

Best practices for serving veterans



**MOST OF OUR PARTICIPANTS
ARE SUCCESSFUL. THEY
GRADUATE AND CHARGES
ARE DISMISSED.**

An interview with Derick Young, Marine veteran and director of the Mahoning County Honor Court

November is National Veterans and Military Families Month, and this week the Big Ideas team was honored to interview Retired Marine SSgt Derick Young. Mr. Young is the director of the Mahoning County Honor Court - a specialized docket in Judge Anthony D'Apolito's courtroom in the Mahoning County Court of Common Pleas. The Honor Court's unique model is tailored to help veterans caught up in the criminal justice system through the use of a multidisciplinary treatment team, creation of a tailored treatment plan, and peer mentors. Successful completion of the program and treatment plan usually equates to dismissal of criminal charges. The overwhelming success of this model is a testament to the efficacy of a compassionate and holistic veteran-centered response in a place where understanding and a helping hand are not always expected. Community Legal Aid is honored to partner with specialized veterans courts across our service region to address civil legal issues that may be barriers to participants' stability and wellbeing.

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**CLA:** Derick, thank you so much for sitting down with us today. Can you share with us the basics of the Mahoning County Honor Court and how it came to be?

Derick: The idea of a Mahoning County Honor Court started in late 2014 under Judge Shirley Christian who had the vision of starting a specialized veterans felony docket court. I was honored to be involved from the beginning as an advisor, as Judge Christian knew the voices of veterans should guide the process. We put together a treatment team that included representatives from the VA, Meridian HealthCare, law enforcement, and a multitude of other partnering community agencies. The idea is if you can clear the common issues facing veterans - substance abuse, mental health issues, challenges meeting basic needs, financial instability - you often remove the fuel behind criminal behavior. And these participants can head back out into society rather than to jail. Everyone wins.

We modeled our court after Judge Heath's successful [Stark County Veterans Court](#), because why reinvent the wheel. We had to change a few things to accommodate differences in demographics or local resources, but generally they were our model. Our court got its final certification from the Ohio Supreme Court as a specialized docket in 2016 and underwent two successful recertifications since then. We also navigated a change in presiding judges and have enjoyed the support and compassion of former Judge Christian and current Judge D'Apolito. As director, I brought a criminal justice background and obviously my lived experience in the military. To bring in the other side of the spectrum, I returned to school for my MSW. In Honor Court, the punitive and the rehabilitative sides come together. When we have needs, they can impact behavior. Why not try to help before we punish?

**CLA: Tell us a little about the unique needs of veterans. Why is a veteran-centered response so critical?**

Veterans do have unique needs and unique viewpoints. It's best when veterans can help other veterans, because we are more likely to understand where the other is coming from. For example, veterans tend to minimize things. We could be shouldering PTSD, depression, anxiety. But you would never know, and we would never tell you. Sometimes you have to probe in a different way. You know the pain scale? We could be feeling a ten but tell you it's a four. It's how we are and who we are. We could be worried about putting food on the table and paying rent tomorrow. But when someone asks us what we need, we tell them "nothing" or "I will figure it out."

Another example - veterans may be more likely to do what they feel is right in the moment. They may stand by these decisions even if they are illegal or inappropriate. We had an example recently of a young veterans court graduate who was on a healthy path. One day, she got a vague message from her son's school about an active shooter situation in the building. Now in reality, a young man brought a gun to school and took his own life. By the time parents heard, the situation was over and the other students were not in danger. But this mom heard the message and went to the school with her weapon to protect her son and the other kids. She felt it was the right thing and stands by her decision to this day. At some level we all get it - and I think even the other law enforcement officers at the scene understood - but civilians who didn't have shared experiences, training, and trauma would be less likely to make this call in this situation.

**CLA: So it makes sense, given these commonly shared characteristics, that mentors who are also veterans are involved in the Honor Court model.**

Derick: Yes, they are like the Big Brothers/ Big Sisters for our participants. Participants are in constant contact with their mentors. And mentors can keep many things confidential that I would need to disclose. Mentors are our participants' cheerleaders, their advocates. All are veterans themselves. They've talked the talk, walked the walk. Some have made mistakes and that means they are equipped to make sure their peers don't do the same.

**CLA: How does the treatment team/treatment plan piece work?**

Derick: Our Honor Court treatment team includes professionals in many fields - social workers, counselors, case managers, legal personnel, probation/parole, the VA. We come together regularly for treatment team meetings and discuss every case. When we are deciding whether they can be involved, we're looking at whether they are legally eligible and whether they have a condition we can treat. Then our treatment team is putting heads together to make a treatment plan. We aren't asking participants to jump through all the hoops - just those they need. There are no blanket treatment plans here. If you only present with a mental health issue, why would you need substance abuse counseling? In addition to treatment for mental health and substance abuse issues, we are connecting participants with supportive services and resources to meet basic needs. So our veterans are getting the treatment they need, getting their conditions addressed, getting extra resources - and at the end, when they graduate, their charges are dismissed. In the words of our Judge, "these acts were deemed to never have occurred."

**CLA: So the court orders the participant to follow the treatment plan?**

Derick: The Court can't order someone to go to treatment - but they can order individuals to follow treatment recommendations. With every participant on probation, a failure to do so is technically a probation violation. But even when something could be a probation violation, and we could put a participant in jail, we're not. Because what good will that do? Usually we pull them back in and see what the treatment team may have missed. We're asking - what else do you need to be successful? We don't necessarily go straight to violating them first. Our Judge is so compassionate and kind. Even when someone stands in front of us and says "I'm not going to do this anymore", the Judge often responds "we're not giving up on you".

**CLA: Sounds so powerful. What's your track record of success?**

Derick: Most of our participants are successful. They graduate and charges are dismissed. We've only officially unsuccessfully released maybe three people. These individuals go back to the traditional criminal track. Sometimes participants just disappear, but we try to refocus on the people who truly want the help. We're only going to work as hard for you as you're working for yourself. We give you resources and tools - but the veteran is the one who ultimately has to use the tools. I like to use the analogy of a boxing match. The veteran is the boxer in the ring. The treatment team is in the corner to support, in between rounds, giving advice and resources - squirting water into your mouth, wiping your face, putting vaseline on your eye. Don't give me a reason to

throw in the towel. We can't fight it for you.

To date, we've graduated 39 successful participants. And there are currently 13 in the program right now. These individuals are participating in Honor Court for a minimum of one year, but some stay for two or three depending on their needs and their pace.

**CLA: In Big Ideas, we love to highlight things that are working. And obviously the Honor Court is one of those things. But we also like to talk about what else is needed. So after your time in Honor Court, what else do you think veterans need?**

Derick: I would like to turn that question on its head and propose that actually most individuals involved in the criminal justice system need a specialized response like the veterans Honor Court model. They all bring a back story, a heavy load. Many have untreated medical and physical health issues, struggles with abuse, unresolved legal issues, instabilities. How might their lives and choices change if they all received this sort of tailored, wrap-around support when they interacted with the criminal justice system? Can we dream big? Can we create a society that doesn't need a criminal justice system or social workers? When we look at numbers, recidivism is sky high through the traditional criminal justice system. When you look at treatment courts, [recidivism rates are much lower](#). More of us need to take a step back - let's fix the catalyst of the problem.

**CLA: Any final thoughts? What else should our readers know about this special program?**

Derick: I have to give a shout out to our team. I put us up against any other team out there! We work hard to remember that most veterans are not comfortable with system involvement. And when it comes to health and safety and care - our team doesn't stop working at 5:00. They truly work hard all the time. We had one participant who was involved a few years ago and he presented with a tough heroin problem. He pled in on a Tuesday and called me that Friday night at midnight saying he messed up and used. His addiction was so bad, he needed to use so he didn't feel sick. That's when you know it's bad. You're not even trying to get high, you're just trying to feel like you can function. First, we made sure he was safe and had someone with him. Then we called up the other treatment team members and got him into a detox facility that same night. We were able to focus immediately on his safety and care. Most other places would never have answered the phone or told him to call back Monday morning. You know what - Monday may never have happened for that guy.

**CLA: Derick, thank you so much for your time. We are honored to learn more about the power of this model.**

NOTE: Veterans Courts are currently operating in four of the eight counties we serve: Mahoning, Medina, Stark, and Summit. Other counties may offer supportive services for veterans apart from specialized dockets.

This article is part of Legal Aid's [“Big Ideas” series](#).

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