

LEAVE NO VETERAN BEHIND

Written by: Bexar County VTC Staff Members
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"San Antonio, "Military City USA," is home to one of the largest veteran-populations in the United States."

"VTC, ATTEN-HUT!"

It's hard to believe that this historical method commonly used to call military members to attention is now being used by the Bexar County Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) to start their bi-monthly docket-calls. Presiding Judge Wayne Christian served for 30 years in Airborne and Special Operations assignments in the active and reserve U.S. Army, retiring at the rank of Colonel. He has presided over the VTC for eight years. In addition to Judge Christian, the VTC staff is made up of group talented and diverse individuals that ensure Bexar County VTC is setting standard for VTC's nationwide. Mr. Joshua Childers, Air Force Veteran serves as the VTC Director. Mr. Childers brings his servant-leadership style, knowledge of mental health and substance use issues, and his knowledge of military culture to ensure Veterans receive the best outcomes while enrolled in the VTC program. Mr. Ronald Mora serves as the VTC Court Manager. Mr. Mora brings 20 years of probation experience to the staff that ensures all veterans are in good standing and compliant with court requirements. Mr. Vincent Petrucci rounds out the staff as the VTC Case Manager. Mr. Petrucci, an Army Veteran, serves as the gatekeeper to the VTC and ensures veterans have access to community programs while in the VTC including housing assistance, employment opportunities, and other needed services.

VTC HISTORY AND MISSION

The Bexar County Veterans Treatment Court was created by the Bexar County Commissioners in coordination with the Criminal District Attorney's Office in September 2010. It is unique among specialty courts in that in addition to being founded on the premise of rehabilitation instead of incarceration, VTC's are the only courts in Texas specifically authorized to offer veterans Pre-Trial Diversion, ensuring a successful probationer receives no conviction for his or her crime. San Antonio, "Military City USA"; is home to one of the largest veteran-populations in the United States. Many veterans of the Global War on Terror suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Traumatic Brain Injury, substance abuse and depression. They may find themselves alone in the Criminal Justice System, in need of assistance to recover from or cope with their addictions and to obtain employment and housing. Instead of going to jail, these men and women participate in counseling, therapy and rehabilitation at the Veterans Administration where they get the help they need to manage past traumas, conform their behavior to societal norms, and find direction in their lives.



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"I was on a path to kill myself or someone else. Everybody fails. I failed. But it's how you overcome that failure that counts."

Bexar County Veterans Treatment Court currently has 75 active veteran-participants and the VTC will graduate its 500th veteran participant by May of this year. VTC participants report their status in front of the judge at two docket-calls per month, while they are in the program. Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine veterans from the Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, Desert Storm, Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts are called to attention, recite the Pledge of Allegiance and begin and end the docket by shouting in unison, "Leave No Veteran Behind, Sir!"

The veteran participant must comply with both treatment and court conditions over the period of a year in order to complete the four phases of the Court's program. There are both incentives and sanctions, and with each phase completed the veteran achieves an increased amount of autonomy and independence. When the veteran reaches phase four, he/she still takes part in court-mandated treatment, but is no longer required by the Court to appear in front of the Judge for monthly docket calls. Throughout each VTC docket, the Judge addresses each veteran by his or her military rank and the veteran then moves swiftly before the bench, often shouting, "Moving, Sir!" Once standing at Parade Rest in front of the Judge, the veteran, surrounded by the VTC Team, hears their program progress announced to the Court. When queried by the Court, the Probation Officer reported of one veteran, "This veteran is off to a strong start. Very strong! She does everything I ask her to do. She is an outstanding veteran. She is absolutely compliant."

After asking the veteran if there is anything else the court can help her with, the Judge concludes, "All right. Keep up the good work! Go get'em!" The room resounds with applause from observers and other veterans waiting their turn as she returns to her seat.

Some veterans face greater challenges and may not be doing as well on their probation, yet the team approaches each with a similar positive attitude. The Probation Officer may report, "We've had a rough start with this veteran, but I know he will get it together;" or he may remind the veteran of the importance of returning phone calls in order to schedule appointments and track progress.

Often, a veteran will be asked by the Judge to make an impromptu address to the courtroom, sharing a personal experience from their rehabilitation in order to encourage the others to follow through with their treatment. One participant stated, "I was on a path to kill myself or someone else. Everybody fails. I failed. But it's how you overcome that failure that counts."

Another participant, a female combat veteran who had recently spent 120 days at an in-patient facility for alcohol rehabilitation, confidently advised the courtroom that her in-patient program had been extremely helpful and had assisted her in providing insight into her own addiction. "The team at the rehabilitation facility helped me recognize that I definitely have an alcohol-dependency problem," she said.

VTC SAVING LIVES

Once accepted into the VTC program, a veteran defendant, depending upon his or her individual type of struggle, is required to participate in counseling and classes instead of jail. These programs may include a Certified DWI Education Course and a Victim Impact Panel, where the veteran may see, in graphic detail, pictures of the tragic effects caused by drunk driving. The goal is awareness and prevention, as the impact panel helps the veteran empathize with victims of DWI-caused accidents. Dr. Kelly explained that the Bexar County VTC is all about saving lives and restoring our veterans to a place of mental and physical health and well-being. "We have to remember that these veterans, at some point in their life, wrote a blank check payable to the United States of America for an amount up to and including their lives;" she said. "They are our brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, fathers, mothers, and neighbors. They live in our community and, for the most part, will be among us for the rest of their lives. We owe it to our to help them become productive citizens."

The problems are real: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Traumatic Brain Injuries and depression motivating combat veterans to self-medicate with alcohol and drug addiction, resulting in criminal violations, family violence, divorce and suicide. Even though the courtroom is relatively quiet, it is filled with an intense feeling of camaraderie, clearly resembling that of a military unit. While each veteran receives only a few minutes with the Judge due to the large size of the docket, many hours of dialogue and preparation by the VTC Team have occurred before the veteran's appearance. The simple experience of being in the same room with others who are undergoing a similar plight appears to be a moving, reassuring and even nostalgic experience to these men and women. Some simply need time and a second chance. Others need more intensive interventions. All share the goal of reintegrating into society in the most productive way possible.

VTC IS A SUCCESS STORY

Since its inception, the VTC has a proven track record of success. Its graduates have recidivism rates substantially lower than conventional courts. The VTC saves taxpayers money by not only negating the high cost of jail overpopulation, but additionally by creating a population of rehabilitated offenders who exhibit much lower risks of re-offending, thereby avoiding entirely the cost of re-arrest, prosecution and incarceration for future crimes.

The Veterans Treatment Court is one avenue to success for those justice-involved veterans who have honorably served our country in time of war, but now need our support for their transition back to being a law-abiding member of our society. The VTC coin, presented to each veteran upon their graduation from the program, says it best: "Courage, Honor, Justice."

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"We owe it to our veterans to help them become productive citizens"

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