

Lancaster County Veterans Court History

The nation's first Veterans Court was established in 2008 in Buffalo, New York, and has been used as a model for the establishment of other courts across the country. Lancaster County implemented their Veterans Court in January 2012 as a means of addressing the needs of veterans who have come in contact with the criminal justice system and are struggling with addiction, mental illness or co-occurring disorders as a result of their service.

As with other Problem-Solving courts, Veterans Court accomplishes the goals of reduced jail time and recidivism as well as rehabilitation of the offender by providing resources to link participants to employment, housing, treatment, social and other support services. Oversight of the daily operations and supervision of participants is provided by the Veterans Court team, which is led by the Veterans Court Judge and composed of members from the District Attorney's and Public Defender's offices, a drug and alcohol treatment provider, Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist from the Veterans Administration, Veterans Court Coordinator, Probation Officer, and clinician from the Veterans Center. This team oversees the daily operations and supervision of Drug Court participants.

Unique to this Problem-Solving Court is the Veterans Mentor Program. In this program, a trained Veteran Mentor is paired with a veteran participant to provide support as he/she navigates through the court and treatment. The Mentor is present as an ally and friend, to assist the veteran through this difficult time. Our belief is that the shared experiences of another veteran will be critical in assisting the participant in regaining control of his/her life and successfully connecting to and maintaining treatment, which in turn will lead to successful completion of the Veterans Court program.

As with other problem-solving courts, the Veterans Court participants must complete an intensive program that includes supervision/probation appointments, regular drug testing, judicial review hearings, community service or other pro-social activities, and any additional services needed such as drug and alcohol treatment or support with job placement. The four-phase program requires a commitment of at least one year, but typically two, from the participant. The intense nature of the program is designed to assist participants with reintegrating into their community using individualized support, while addressing criminal charges. In 2013, Veterans Court celebrated the graduation of its first participant.

The Lancaster County Court of Common Pleas Veterans Court sessions are open to the public at 1:30 p.m. Thursdays in Courtroom 5. An account has been established through the Veterans Court Community Partnership to accept donations. These donations are used directly to enhance the Veterans Court program operations. Members of the Veterans Court team welcome the opportunity to speak to community groups and organizations.