURT PROGRAM
MENTOR GUIDE**

INTRODUCTION

In 2011, Shelby County was selected by the Alabama Administrative Office of Courts to serve as a pilot county for implementation of a Veterans Court pursuant to the recommendations of Alabama's Veterans Treatment Court Initiative Task Force, a multidisciplinary task force formed to explore the development of Veterans Courts across the state. Shelby County Circuit Judge Bill Bostick established the court, which provides judicial supervision of military veterans (many of whom served in Iraq or Afghanistan) facing criminal charges, with assistance from the Veterans Administration and volunteers from the local veteran community who serve as mentors to the participants.

In the spring of 2012, Judge Bostick and nine members of the Veterans Court team traveled to Buffalo, New York to study under Judge Robert Russell, who established the nation's first Veterans Court in 2008. Upon their return, the team began preparation to launch the court, and in November 2012, the Shelby County Veterans Court convened. According to Judge Bostick, "Our goal in establishing a Veterans Court was to ensure that veterans involved with the criminal justice system have access to the services and treatment they are eligible for by virtue of the service they rendered. Our hope was to build upon the success of our existing Drug Court and Mental Health Court, which have a proven track record of significantly reducing recidivism among, and improving the quality of life for, the participants."

Many American troops have served in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom) and/or 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, Veterans Court takes a proactive approach by meeting the particularized needs of the veteran.

Veterans Court seeks to divert eligible veteran defendants with substance dependency and/or mental illness who are charged with typically misdemeanor, and some felony, non-violent criminal offenses to a specialized criminal docket. The court substitutes a treatment problem solving model for the traditional court procedure. Veterans are identified through evidence based screenings and assessments. The veterans voluntarily participate in a judicially supervised treatment plan that a team of court staff, veterans health care professionals, veteran mentors 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 completion and others are assured of a sentence not involving jail upon completion.

Many Veterans are known to have a warrior's mentality and often do not address their treatment needs for physical or psychological health care. Often those who are referred to the Veterans' Treatment Court are homeless, in despair, suffering from alcohol or drug addiction, and others have serious mental illnesses. Their lives are spiraling out of control and this court is intended to give a veteran a chance to stay out of the criminal justice system of prison and jail. The collaboration of unique partners affords opportunities 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 offer them assistance, assess their needs, manage their care and help them solve their problems.

VOLUNTEER MENTORS

An essential part of the Veterans Court is the team of Volunteer Mentors, a group of veterans who have served in uniform on active duty in Vietnam, Desert Shield, Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. The Volunteer Mentors are part of the support team that encourage, guide and motivate participants to enter and complete timely and appropriate treatment for physical, psychological and substance abuse conditions stemming from their military service.

Led by the Mentor Program coordinator, trained and committed volunteer mentors develop active and supportive relationships with the participants. While in court, mentors are assigned to meet with participants and 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 all volunteers and 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.

THE PROPER ROLE OF THE MENTOR

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 is a primary resource and referral provider to the participant by helping him/her with benefits, assistance and support services that are community based. The mentors are a "Resource" to the veteran. Access to 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, Alabama 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 participant's own values/beliefs and encourage each participant 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 resolve 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 only another veteran can appreciate and understand. In doing this, the mentor should maintain close contact with the VTC Mentor Coordinator and the 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 may be a 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.

MENTOR ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS

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

- A. Be a veteran or former active duty member of one of the branches of the United States Military, including, Navy, Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, or corresponding reserve branches of the aforementioned services and members of the Reserve and National Guard.

- B. Agree to follow and abide by all policies and procedures of the Shelby County Veterans Treatment Court and its Mentoring Program.
- C. Commit to the VTC Mentoring Program for a minimum of one year.
- D. Complete the Mentoring 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 VTC participant's requirements, treatment plan and goals, and term and conditions of probation and assist each participant in complying to make progress and achieve success.
- H. Understand the psychological war wounds from which the participant suffers and the manner in which such will present challenges to the participant's path to success. Be able and willing to be a guiding influence toward recovery.

MENTOR 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 and coordinate with the Mentor Coordinator and their Team Leader. Team Leaders will then coordinate with Court Coordinator to avoid interference with other aspects of the VTC Program, specifically the Counseling sessions at the VA Hospital.

- E. Be supportive of other mentors in the program.
- F. Be honest with the participant, 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 is any indication of suicidal thoughts, attempts or plans on the part of the participant. Mentors should keep current resource numbers on your person at all times and ensure that 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 Responsibilities:

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

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

- A. Assume the major responsibilities for recruiting qualified veteran mentors.
- B. Be responsible for coordinating the mentor orientation program and any specialized required training.
- C. Be responsible for matching and recommending particular mentors for each eligible veteran participant in the Veteran's 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.

E. Attend all court sessions and carry out any other duties assigned by the VTC Court Coordinator or the Judge.

F. Appoint Team Leaders.

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

Contact VTC Mentor Resource Coordinator Daniel Williams at (205) 266-8353 or Mentor Coordinator Bryan Morgan (334) 590-1221 to receive an application.

Volunteer Veteran Mentor

Position Description

Main Function:

The role of the Volunteer Veteran's Mentor is to act as a coach, a guide, a role model, an advocate, and as support for the individuals he/she is working with. A mentor is intended to encourage, guide, and support the veteran participant as he/she progresses through the court process. This will include listening to the concerns of the participant and making general suggestions, assisting the participant in determining what their needs are and acting as support for the participant at a time when they feel alone in a way that only another veteran can understand.

Duties and Responsibilities:

- ❖ Attend at least one out of every four monthly court sessions which occur on Thursdays at 1:00 p.m. - court begins at 2:00 p.m. in Courtroom 5.
- ❖ Participate in and lead mentoring sessions with veterans who have come into contact with the criminal justice system.
- ❖ Be supportive and understanding of the difficulties veterans face.
- ❖ Assist the veterans as much as possible to resolve their concerns around the court procedures as well as interactions with the Veteran's Administration system.
- ❖ Be supportive and helpful to the other mentors within the program.

Requirements:

- ❖ Be a veteran or active duty member of one of the branches of the United States Military, including, Navy, Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, Coast Guard, or corresponding reserve branches of the aforementioned services and members of the Reserve or National Guard. You must have an Honorable Discharge and provide a copy of DD214 or NGB22 stating such.
- ❖ Adhere to all the Shelby County Veteran's Treatment Court policies and procedures.
- ❖ Commit to participation for a minimum of one year.
- ❖ Participate in additional training throughout time of service.
- ❖ Go through our Vetting process (police background check)

Desirable Qualities:

- ❖ Willing listener
- ❖ Encouraging and supportive
- ❖ Tolerant and respectful of individual differences.

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