



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

WASHINGTON, DC

Voices of Valor:

*Transformative Journeys through
Veterans Treatment Courts*





Introduction

on Veterans Treatment Courts

Today, there are over 600 veterans treatment court (VTC) programs operating across the nation, including several at the federal level. VTCs are a type of problem-solving court within the United States criminal court system. These programs are designed to address the underlying issues and needs that may be related to criminality among military veterans and service members who are in contact with our justice system. Examples of these underlying issues and needs include but are not limited to substance misuse, mental health issues (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder), traumatic brain injury, unemployment, and housing instability. VTC team members work together to monitor participant progress and challenges and ensure participants engage in the mandated treatments and services that address these underlying issues in effort to reduce recidivism, promote public safety, and improve the overall well-being of our military veterans and service members.

This publication aims to increase the public's knowledge of the: (1) existence and purpose of veterans treatment courts, (2) experience of VTC participants, (3) importance and impact of VTCs, and (4) ways to connect veterans and service members to VTC programs. The subsequent pages present three VTC participant profiles, chronicling their stories in terms of their military experience, extralegal challenges (e.g., mental and behavioral health issues), legal issues, and the VTC programs in which they participated. The publication concludes with a summary of the anecdotal evidence of effectiveness and ways in which veterans and service members in need may connect with VTC programs across the country.

Stanley Noble

U.S. Army 1993 - 2004

Wanting to serve something bigger than himself and follow family tradition, Stanley Noble decided to enlist in the United States Army for the first time, in 1995, at the age of 22. During his first enlistment, Stanley served as a medic and remained stateside for the duration of his contract. Initially having no intention to reenlist, Stanley made the decision to rejoin at the age of 30 years old, following the Sep-

tember 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, in what he described as a Pearl Harbor type of motivation. In 2003, Stanley was deployed to Iraq as part of the initial push during the Iraqi War. During his deployment, Stanley broke his back due to an IED blast – an injury which was not found until he returned stateside in 2004. Because of the magnitude of this injury, he was medically discharged shortly after. Despite everything he experienced during his deployment, Stanley has maintained a positive view of his time in the Army. Speaking about those he served with, Stanley describes them as a “large, extended family” emphasizing the magnitude of love and belonging he experienced both during his enlistment and after coming home. Stanley also speaks positively about the feeling of giving a voice and strength to those who were being suppressed, “Some of the other countries around the world, they don’t have that opportunity to speak. So, when they’re



being suppressed at the moment, it felt like I was going to get to be their voice and their arm and their strength.” However, his time in the Army was not all positive. During his deployment, Stanley describes being constantly surrounded by fear and uncertainty about what was happening around him. As he describes it:

“You only live in the moment, minute by minute in those situations. Really, in some situations over, there you live second by second. And you can break down those seconds into hours. And when you depend on each other like that, you depend on everybody to do everything that they can. And when people do everything they can and they don’t

make it, it really sets an empty block in you. And it never fills.”

While he did not focus too much on this negativity during his deployment, he acutely felt its effects after coming home.

After his discharge from the Army, Stanley struggled transitioning back to civilian life due to undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from what he had experienced during his deployment. He began to notice symptoms of PTSD—fears of crowded spaces, the need to be in control of everything, self-isolation, and hypervigilance—and sought help from Veterans Affairs (VA) which put him on medication. However, after witnessing friends from his team take their lives while on the same medication he was taking, he stopped taking it out of fear of its effects. He also participated in a live-in PTSD clinic twice, and credits his second time through the program with waking him up to the fact that, “It’s in my court -

it's my responsibility - this is my bucket and that I have to depend on myself to fix it and to come to an understanding on why I'm here, why I was there, [and] what was the reason and purpose of it."

Stanley also struggled with holding down a job due to the combination of his PTSD and the physical injuries he had suffered. His personal challenges were exacerbated when he ran into legal trouble and was apprehended by law enforcement. Upon his arrest, he was placed in a veterans unit within the local jail—something he believes every jail should have. While in the veterans unit, he was approached by a veterans treatment court (VTC) representative who explained what the court was and how his conviction would be expunged if he successfully completed the program. Stanley decided to enroll in the VTC program.

Stanley credits the VTC and being part of the VTC, both as a participant

and a mentor, as giving him purpose and meaning in his life after exiting the military. While it is not the case for everyone who participates in the VTC, Stanley did not encounter any roadblocks while moving through the program and even volunteered to help his friend start a service dog business. Stanley speaks highly about the VTC team members who supported him throughout his journey. In particular, he commends Judge David L. Shakes of the 4th Judicial District Veterans Trauma Court in Colorado Springs, Colorado, for providing him with the resources and support he needed to make it through the program and become his best self. Speaking about Judge Shakes, Stanley explains that "the moment he hears that there's a problem he just like throws out these tentacles of resources to you," and that he always "goes the extra mile to make sure you get the care you need." Stanley praises other members of the VTC team as well, explaining how Kisten Born, the

court coordinator, always makes sure to know what is going on in the participants' lives and how their families are doing. He also speaks positively about the district attorney, a fellow veteran himself, who he says was not just interested in locking people up, but wanted to help people improve their lives.

Stanley's time in the VTC and his continued work with the court have had a profound impact on his life and how he views the justice system. Because of his positive experience in the VTC and the growing need for them, Stanley has spoken to policymakers in the Colorado legislature about funding these courts throughout the state. Stanley has seen firsthand how much of an impact these courts can have on struggling veterans by providing them with the care and treatment they need to turn away from self-destructive behaviors and, ultimately, renew their lives. He explains that for the veterans who go through these courts, it is not just about avoid-

ing jail or having their charges dropped. Instead, VTC receive support from volunteer veteran mentors who have overcome similar obstacles and are and are also surrounded by a dedicated team that's who is focused on giving them the care they desperately need. VTCs have had a lasting impact on Stanley, who explains that they have provided him with the meaning and purpose that he has been searching for. Having been surrounded by fellow veterans who have seen and experienced what he's experienced has finally allowed Stanley to feel "normal" once again.





Daniel Conway

U.S. Marine Corps 2006 - 2012

Wanting to follow in his father's footsteps, Daniel Conway enlisted in the United States Marine Corps (USMC) in 2006, at the age of 19, with the ultimate goal of receiving a commission. During his enlistment, he served as an Amphibious Assault Vehicle crewmember. In 2007, his unit was activated and deployed to Iraq to fight in the ongoing Iraq War.

Not long after, Daniel was injured while participating in a practice drill,

where he suffered a broken shoulder and punctured lung. Due to the severity of his injuries, he was prescribed Oxycontin and placed on medical hold after returning stateside. Gradually, Daniel became physically dependent on the medication he was prescribed. Recognizing his reliance on the medication, Daniel did attempt to stop its use but was scared of getting into trouble if a drug test indicated he was no longer on the medication.

In 2012, Daniel was honorably discharged from the USMC, returning home with a plethora of undiagnosed mental symptoms and an addiction to pain medication. However, despite these challenges, he does speak positively about his time in the USMC, emphasizing that his service gave him a sense of purpose in life and that providing service and protection to others made him proud. He also speaks fondly of the rather unique brotherhood he eventually developed while serv-

ing with the men of his unit, a brotherhood he still feels exists to this day.

After he was discharged, Daniel struggled with his transition back to civilian life after his discharge due to the undiagnosed mental health conditions and his addiction to pain medication. He describes this combination as a "slippery slope" that he was unable to overcome. Because of his time away, his connections with both family and friends had changed, and he struggled to readjust to these changes. His behavior, due to mental illness and addiction, fractured these reforming bonds further, leading him to feel isolated and lost. He describes how he struggled to relate to people outside of the military who had not gone through what he had. Eventually, Daniel ended up homeless as he battled with addiction. He describes his battle with addiction as a cycle, where he would seek help and get clean, find work and a place to live, but then relapse again after only a few

months. This cycle persisted for years.

In an effort to win his fight with addiction, Daniel tried multiple treatment options offered by Veteran Affairs (VA) Department but to no avail. His first try was with the VA hospital in Richmond, where he entered into a 28-day rehabilitation program. After being removed twice, he ended up graduating the third time around. Recognizing that Daniel needed more intensive care, the VA enrolled him in a 90-day program in Hampton, Virginia, and he completed it on his first try. Afterwards, with no job, no place to stay, and no support network, Daniel went to Ashville, North Carolina, to enroll with the Veterans Restoration Quarters (VRQ). This long-term VA Grant and Per Diem program provides veterans with two years of free housing along with mental health and substance use recovery services. It was here that Daniel was finally able to get the intensive mental health and sub-

stance abuse treatment that he desperately needed. However, addiction is a powerful force, and Daniel once again relapsed. The cycle of addiction started anew, with Daniel getting clean through programs and relapsing again. It was after returning to Asheville, North Carolina and experiencing another relapse that Daniel ran into legal troubles. Within a 6-month period, he was arrested three separate times, receiving five felony charges—the most serious of which was a heroin trafficking charge. When specifically asked about the heroin charge he received, Daniel explained that it was not for the money but to support his own habit,

“to survive in active addiction, what a lot of people don’t understand when it comes to trafficking or distribution charges, people don’t do that just to make money. Sometimes people got to do that to survive out there

– we’re on the streets, homeless, with no job.”

Luckily, Daniel heard about the Veterans Treatment Court from a fellow veteran and found out that he was eligible to participate. Daniel’s experience in the program was positive with him describing it as “pretty good all around.” He speaks highly of the model that the VTC follows, demanding accountability from its participants but offering support throughout their journey. Every team member, from the Veterans Justice Officer (VJO) to the probation officer to the treatment team offered unwavering support and understanding while he navigated treatment for his mental health and substance misuse issues. Daniel credits the camaraderie between himself and his fellow participants as providing a positive impact, explaining how “being in a group of other veterans that were struggling the same way that you were but were there to

support me,” allowed him to feel seen.

He also believes that having veterans on the court team, such as Kevin Rumley as the court coordinator, improved his experience. Because of his own background, Mr. Rumley was able to understand what he had undergone during his service and the negative lasting effects Daniel was experiencing. In addition, the VTC where Daniel received treatment had a mentoring program filled with fellow veterans, some of whom had previously gone through the program. Daniel was able to have someone to lean on who had been through similar situations, guiding him through both the program and his recovery. Daniel does wish that VTCs could do more to help participating veterans handle other related legal issues stemming from what they experienced in the military, like custody problems, or pending charges in other counties. He explains that too often these other issues slip through the cracks, so

having a streamlined process could only serve to benefit all participants.

Even after his VTC graduation, Daniel has continued his involvement in VTCs as a liaison and mentor for new participants and has worked as a case manager with a non-profit designed to help veterans struggling with mental illness and homelessness. Addressing why he has chosen to stay involved with the VTCs and other veteran support programs, Daniel explains that “helping other people, I’ve learned, has helped me a lot too in my own recovery, with my mental health and my substance abuse issues.” Currently, Daniel is working with Henderson County, North Carolina, to establish the county’s first ever drug court. Because of what he experienced during his own battle with addiction and the positive experience he had with treatment courts, Daniel wants to provide the same opportunities to others who are in the same spot he once was.



David Brundage

U.S. Marine Corps & Army, 7 yrs

At the age of 18 years old, David Brundage enlisted in the United States Marine Corps as a way to escape a difficult home life. During this first contract, David served as a truck driver and remained stateside for its duration. David transitioned back to civilian life after receiving an honorable discharge. However, after his brother was shot while deployed in Iraq, David decided to re-enlist in the Army in 2005. This time

around, David served as both a combat medic and a light wheel mechanic. He remained stateside while serving this contract until he was medically discharged. He suffers from aortic stenosis which affects his heart's ability to pump blood. If not for this, David would have continued to serve because of the positives he experienced while serving. In total, David served roughly seven years in the Armed Forces.

Due to both his heart and other medical issues, David has been classified as 100 percent permanently and totally disabled. While seeking help from the VA for these issues, he was prescribed an extremely high dose of both Oxycodone and Percocet. He indicates that, at the time, the VA's "solution to every-thing was just to throw pain meds at it." However, this was before the general public had knowledge of the dangers of opioids. Once the new wave of the Opioid Epi-

demic was in full swing and individuals began to recognize the addictiveness of prescription opioids, the VA cut off all of his prescriptions without proper titration or aid. David explains that the VA cut everyone off all at once, leading to dangerous withdrawal effects. He was also unable to find private doctors willing to continue his prescriptions because of the newfound attention on these issues. David explains how this sudden stop in his prescriptions sent him into opioid withdrawal, making him "sick, like you want to die sick." In his desperation to end these life-threatening side effects, David decided to find his medication through illegal channels. Eventually, he was arrested and ended up charged with possession.

David did not find out about veterans treatment court (VTC) until his case was almost concluded. By chance, David happened to mention his military service in a brief conversation with his lawyer. Armed with this newfound

knowledge, David's attorney worked out a new deal to get him accepted into the VTC. Speaking about his reasoning for deciding to enter the VTC when facing only a minor charge, David explains,

"As an addict, you wake up every day praying for a way out. And I hoped that this was my way out. So, I gave it a shot."

Once in the VTC, David had a rough start. Because of scheduling conflicts with the VA for his classes and treatment due to his ongoing health conditions, David remained in the beginning phases of the program for longer than average. Frequent hospital visits also impeded his progress in the program. However, once completing Phase II of the program, he felt the process was less difficult. Discussing these challenges, David explains that the first two phases of the program are always

the hardest as you adjust to a new routine and, for some, overcome active withdrawal from addictive substances –

“This is not a program that you can just, you know, fly by the seat of your pants, and accomplish it and graduate. You have to put the time and the work in, or you’re not going to make it through this program.”

Despite his early struggles with the program, David speaks positively about his VTC experience and the individuals involved in the program. He explains that taking part in the VTC has had a noticeably positive effect on his life. Since participating in the VTC and graduating, he has been improving his relationships with his family whom he alienated while in the throes of addiction. He also points out that

he has gotten better with managing his time and how he uses it. David also praises the treatment and services that the VA provided to him and others going through the program. He explains that the VA offers so much more than anyone might think and connecting to these services can be the difference between understanding what you are facing or hitting a low point. Speaking about the individuals involved in the program, David credits his probation officer as having the biggest impact on him during his time there, explaining, “he’s probably one of the biggest reasons why I made it through because of the encouragement and conversations that we had.”

David recommends that any veteran involved in the criminal justice system should try to find a VTC or a program similar because, while they might not want to admit it, everyone needs support at such a critical time in their lives. He emphatically states that,



“...without the love and compassion and the accountability, I would not have made it. I couldn’t have done it on my own and I don’t know very many people that could do it on their own. In fact, I don’t know anybody that can do it on their own.”



Conclusion

These VTC participants attributed three factors to their success in their respective programs, as well as their lives after graduation. These factors were:

- 1 the support, love, and compassion they received from the VTC team members and fellow VTC participants,
- 2 the accountability their teams required,
- 3 the unique nature of these programs.

For example, David Brundage reflected that *“without the love and compassion and the accountability, I would not have made it. I couldn’t have done it on my own, and I don’t know very many veterans that could do it on their own... [the VTC team] understands that you’re gonna have slip-ups. They expect you to learn from them and move on from them, but they’re compassion-*

ate...and caring and there to help you, not to scold...and hurt...and embarrass you...or put you in jail. They’re there to help you turn your life around and be a better person.”

The veterans relayed how different their experiences in the VTC programs as were compared to any of their other experiences in the court system. Specifically, they compared the adversarial nature of other court experiences with the supportive environment created by VTC teams and the treatment and services they were offered. *“The VTC is different because they don’t yell at you or shame you for what you’ve done; they provide a gentle guiding hand towards bettering yourself. They give a safe and supportive space for you to be honest about your struggles and what you need.”*

Additionally, the camaraderie that resulted among VTC participants was noted as one of the impactful elements—*“being in a group of other veterans that were struggling the same way that were there to support me and I was there to support them.”*

While more than 600 VTC programs are operating across the country, one of the main issues these programs face nationally is the identification of potential VTC participants — or the identification of military history among individuals in the justice system. The justice system has not historically aimed to systematically identify military status among those who become entangled in it, so VTC programs have struggled with creating a standardized and objective procedure for identifying justice-involved veterans and service members. Further, many people do not know a VTC program exists in the jurisdiction in which they live or, if they do know about them, they may not know how to get in contact with these programs. This was evident in the experiences of all three veterans highlighted in this publication. For example, Stanley Noble was told about his VTC program by other veterans in the veteran jail unit in which he was housed, and

David Brundage discovered the program when he happened to mention his military veteran status to his attorney near the conclusion of his case.

Our hope is that this publication will increase the public’s awareness about these programs and encourage individuals to discover whether a VTC program exists within their jurisdictions. Several ways to determine whether a program exists in your area include conducting an Internet search (use your county or city name + veterans treatment court) or making a call to your local clerks office or courthouse. You may also check on the National Treatment Court Resource Center website (ntcrc.org); however, this information is updated intermittently. Nationally, we have seen many veterans become VTC participants because either their family members, their friends, or they themselves have found out about a VTC program and contacted that program directly.



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