



Wisconsin Court System

Court Programs for Wisconsin Veterans

The Wisconsin court system recognizes that veterans in the criminal justice system face unique issues. Developing strategies that will be effective with this population requires commitment, understanding, creativity and a willingness to build partnerships. Courts across Wisconsin are piloting programs designed to provide better, more effective solutions for veterans in the criminal justice system.

Connecting Veterans with Services

The courts have an important role to play in helping to connect veterans in crisis with information on services to which they are entitled. When a veteran needs housing support, mental health services, treatment for addiction, job training or other help, the court may work with one or more local experts, including:

County Veterans Services Officers

In every county in Wisconsin, a County Veterans Services Officer (CVSO) is assigned to help connect veterans with available services. There are also Tribal Veterans Services Officers. In January 2009, the Wisconsin Supreme Court's Planning and Policy Advisory Committee (PPAC) began a concerted effort to help connect the state's circuit court judges with their local County and Tribal Veterans Services Officers to ensure that veterans who find themselves in court are connected with important resources. The Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs' directory of CVSOs is available at dva.state.wi.us/cvso_list.pdf.

Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has asked that each VA medical center designate a Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist. These specialists are responsible for helping veterans with case management and serving as liaisons with local justice system partners. In Wisconsin, Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists are available at the VA medical centers in Madison, Milwaukee and Tomah. A directory of these officers is available at www1.va.gov/HOMELESS/VJO_Contacts.asp.

Leave No One Behind: Veterans in the Criminal Justice System

The Office of the State Public Defender and the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs began the work that led to this initiative in 2008. They received a federal grant to bring Judge Robert Russell - who started the nation's first veterans treatment court in Buffalo, N.Y. - to Wisconsin to tell his story. A short time later, a delegation from Wisconsin visited Judge Russell's court in New York.

The *Leave No One Behind* conference, the first-ever statewide conference on veterans in the criminal justice system, soon followed in June 2009. The Wisconsin court system joined the State Public Defender, Department of Corrections, Department of Justice, Veterans Administration and the Department of Veterans Affairs in co-sponsoring the conference, which brought together judges, prosecutors, public defenders,



Among the participants in the Leave No One Behind conference were judges, veterans service providers, prosecutors, state public defenders and others from across the state.

treatment providers and County Veterans Services Officers from across Wisconsin. Participants developed plans for building specialty court programs in the state. More than 100 people at sites in Madison, Milwaukee and Tomah participated.

The Rock County Veterans Treatment Court Program

In September 2009, Wisconsin opened its first veterans treatment court program. The program operates in Rock County under the direction of Judge James P. Daley, a Marine brigadier general and decorated Vietnam veteran who has served on the Rock County Circuit Court for 21 years. The court serves veterans who are charged with crimes and who have mental health issues. Each participant is matched with a mentor of similar military background. Prior to participating, each mentor completes a training program. The court has now expanded to accept cases diverted from nearby counties.



Rock County Circuit Court Judge James P. Daley congratulates Casey Johnson of Beloit, Wisconsin's first Veterans Treatment Court graduate.

Photo courtesy of the Janesville Gazette



Judge Patrick J. Madden

The Iron County Veterans Court

In April 2010, Wisconsin opened its second veterans treatment court program. The Iron County Veterans Court operates under the direction of Judge Patrick J. Madden, who has served on the bench for 25 years. The court serves veterans who are arrested for crimes related to drugs and alcohol. Each veteran in the program is assigned a mentor; the mentor program is managed by County Veterans Services Officer Charles E. Splonskowski.

The La Crosse County Veterans Court Initiative

In August 2009, a multi-disciplinary team of 20 professionals in La Crosse began developing a program to address the needs of veterans in the criminal justice system. The **first step** was a pilot program through the La Crosse Police Department to identify veterans at the earliest possible moment in the criminal justice process. Early identification means that the veteran can be connected, through the County Veterans Services Officer, with available services as quickly as possible.

The **second step**, in January 2010, was the swearing-in of a group of trained mentors who will work with veterans in the criminal justice system. The role of the mentor is to encourage the veteran to address any potential emotional and mental health issues.



Judge Todd W. Bjerke swears in mentors at the activation ceremony for the new La Crosse County Veterans Court in November 2010.

The **third step**, in November 2010, was the official opening of a veterans court program (Wisconsin's third), on Veterans Day in La Crosse. Presiding is Judge Todd W. Bjerke, a colonel in the U.S. Army Reserve who was first elected to the bench in La Crosse in 2007.

Chippewa Valley Veterans Treatment Court

In January 2011, the Chippewa Valley Veterans Treatment Court will open in Eau Claire. The court will serve Chippewa, Dunn and Eau Claire counties, and will focus on addressing alcohol, drug and mental health issues associated with criminal behavior within the military veteran population. Chief Judge Benjamin D. Proctor - who was honored as the State Bar Judge of the Year in 2009, in part for his work with veterans - will preside in this court.



Chief Judge Benjamin D. Proctor

Milwaukee Veterans Program

In Milwaukee County, the Wisconsin State Public Defender's Office, the Milwaukee County District Attorney's Office and the Veterans Administration have developed a multi-faceted program to serve veterans involved in the criminal justice system.

Veterans are identified during the jail booking process and connected with the State Public Defender and the VA. Both organizations screen these veterans to determine eligibility for services. Beginning soon, veterans will also be screened for eligibility for diversion and deferred prosecution programs, which offer an opportunity to have a charge dismissed if the offender abides by a certain set of conditions. The Veterans Justice Outreach Worker (VJO) monitors each offender's progress. This year, Milwaukee plans to hire a full-time VJO who will work in the county jail.

The Milwaukee program also matches veterans with mentors through a non-profit veterans services group called Dryhootch. Mentors (who are also veterans) meet with the veteran between court appearances and report to the court on the veteran's progress.

Waupaca County Veterans Assistance Program

In Waupaca County, defense attorneys, prosecutors and judges working with treatment providers at the Wisconsin Veterans Home at King have established a legal assistance program for veterans. The program works with law enforcement to emphasize early identification of veterans. Those identified are referred to the Veterans Assistance Program for assessment. In appropriate cases, deferred prosecution agreements are sought to give the veteran a chance to obtain needed services. Legal assistance is provided pro bono through local attorneys. Contacts: Atty. Tom Maroney, (715) 258-5990, thomasmaroney@att.net; Steve House, Veterans Assistance Program, (715) 256-1118, steve.house@dva.state.wi.us.

Wisconsin Veterans Intervention Program

The Wisconsin Veterans Intervention Program (WI-VIP) is an initiative of the State Public Defender's Office. The program encourages creation of veterans court programs in Wisconsin and supports them once they are established. WI-VIP also works with the Department of Corrections to identify veterans currently in an institution or on probation/parole in order to ensure that each veteran is connected with available services. Contact: Peter Anderson, liaison for WI-VIP in the Wisconsin's State Public Defender's Office, (608) 267-0581.

Legal Services for Veterans

There are programs to help Wisconsin veterans and active-duty servicemembers who need legal advice. The Marquette University Law School Program, SAVLAW (Servicemembers and Veterans Legal Assistance for Wisconsin) features a website on which servicemembers can post requests and lawyers can volunteer. See www.savlaw.org.

The American Bar Association Military Pro Bono Project connects active-duty military personnel to free legal assistance with civil (non-criminal) legal problems. Referrals are made only by military legal assistance (JAG) attorneys. See www.militaryprobono.org.

This overview will continually grow and change. We encourage those who have additions and updates to contact us at (608) 266-1298.