



## **The Veterans Court Mentor Program**      **Woody Hippel**

The Bucks County Veterans Court Program was established by the Bucks County District Attorney's Office in 2012 to more effectively address the needs of Veterans cycling through the county courts, participating in probation and parole, and incarcerated in the prison system. Prior to this program, Veterans often went unidentified in the justice system, especially with regard to Veteran-specific, service-related disorders, such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and were thus often lumped in with the general offender population as they went through the court system. The Veterans Court program was designed to divert these at-risk Veterans, who are suffering, have committed less serious, offenses, and, because of their service, have earned consideration for placement into the a Veterans' treatment court program. The Veteran's entry into the program is strictly voluntary and only at the discretion of the District Attorney's Office. Not all Veterans in the program reside in Bucks County but since their offense was committed here, they remain under the jurisdiction of the Bucks County Courts.

The present treatment court represents a collaborative effort between the Criminal Division of the Bucks County Court of Common Pleas, The District Attorney's Office, The Public Defender's Office, the Bucks County Bar Association, the County Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, and other community-based treatment agencies such as the Shamrock Reins Equine therapy program.

The mission of the Veterans Treatment Program is to enhance public safety and reduce recidivism of criminal defendants who have served our Nation by connecting them with VA benefits, treatment services and Veteran services and to find appropriate dispositions to their criminal charges by considering the defendant's treatment needs against the seriousness of the offense(s) and the impact of the crime on the victim(s) and the community.

The Veterans Treatment Program is limited to defendant Veterans who are eligible for VA benefits. In order to participate, the veteran must have been discharged from the military in good standing and have one or more of the following service-related ailments:

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Military Sexual Trauma (MST), or

psychological and/or substance abuse problems requiring treatment.

The success of the Veterans Treatment Court program requires dedicated and motivated Veterans to serve as **Volunteer Mentors** to defendant Veterans moving through the program. The Veteran Mentor will be teamed by the Mentor Coordinator, to guide and support the veteran defendant through the court system and act as a trusted counselor to help ensure the Veteran completes all program requirements imposed by the Veterans Court.

I have served as a Veteran Mentor since 2019 and currently serve as the Mentor Coordinator, following the retirement of my predecessor, Carolyn Debuque, in 2021. For me, being a mentor is a unique and rewarding experience, wherein I'm able to continue to serve others by helping fellow Veterans in need. The program offers needed treatment to Veterans with the goal for them to be far better off upon leaving than entering the program.

Our Veteran Court coin reads "**Leave no Veteran Behind**". Upon successful graduation from the program, the coin is presented to the veteran graduate. The bottom rocker of the coin reads "**Mission accomplished**". All of us, Mentors and Mentor Coordinators, are volunteers, with the common bond that we want to do whatever we can to see our program's Veterans succeed. If you're an Honorably Discharged Veteran, are motivated to help Veterans in need, are committed, and would like more information, please contact Woody Hippel at (267) 614-0850 or [woody@VeteransCourtBucks.org](mailto:woody@VeteransCourtBucks.org).