

# Therapeutic Court for Veterans

*Dr. Elise Taylor, left, is in charge of the Veterans Treatment Court program in Tulsa, Okla.; Dowanna Wright is the Veterans Treatment Court liaison.*

A program spreading across the country is giving veterans charged with non-violent alcohol or drug-related offenses a second chance to get their lives back on track.

any veterans return from war with PTSD, depression, or other combat-related issues that can greatly affect their day-to-day lives. Some of these men and women turn to drugs or alcohol to deal with the aftermath of combat and wind up in the criminal justice system.

The VA medical center and regional office in Muskogee, Okla., are the latest VA facilities to recognize not only a need, but also an opportunity, to reach out to veterans and help them rehabilitate and live a more productive life in society. They have partnered with the local courts to help veterans get their lives back on track after being arrested.

"The Jack C. Montgomery VA Medical Center is proud to be the third VA in the nation to provide this treatment option for our returning veterans who have difficulty readjusting to civilian life," said Director Adam Walmus. "This joint venture VA is doing with the Tulsa County Drug Court and the City of Tulsa will give these deserving men and women a second chance."

In December 2008, the Muskogee VA entered into a memorandum of understanding with the 14th Judicial District to form a Veterans Treatment Court in an attempt to divert veterans from jail and into appropriate rehabilitative programs.

The Veterans Treatment Court applies to veterans charged with non-violent alcohol or drug-related felonies who may be experiencing difficulties transitioning to civilian life—whether recently or long discharged from active duty.

Veterans are diverted and sentences are either delayed or replaced with a period during which treatment is provided by the VAMC, and court-appointed mentors provide guidance on many matters, such as education, employment and housing.

If the diversion is successful, the veteran is less likely to repeat the behaviors that resulted in his introduction to the court system.

"It's a treatment-first approach over a punitive approach," said Dr. Elise Taylor, a VA psychologist and substance abuse program supervisor who is in charge of the Tulsa program. "We want to provide the care and treatment these veterans need, help them move forward in their lives and prevent repeat offenses."

It all starts at the time of arrest. The program is voluntary for veterans charged with non-violent crimes who are in need of mental health or substance abuse treatment. Veterans agree to enter into the program in writing during a hearing and also provide written consent to allow VA to communicate with the court about their treatment.

"When a veteran is brought to jail, the officers ask them if they are veterans while they are being processed," said Taylor. "Our Treatment Court liaison, Dowanna Wright, helps with determining eligibility for VA benefits. If they are eligible, they will be put on the Treatment Court docket and then assessed."

Veterans entered into the program are assessed by a mental health professional such as Taylor to determine what type of treatment is needed to best serve their needs.

"They may just need outpatient care, or they may need to be entered into an inpatient care program such as detox," said Taylor.

During the treatment process, each veteran's case is reviewed by the judge to determine their progress. VA's treatment team and the judge work closely together to keep the veteran on track and on the road to recovery.

"We don't want them to fail and neither does the court," said Taylor.

"However, the court will step in if the patient fails to abide by the program. If they fail a drug screen or disobey the court's orders, they will be arrested and run back through the legal system."

Veterans who repeatedly fail drug screens, or are repeatedly noncompliant with court-ordered treatment, are sanctioned by the court, which could include community service, fines or jail time.

"With 158 veterans arrested in Tulsa County in the month of October, there is clearly a need for this new therapeutic court," said Tulsa County Special Judge Sarah Smith, who hears veterans' cases every Monday. "The Veterans Treatment Court offers a unique partnership between the VA, the court system and other veterans' organizations to provide treatment, compassion and hope to the men and women who served our country and are struggling in the criminal justice system."

As with all drug court participants, the records of those taking part in the Veterans Treatment Court are sealed once they've completed the program.

Tulsa is the third community in the country, and the first in the central U.S., to implement a Veterans Treatment Court. The first program was created in Buffalo, N.Y., followed by a program in Alaska, with similar courts being considered in Rochester, N.Y., Illinois, Las Vegas, and two in Pennsylvania. The Muskogee VA modeled its court on Buffalo's successful program, which key leaders visited and sought advice from before starting the Muskogee court. **VA**

By Gary Hicks