

SITUATION REPORT: THE INGHAM COUNTY VETERANS TREATMENT COURT



By
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*“There are people who come home from war and want to talk about the pain, but no one wants to listen; there are others who want to keep silent and repress the memories, and all their family and friends want is to talk about it. I call this the war veteran reintegration paradox.” ~ M.B. Dallochio, *The Desert Warrior*¹*

In February 2015, I wrote an article titled “No Veteran Left Behind.” It was based on my

understanding of the benefits that the Matt Brundage Memorial Ingham County Veterans Treatment Court (ICVTC) offered participants, following an in-depth discussion with 54-B District Court Judge Richard D. Ball and then-Chief Probation Officer Kevin Tatroe. At the time, I was an outsider looking in.

My experience has come full circle because I now serve as a mentor at the ICVTC. Every ICVTC participant can empathize, not merely sympathize, with Dallochio’s definition.

The following is a description of my experience as a mentor and the current situation at the ICVTC – a “situation report,” in military parlance. I could not be prouder to be an integral part of the treatment-based and problem-solving approach that the ICVTC uses in lieu of the traditional court process. I will use the five-paragraph operations order format that is undoubtedly recognizable to any service member who graduated basic training.

Mission

The mission of the Veterans Mentoring Program (VMP) is to ensure that every participating Veteran receives the services they require by helping navigate the system and acting as a mentor, advocate and ally. Mentors must submit to a criminal background check, provide a DD Form 214,² as well as sign and honor a confidentiality agreement. We, the mentors, also participate in

various trainings throughout the year.

Each participant is assigned a volunteer mentor. Generally, the mentor served in the same branch as the assigned Veteran. If possible, the mentor served in the same war. That is the true with my current mentee. We appear together for monthly reviews before Judge Ball.

The VMP has three primary goals. First, we help our fellow Veterans receive the services they need to reach their full potential as productive members of society. Second, we help our fellow Veterans navigate the court system, treatment system and the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) system. Finally, we assess our fellow Veterans’ needs and help them adjust back to civilian life.

It has been said that one’s problems learn to swim when you try to drown them in alcohol. The ICVTC started out as a mental health court. But many participants charged with crimes may also suffer from substance dependency. A recent study of the 461 Veterans Treatment Courts that currently exist nationally revealed that Veterans who completed the program, as opposed to those who dropped out of the program, did have consistently lower recidivism rates than traditional court participants across multiple time periods.³ This study highlights the importance of further developing and supporting substance abuse treatment, vocational training and wrap-around services among this most deserving population.



Execution

Coach, guide, advocate or role model are all appropriate descriptors for my role as a Veteran mentor. Doubtless, I have handled countless alleged probation violations as a criminal defense litigator. However, that is not one of my duties in my role

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as a mentor. Instead, there is a different criminal defense attorney whose foremost responsibility as a member of the Treatment Team is to litigate alleged violations. I most certainly stay in my lane and enjoy donning my “counselor at law” hat.

In addition to attending court sessions, I help my mentee resolve concerns around the court procedures. Fortunately, I have some experience navigating the VA system. As such, I am uniquely qualified to and have lent assistance in that area of operation. Judge Ball has not yet pinned the rose on me to organize and conduct training for the Veteran mentors, but I would gladly accept those marching orders and execute them with extreme zeal.

Most Veterans Treatment Court programs are comprised of four phases that typically take approximately a year-and-a half to complete.

1. Phase I is the orientation and compliance phase. It is designed to help participants understand all aspects of the program, ensure the highest level of function and success, and comply with the treatment plan.
2. Phase II is the stabilization phase. Here, the Treatment Team’s main focus is addressing essential needs like housing, health, clothing and recovery services.
3. Phase III is aimed at community reintegration. This is usually when the issues that brought the participant in contact with the Veterans Treatment Court are most vigorously addressed. Based on the participant’s progress, required appearances at Veterans Treatment Court review hearings may be reduced.
4. Phase IV is the maintenance, growth and development one. It is heavily focused on the participant continuing the structure and discipline that was developed in earlier phases and developing self-sufficiency. At this point, the participant has successfully adhered

to the psychiatric treatment requirement, including medication compliance, developed a functional support system and avoided renewed involvement with the criminal justice system.

I remember brimming with pride when I stood next to my mentee as he was recommended for promotion to Phase II of the program. Such promotion was based entirely on merit. It was earned through the consistent and concerted efforts of the entire Treatment Team. But nobody deserves more credit than my mentee. His family has benefited from the counseling that he attended on a frequent basis during Phase I. My mentee has made personal strides that are easily discernible to me. He has renewed vigor to further his education, be the best father he can be and maintain his sobriety. I can only imagine how grateful his wife is for the new and improved version of her husband.



It has not been difficult at all for me to be supportive of my mentee. I celebrate his achievements just like he does mine. He knows that I am always a text or phone call away ... especially when he is feeling isolated. We can talk about nothing or anything. I know that we will remain close long after he is successfully discharged from the ICVTC.

Service And Support

A VA representative attends every ICVTC session. This member of the Treatment Team answers questions and helps secure benefits. Judge Ball and Chief Probation

Officer Amy Iseler strongly encourage any Veteran who would like to speak with a live representative to stop by an ICVTC session. Notably, assistance will be provided irrespective of participation in the Treatment Court.

The mentor relationship is one of the principal ways in which the ICVTC differs from traditional probation. Further, ICVTC participants enjoy more judicial interaction than traditional probationers, which I can now confirm increases accountability and has a deterrent effect on future offenses and probation violations.

Only one Veteran who served in the Coast Guard has entered the ICVTC and she was discharged following successful completion of all its rigors. She was one of the four women who have participated in the program since its inception. The Army remains the most widely represented branch.

Currently, there are 33 Veteran mentors, a number that is down from a peak of 60. The VMP would like to swell its ranks. Therefore, potential mentors are strongly encouraged to apply.

Command

Judge Ball still presides over the ICVTC and Iseler is the current second-in-command. Together, this “high speed, low drag”⁴ duo runs a tight yet compassionate and effective ship. Indeed, they have accepted the mission and are breathing life into President Lincoln’s charge to the nation, “to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan.”

To Judge Ball and Iseler, I say “HOOAH!”⁵

(ICVTC photo credits: [Friends of Ingham County Veterans Treatment Court website.](#))

¹ The Desert Warrior is an extraordinary memoir of trauma recovery and resilience, while providing a fascinating look at one soldier’s return from the early, grisly years of the Iraq war.

² The DD Form 214, Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty, is a document of the United States Department of Defense, issued upon a military service member’s retirement, separation or discharge from active duty in the Armed Forces of the United States.

³ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5776060/>

⁴ Army-ism used to describe something that is on the ball, effective or works well.

⁵ Since WWII, this battle cry has been used widely throughout the US Army and gained a general meaning of anything and everything except “no.” It is comparable to Oorah in the United States Marine Corps, and Hooyah in the United States Navy.