

Scott County Veterans Court

Location: Virtual Zoom Meeting

Date: November 12, 2020, 9:30 – 11:00 a.m.



FISH welcomed 41 attendees to the November 12 virtual meeting. FISH filled 35 needs in October with a value of \$21,146.

Derek Farwell, Scott County Veterans Service Officer, explained that Veterans Court surrounds veterans with the resources they need. Participants are very proud of what they've done so far.

Judge Chris Wilton stated that four and a half years ago Scott County started Drug Court which has been very successful, then two years ago the idea of a Veterans Court was suggested. There were 22 people initially. It's not cheap to run so a federal grant was written and the committee went to the Board of Commissioners to get approval for the grant, plus funding for a 20% match. The Commissioners were very supportive and Scott County received \$400,000 from the federal grant plus \$100,000 from the Commissioners.

Veterans Court is very different from regular court. Judge Wilton sees 45-50 people a day in regular court. Veterans make applications to get in and must have high risk and high need. The committee meets as a team for one hour before court to get detailed information on the veterans, then make recommendations on who to accept. The veterans are brought in as a group, there is a topic and they share what has gone well and not so well. By the time they graduate from the program there are things in place to help each to be successful. They have seen things in combat and some have nightmares so they turn to chemicals to survive. The team consists of mental health therapists, a prosecutor, a defense attorney, probation officer and judge. Participants go through phases.

Drug and Veterans Courts are the most studied in America. They are the most successful courts in the United States, with individualized care plans. Full-time probation officers are devoted to veterans and are on call 24/7. The team cares immensely about the program and veterans. Judge Wilton thanked FISH for helping people in the past and extended an invitation to watch veterans court in person. Certain crimes such as criminal sexual conduct, some violent crimes and murder cannot be handled in Veterans Court. The County Attorney's Office has the right of first refusal in deciding who participates. Veterans are amazing humans. One man was homeless, living in his car and got into a number of programs. He said the program saved his life but the veterans do the hard work. This man's son graduated from Drug Court.

Allen Andersen, a prosecutor with the Scott County Attorney's Office and a Marine Corps veteran, was the next speaker. He usually works with juveniles. He had personal experience with mental health and chemical dependency issues after serving as a Marine but had a good support system to help him. He was a law clerk for two years and had one year of experience as an attorney prior to helping start veterans court. This started out as an informal program and no one was paid. It is impactful to veterans to see everyone who wants to help vets. The informal program was already working with veterans when the County Board approved the \$400,000 federal grant and their 20% match. The Commissioners were on board and on the same page with prosecutors, defense attorneys and judges to help participants.

Jamie McNatt, Community Mental Health provider, previously worked in the Prior Lake-Savage School District and used FISH as a resource to help families. Jamie volunteered to be a mentor to veterans. Her father was a Viet Nam vet who was never the same when he came home and committed suicide when she was 15. If he would have had some help he might have had a different outcome. Jamie helps with the community aspect.

Some veterans aren't comfortable with VA services. Jamie has her own practice and her specialty is trauma. Combat veterans experience a level of trauma, grief and loss that actually changes their body chemistry. When they come out of the service there's no one telling them what to do. They can have personality changes and feel shame and trauma. Women have more ability to vocalize what they are feeling and there is more allowance for them in the military. Men in the military are not encouraged to vocalize emotions.

Kevin Wetherille is an attorney with Jaspers, Moriarty and Wetherille and a defense attorney for Veterans Court. He also does Child Protection work and has been practicing for 17 years. He has pulled away from criminal defense in recent years and got involved with Veterans Court a year ago. There is a tremendous cost savings by keeping people out of jail and the court system. Certain offenses are not eligible but applicants are screened for risk / need level, needed services and treatment. The team meets every other Monday to discuss applicants. Not everyone agrees. They invite applicants to see the court. They will get a disposition better than if not handled in Veterans Court if they complete the program and do the work. The shortest time to get through the phases is nine months. Margaret Neumann helps with VA resources. Obstacles include maintaining sobriety and staying on track and obtaining housing. No one on the team says, "It's not my job."

Covid has been a challenge for people in Drug Court. People are told not to isolate. Because of covid 15 or 17 people have relapsed and one died. There have been incidences of domestic assaults and alcohol-related DUI. They are working at having diversity in both Drug and Veterans Court. Participants see an implicit bias when coming to court – they see white, middle class employees, lawyers and judges. This is something to recognize.

Margaret Neuman is a Clinical Social Worker at the VA. She meets with Veterans Court applicants and does a diagnostic assessment and looks at mental and chemical health, housing, family situation, traumatic brain injury and medical concerns. The goal is to plug into a program that best fits needs and what treatment modalities best fit. Not everyone wants VA services. Margaret used to work with the homeless veteran population. If we can prevent them from getting a felony it's easier to get housing.

Allen mentioned that HF31, a criminal justice reform bill that would have standardized Veterans Court throughout the state, was voted down in the Minnesota Senate this past year.

Derek Farwell, Veterans Service Officer, got involved with the team two years ago. He serves as a mentor and coordinator. A mentor is a role model, coach and friend who provides positive encouragement. Veterans who want to help can serve as mentors. Eventually they would like graduates of the program to serve as mentors.

Mike Stansberry with Minnesota Adult and Teen Challenge said they have a short-term clinical program and are part of the VA Community Care Network. There has been a huge uptick in veterans entering their programs.

Veterans Court takes place on Mondays in Courtroom 6 in the Scott County Justice Center.

The FISH December 10 meeting will be Hope and Gratitude and Bethany asked virtual participants to wear an ugly holiday sweater or scarf.