

Project Abstract

The North Texas Regional Veterans Court (NTRVC) is a specialized program for justice-involved veterans (JIV) with whose crimes correlate to injuries suffered as a result of their military services. The program provides a second chance through a judicially-supervised, team-based approach to ensure participants receive treatment for underlying risk factors that contributed to their crime(s), including substance abuse, medical, and/or behavioral conditions. PTSD, traumatic brain injuries, and substance abuse all change the way the brain functions and impacts the ability of individuals to make responsible choices. Research has demonstrated that establishing a supportive, non-adversarial judicial relationship, employing progressive sanctions and incentives, and providing regular, meaningful involvement with a judge are significant factors leading to positive behavioral changes among offenders.

The goal of the North Texas Regional Veterans Court is to move justice-involved veterans out of the traditional criminal justice process and into appropriate, individualized rehabilitative alternatives that improve mental health and successfully lead to community reintegration and criminal case resolution. Once veterans have been screened, assessed, and approved for participation in this voluntary program, they promptly begin a treatment program that is specific to their needs. In addition to program team meetings, the program may involve drug and/or alcohol treatment, random drug testing, support group meetings, vocational or job counseling, educational classes, and community supervision. Many services are provided by outside agencies, and participants are referred as needed. While actual length varies based on participant progress, the 12-to-24 month program consists of 3 phases requiring frequent meetings with the Judge and Program Team. Upon successful completion of the program, the case(s) are normally dismissed, expunged, or never filed.

The Collin County Veterans Court program was started in 2013 by the 296th District Court Judge in Collin County. Unfortunately, many smaller counties in the area do not possess the resources to manage a similar program, resulting in justice-involved veterans in those counties not receiving the treatment and support needed for recovery and restoration to their pre-combat lives. In an effort to meet the need, the program has expanded into six neighboring counties - Fannin, Grayson, Kaufman, Rockwall, and will soon include Hunt and Cooke – resulting in the North Texas Regional Veterans Court. Each county has a local interdisciplinary team, composed of a supervision/probation officer, veterans service officer, defense attorney, prosecuting attorney, and law enforcement officer, which are led by the 296th District Court Judge. The team reviews and discusses participants' progress and uses a coordinated strategy to help veterans recover. The program currently consists of 102 participants –40 from Collin, 18 from Rockwall, 20 from Grayson, 8 from Kaufman, and 16 from Fannin County. The program is increasing its capacity to 125 participants, and additional participants are expected to be added throughout the grant period.

As program success can be affected by daily life circumstances, grant funding will be used to assist veterans' with unexpected needs that are critical to the veterans' overall wellbeing such as utility, housing, and transportation expenses. Provision of assistance in these situations allows veterans to more fully participate in the program, focusing on recovery and reintegration into society. Grant funds will also be utilized to provide abstinence monitoring, counseling/treatment, and court/probation-required courses for program participants.

Grant funding is requested for five contracted positions, to serve participants in all seven counties. The Program Coordinator serves as the primary point of contact for the NTRVC, receives and reviews all applications for program participation, coordinates opportunities for community outreach and program education, consults with state and national stakeholders wishing to begin their own Veterans Court or Regional Veterans Courts, oversees all program participants and staff, coordinates between the counties, collects and maintains all program data, and updates the programs policies and procedures to remain current with the best practices of a veterans treatment court. The Clinical Director develops clinical administrative policies and procedures, completes initial evaluations for participants, contributes to the development of individualized treatment plans, monitors progress, makes continuing care recommendations, conducts community outreach and program education, and supervises the Mental Health Clinician and all clinical interns from state and national university mental health programs completing an internship with the program. The Mental Health Clinician will assist the Clinical Director in coordinating mental health care services, assist in client assessment and in developing and updating individual treatment plans, monitoring and documenting care, and collecting clinical data to track and report mental health trends. Case Managers serve as the primary point of contact for program participants and link participants to the civilian continuum of care, providing community linkages and referrals, as appropriate, and aids in monitoring program compliance. Travel monies will be utilized by the Judge for travel between the counties and for attendance to the annual Texas Association of Specialty Courts training conference and National Association of Drug Court Professional conference.