



Supreme Court of Appeals State of West Virginia

News

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Supreme Court Receives Grant for Putnam County Mental Health & Veterans Treatment Court

For immediate release

WINFIELD, W.Va. – A \$50,000 federal planning grant that will allow the Putnam County Veterans Treatment Court to expand into a Mental Health and Veterans Treatment Court has been awarded to the Supreme Court of Appeals of West Virginia.

The grant was awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs (OJP). It will cover the salary and benefits for a full-time treatment court manager for the Putnam County Mental Health and Veterans Treatment Court and travel to required OJP training. After completing OJP's training process, the Mental Health and Veterans Treatment Court will be eligible to apply for larger implementation grants next spring for award in the fall of 2015 and thereafter.

The veterans program "is a unique combination of federal resources and state resources to combine to offer treatment over incarceration," said Twenty-Ninth Judicial Circuit (Putnam County) Judge Phillip M. Stowers, who is the administering judge for the program and the planned judge for the Mental Health and Veterans Treatment Court.

Charles Tucker, 26, of Hurricane, became the first person to graduate from the Putnam County Veterans Initiative Program in a ceremony on October 3 at the Putnam County Judicial Building in Winfield. Judge Stowers presided over the ceremony in his third-floor courtroom. Supreme Court Justice Brent D. Benjamin and U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin attended.

Mr. Tucker's case inspired Judge Stowers to start the Putnam County veterans program two years ago. Mr. Tucker was convicted in 2012 after breaking into a tanning salon. In Court, Mr. Tucker told Judge Stowers that when he was arrested at the bottom of an elevator shaft in another building, he believed he was in Afghanistan and under fire.

In Afghanistan, Mr. Tucker had been a member of an Army field artillery unit. When he returned home, he suffered from post-traumatic stress and became dependent on alcohol.

By his service in Afghanistan, Mr. Tucker "paid in advance" for the treatment program, Judge Stowers said. "You have to support the veterans when they come back from war. You can't just bring them home and forget them," the judge said.

The treatment program is more challenging than incarceration, Judge Stowers said. It includes hours of therapy, and once-a-week meetings with a treatment team that

includes the overseeing judge. Mr. Tucker has been in the program for more than two years.

“Today he has a family, he’s enrolled in college, he has employment opportunities, he’s a changed man,” Judge Stowers said.

Mr. Tucker said, “The program is responsible for saving my life and my family. . . This is probably the proudest moment of my life.”

He said he wants other veterans with similar problems to know they are not alone and that there is help available.

The Putnam County program will be the second full-fledged Mental Health and Veterans Treatment Court in West Virginia. The other is in the First and Second Judicial Circuits (Brooke, Hancock, Ohio, Marshall, and Wetzel Counties). The programs are overseen by the Supreme Court Division of Mental Hygiene and Mental Health/Veterans Treatment Court Services, and locally by the Circuit Judges who operate them. The Wayne County Adult Drug Court also has a veteran’s track, similar to the way the Putnam County program previously operated.

Mental Health and Veterans Treatment Courts are designed to provide long-term treatment, rather than jail or prison terms, to stabilize those with mental illness and help them achieve abstinence from drugs or alcohol. Co-occurring mental health and substance abuse problems are common for participants in these programs. The goals are to allow program participants to remain in the community as responsible members of society, to reduce recidivism, and to promote self-sufficiency through employment and education where appropriate.

Mental Health and Veterans Treatment Court treatment plans can last up to the length of a participant’s potential sentence. The veteran’s court program is longer because participants spend time in in-patient substance abuse treatment, which is paid for by Veterans Administration.

The program is offered only to non-violent criminal offenders and participation is voluntary. The judge, court staff, other treatment team members, and United States Veterans Affairs staff volunteer their time.

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