

# Veterans Find Supportive Community in Time of Need



**PennState**  
Harrisburg

School of Public Affairs

## Criminal Justice

### The Role of Mentoring in Veterans' Court

**Summary:** This brief outlines how mentors serve justice-involved veterans and provide support as they navigate the court system and treatment process.

#### Veterans' Court

##### Dauphin County's Program

Veterans' Court is one of several types of problem-solving courts, which are diversion programs that provide a community-based option for individuals facing jail or prison time after becoming involved with the criminal justice system. The first problem-solving court, the Miami-Dade, Florida, drug court sought to reduce the number of individuals with substance abuse problems returning to the corrections system by treating their underlying cause of offending. Veterans' Courts build on the prior success of such problem-solving courts, but they focus on the common experience of participants – military service.

The Dauphin County, Pennsylvania, program began in 2012. To date it has served more than 80 justice-involved veterans.

Participants in this diversion program are supervised in the community through work-

release rather than in the local jail or state prison. This pre-plea program suspends their sentence while they participate in the program and receive needed substance abuse and mental health treatment services. Participant progress in the program is monitored through frequent "hearings" with the Veterans' Court judge and their probation officer. Participants also complete 150 community service hours.

Like other problem-solving courts, the Veterans' Court Team is comprehensive, with additional representatives providing support and monitoring. The key stakeholders involved include:

- Judge
- District Attorney
- Defense attorneys
- Probation officers
- Substance abuse counselors
- Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) representative
- Court case manager
- Head veteran mentor

The veteran mentor is unique to the Veterans' Court model of problem-solving court and is the focus

#### Veteran Mentors

##### Who is a mentor?

At their most general level, mentoring programs pair a more experienced person with someone in need of guidance in a particular area. In Veterans' Court, the role of mentor has additional qualities.

Potential mentors include persons who:

- Served in the U.S. military
- Seek to encourage Veterans' Court participants through frequent contact
- Can commit to two one-on-one meetings and one group meeting per week
- Will stay in frequent contact with veterans' court participants

In between court hearings, mentors provide support to veteran participants.

## Mentoring Process

### Mentor-Mentee Relationship

Mentor-mentee relationships vary across different contexts as they serve a variety of purposes depending on the court. Within the Dauphin County Veterans' Court, the mentor-mentee relationship is primarily one of adviser to the veteran participant and the court.

### Mentors Advising Participants

Mentors are paired with one specific Veterans' Court participant. Upon availability, the court tries to connect mentors-mentees from the same branch of service and same gender. This increases the similarities between the pair. Shared experiences in the military environment can help mentors and mentees form a common bond and build trust.

Mentors cannot work with their mentees to navigate the criminal justice system, nor can they offer legal advice. They can provide a sympathetic ear.

By reminding them of their status as a veteran, mentors reinforce the "no one left behind" ethos essential to the military culture. The brother- and sisterhoods formed with mentors mimic those established during basic training, officer candidate school, and military missions, all of which carry over into Veterans' Court.

While mentees feel supported by the mentor-mentee relationship, others feel that perhaps it is an excessive burden or forced connection.

### Key findings:

- There is a shortage of mentors.

- Mentors cannot provide legal advice.
- Mentors provide a reminder of participants veteran identity.
- Mentees have mixed feelings about their relationship with their mentor.

### Mentors Advising the Court

Mentors wear many hats as they interact with their mentees, but their most important role is that of sage sounding board. They provide social support during a very difficult and challenging time when the mentee is trying to rebuild his/her life, comply with court-ordered directives, and assess how best to move forward in the wake of criminal charges.

### Key findings:

- Mentors must find balance between mentee and court obligations.
- Mentors support the veteran socially as they complete treatment, an essential component of the court program.
- The court and mentors at times disagree on what role mentors should play.

## Conclusion

There is a need to understand their roles and obligations of mentors to the court and participants. The military culture may provide a theoretical foundation for why mentors are a key component of Veterans' Courts. However, additional research is necessary to understand its influence over participant outcomes.

## Methodology

Semi-structured interviews, with standard questions and opportunity for participant input, were conducted with 15 veterans' treatment court mentors and 15 veterans' treatment court participants. The interviews each lasted about 60 minutes. Axial coding was employed to determine common themes across study participants. To supplement this information, 12 mentor-mentee pre-court meetings and veterans' treatment court sessions were observed to gather process data on the context of the Dauphin County program. This provided a context for our research findings.

This project is an extension of an ongoing process and outcome evaluation of two problem-solving courts in the Harrisburg Capital region.

We thank Michael Posteraro for assisting with data collection.

### Contact:

Anne S. Douds, Ph.D.  
Email: [asd12@psu.edu](mailto:asd12@psu.edu)

Eileen M. Ahlin, Ph.D.  
Email: [ema105@psu.edu](mailto:ema105@psu.edu)

### Sponsor:

School of Public Affairs in partnership with Penn State Justice and Safety Institute



**PennState**  
**Harrisburg**

777 West Harrisburg Pike  
Middletown, PA 17057  
[harrisburg.psu.edu](http://harrisburg.psu.edu)

Penn State is an equal opportunity, affirmative action employer, and is committed to providing employment opportunities to all qualified applicants without regard to race, color, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, disability or protected veteran status. U.Ed. HBO 18-64