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NO VETERAN LEFT BEHIND

Matt Brundage Memorial Ingham County Veterans' Treatment Court

I. First Muster

President Lincoln's charge to the nation "to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan" would ultimately become the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) motto.

The VA serves the needs of veterans by providing healthcare, disability-compensation and rehabilitation, education assistance, home loans, burial in a national cemetery, as well as other benefits and services.

Judge Robert T. Russell Jr., Associate Judge for Buffalo City Court and Acting Erie County Court Judge, recognized that America's veterans were returning from three wars to find new battles to fight at home.

In January of 2008, he created and began presiding over our nation's first "Veterans' Treatment Court."

The Matt Brundage Memorial Ingham County Veterans' Treatment Court (ICVTC) is one of our nation's courts inspired by and adopted from Judge Russell's efforts. Hence, the sentiment underlying President Lincoln's enduring statement is manifest within the legal community.

Veterans' courts use a treatment-based and problem-solving approach in lieu of the traditional court process. Participants charged with crimes may also suffer from substance dependency or mental illness.

II. Current Leadership

A majority of the roughly thirty to forty veterans Judge Richard D. Ball sees every fourth Monday of the month entered the ICVTC during now-retired Judge David Jordon's tenure as its presiding judge.

Judge Jordon never enlisted; however, his father was a 'lifer,' meaning,

his father was a retiree in military parlance. It is a little-known fact that the ICVTC started as a mental health court. It morphed into a Veterans' Court thanks to Judge Jordon's efforts.

His dedication to veterans can probably be attributed to the impact that his father's long service had on him.

Come January 2013, Judge Ball started serving in his current capacity. He developed a strong rapport with the veterans at each session. He does not trumpet his 19 years of service in the Army National Guard, but his experience on the bench and service make him a great successor to Judge Jordon.

Judge Ball went from "green to gold;" he rose through the enlisted ranks then sought and obtained a direct commission. The judge was a Major before he was honorably discharged in 1990. Although he never deployed, Judge Ball's time in The Guard helps him relate to ICVTC participants.

Judge Ball moved on to speak of the seismic shift in our nation's attitude regarding our Armed Forces. Poignant anecdotes about the blatant "disrespect" coming out of Vietnam were contrasted with a stirring description of the multi-branch Color Guard that presents at every Michigan State University home game.

The Color Guard is responsible for rendering appropriate military honors. The traditional formation adds dignity to military-related and civic events by showing respect to our Nation and those who have served.

III. Future Operations

A new Memorandum of Agreement was in the works when this interview was conducted. It was the result of newly adopted legislation that contained three provisions.

One provision would formally incorporate the ten key principles of Judge Russel l's court into the ICVTC's charter. The other two clarify the judge's and participants' responsibilities to each other.

Judge Ball seeks uniformity with other courts. The ICVTC has accepted transfers of cases that are in different stages of prosecution. In some cases, the plea was entered in the transferring court. In others, the transferring court's goal was mere supervision of the case by the ICVTC.

Judge Ball explained how the lack of uniformity could raise jurisdictional issues down the road. Ideally, he would like to see all specialty courts assert jurisdiction in the same way and at the same time.

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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. THE PAIR APPEARS TOGETHER FOR MONTHLY REVIEWS BEFORE JUDGE BALL.

IV. After Action Review

Judge Ball spoke of the many graduates. One veteran had seven DUI convictions when he entered the ICVTC. He had also been diagnosed with cancer. Indeed, he had “gone through the ringer.”

At graduation, the veteran gave Judge Ball an Alcoholics Anonymous challenge coin in exchange for his Treatment Court coin. He was progressing well, able to articulate what was good about what was done and expressed his appreciation.

Unfortunately, there have been people who were simply not ready for help. They comprise a minority of the participants though.

Judge Ball concluded his comments by reiterating the fact that most participants are grateful.

Change of Command

In November 2011, Chief Probation Officer Kevin Tatroe inherited files from Matthew Brundage, whose leadership led to the success of the ICVTC.

Over 150 files have been through the ICVTC since its inception. 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. The pair appears together for the monthly reviews before Judge Ball.

There are currently about 90 mentors in the ICVTC. Nearly every branch of the Uniformed Services is represented. The ICVTC has yet to treat a veteran who served in the Coast Guard.

The Army is the most largely represented branch. Women comprise only 10% of the Chief’s caseload.

V. Treatment Team

A VA representative attends every ICVTC session. This member of the Treatment Team answers questions and helps secure benefits. Judge Ball and Chief Tatroe strongly encourage any veteran who would like to speak with a live representative to stop by an ICVTC session. Assistance will be provided irrespective of participation in the Treatment Court.

The Chief pointed out several ways in which the Treatment Court differs from traditional probation. The mentor relationship is a primary benefit.

A lot of mentors continue to nurture the relationships with their mentees

well beyond discharge. Several participants have no idea that they are eligible for certain benefits until they speak with the VA representative.

Additionally, ICVTC participants enjoy more judicial interaction than traditional probationers, which increases accountability and has a deterrent effect on future offenses and probation violations.

VI. Arsenal

Recidivism has not been formally tracked. The Treatment Court acquired the Michigan District Court Case Management Information System (DCCMIS), a software program developed by the State Court Administrative Office to facilitate daily operations of drug courts. Further, DCCMIS collects data for subsequent analysis and evaluation.

Chief Tatroe opined that his formal education as an attorney helps him perform the administrative tasks that are incumbent on him. Judge Ball supplemented that response and pointed out that the Chief’s educational background gives him a great appreciation of consequences, “legal requirements, procedures, loopholes, and barriers.”

Chief Tatroe’s commitment to the success of the Treatment Court was obvious the instant we began to converse. Still, he did not define success until we were almost done: “Treatment, resources, help where we can help so that the veteran is never in this position again.”

VII. Victory

Like Judge Ball, Chief Tatroe shared success stories. He reminisced about a veteran whose treatment needs required “extensive” resources.

Soberlink four times daily was the least onerous term of that veteran’s treatment plan. Ultimately, the veteran reestablished relationships with his parents and girlfriend. Now he is a father and holds a good job.

VIII. Conclusion

Veterans’ Treatment Courts link veterans with the programs, benefits, and services they have earned. It comes as no surprise that these specialty courts are becoming ubiquitous.

ICVTC participants are poised for continued success. My conversation with Judge Ball and his second-in-command, Chief Tatroe, left me with no doubt in my mind that they will provide their troops with the sense of purpose, direction and motivation that is characteristic of all great leaders. □

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