

**The Ohio Veterans WrapAround Project:  
*Wrapping Our Arms Around Veterans***

by  
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*Do you know if you have any veterans on your docket? Do you, or does anyone on your staff, even ask? If you don't ask, you are leaving a large opportunity for treatment and programs untapped. In our cash-strapped times, this is something we cannot afford to do. Nor is it the right thing to do for our veterans.*

**Veterans in the Court System**

Among the 50 states, Ohio has the fifth largest veterans population—an estimated 900,000. Some are older, such as a Vietnam veteran. Some are returning from several tours of active duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. An increasing number of our veterans are developing serious mental illnesses, substance abuse issues (or both) and as a result may end up homeless, unemployed, disengaged from their family, friends and communities. Many have Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or the less understood Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) from repeated concussions and other physical injuries. Because of these factors, some of our veterans will find themselves in the criminal justice system when they only wanted to come home and live the peaceful civilian life they bravely fought to maintain for us. Just as we have learned from our mental health court programs, incarcerating our veterans and throwing away the key is neither the smartest, nor the most cost-effective solution in dealing with this problem. Since they have given so much for our country and our safety, we need to wrap our arms around our veterans and help them in *their* time of need.

## **Raising Awareness of Veterans Resources**

I first heard about a “Veterans Court” two years ago while speaking at a conference in Washington, D.C. I realized it was really a drug court or a mental health court, but with a resource stream unique to veterans. Although I was aware of a handful of benefits offered to veterans, the number of additional resources I had never heard of surprised me. And as I continued to attend meetings and give speeches at various events throughout the state, I began to ask my audiences—which often consisted of judges, prosecutors, attorneys, law enforcement—“How many of you have ever heard of the federally funded, state-run Jobs for Vets?”

No hands.

“How many of you are aware of the veterans programs offered by the Ohio Attorney General’s Office?”

No hands.

“How many of you are aware of the VJO – the Veterans Justice Outreach program?”

No hands.

“How many of you, during your intake assessments, ask whether or not your participants have military experience?”

No hands.

We in Ohio did not even know about our own tools and resources available for our veterans. But our support for our veterans should not end when their active service ends. We need to spread the word of these often untapped services to our troops and direct our wounded soldiers to a place of recovery.

## **Bridging the Gaps:**

I was appointed to a committee set up by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to help put together a program called the Veterans Justice Outreach Program (VJO), which assigns a liaison to each Veteran Medical Center to work with the court system to help veterans access treatment services and other assistance. These VJOs are not only available to a judge with a veterans treatment court, but to any court with a veteran in the system.

But now my challenge was how to get Ohio courts to know and use the VJOs.

To try to coordinate resources and benefits for veterans in our court system and to introduce the VJOs, I convened two statewide meetings. In the second one, I introduced the *Veterans WrapAround Project* which is a way to try to coordinate the Ohio court system and Ohio resources with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. We needed to bring together co-existing veteran services and their respective agencies and educate ourselves about each other's services. Attendees included the heads of the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction; the Ohio Department of Mental Health; the Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services; Ohio Attorney General Richard Cordray; Director Bill Hartnett of the recently created Ohio Department of Veterans Services; Ohio Adjutant General Greg Wyatt; a number of VA representatives, several judges, along with the introduction of the five Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) specialists.\*

The project's goal is to "connect the dots"—to encourage the development of veterans treatment courts and the network all the programming available to veterans so each court is aware of and can provide the most productive assistance to its veterans who stand before them.

## Veterans Treatment Court:

By now, because of the innovative and collaborative nature of Ohio, the “WrapAround” approach should not be anything new to us. It’s what makes the over 130 specialized docket programs already in existence throughout the state work so well. These specialized docket court programs—drug, mental health, OVI, re-entry, domestic violence, sex offender, child support enforcement courts, etc.— introduce participants to new ways of thinking to change how they live and act in order to become productive members of their communities. It is accountability endowed with substantive treatment to enhance real change in behavior.

As a way to try to manage all this information, I use a “WrapAround Circle Chart” which is a visual consisting of circles within circles of the help we can wrap around our veterans.



The first circle is the criminal justice system, representing the initial contact the veteran will have with our local judges, prosecutors, defense counsel, probation officers, and law enforcement, who should, if not already, ask the question: “Do you have military experience?” (I learned that many say “no” if only asked if they are a “veteran.”) This should be part of all intakes so the process of connecting the veteran to benefits and treatment can begin. Linking a veteran to services specified for them might even free up local dollars for other defendants in your court. We are working with Tim Young, our State Public Defender, to train all public defenders to ask the same question of all their defendants.

Judge Jerry E. Ault of the Mansfield Municipal Court has taken the lead on veterans’ issues by starting the first Veterans Treatment Court in Ohio. In the initial planning phases, Mansfield considered running a “track” specifically for veterans in their mental health court program, but realized that a separate docket was needed as they had over 50 veterans a year on community control. A separate docket will allow the veterans to increase their chances of success by bringing all the resources together on the same day. In the Butler County Court of Common Pleas, Judge Michael J. Sage determined that an insufficient number of veterans were on community control and opted for a direct liaison person in the Veterans Service Commission office to serve as a counselor to whom the Common Pleas judges could refer defendants for veterans’ services. We are also working with Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT) to develop a special law enforcement response program for veterans in crisis.

The next circle represents the resources where we can start directing our veterans. These can be broken down into two tiers: state resources and federal resources. For a list of state resources, see **Appendix A**. For a list of federal resources, see **Appendix B**.

We hope to work with the Ohio Department of Veterans Services to set up a one-stop website, arranged by need categories, where all federal, state, local and even non-profits and volunteer resources can be listed.

### **Peer Support/Pro Bono Volunteers**

The last circle is the volunteer component of the WrapAround Project. Veterans have proven to respond more favorably to other veterans, and in other veteran courts, the mentor program is a unique mix of volunteer veterans and active-duty soldiers who offer free peer-to-peer mentoring. Judge Ault's Veterans Court in Mansfield is working to mimic these efforts by recruiting peer specialists—other veterans—who can help the recovering veteran transition back to society from community control.

We also want more pro bono lawyer volunteers. Following the unveiling of the WrapAround Project, the Ohio Legal Assistance Foundation (OLAF) and the Ohio State Legal Services Association are working with us on a program to provide pro bono services for the civil legal needs of veterans that often follow involvement in the criminal justice system. We have some pro bono programs that focus on wills and estate planning, but need so much more legal assistance for the many other needs of veterans and their families. For a list of volunteers offering services to veterans, see **Appendix C**.

### **A Work in Progress:**

We have much work to do in developing these programs and support systems for our veterans. But through continued leadership of our agencies and courts working together to better serve our troops, we can give back to the men and women who serve our country and come

home to civilian life, only to find that life in shambles. Many need help but won't ask for it. They should not have to ask. In many ways, our veterans have kept us safe and secure. Many have paid a heavy price for their service. Now it is our time to help them. And where can we all start making a difference? The first step is: "Am I asking them if they have military experience when they are in my courtroom?"

If not, I hope we all will.