

# Madison County Veterans Court Achieves 'Astonishing' Success: 88.5 Percent Grad Rate

by Brian Brueggemann  
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EDWARDSVILLE — Nearly 90 percent of participants who enter Madison County's Veterans Court successfully complete the program, according to new data. The data is part of an evaluation conducted by a team led by Dr. Jeremy Jewell, a professor of psychology at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville. Jewell's evaluation was conducted for the U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance, which provides a grant for the Veterans Court.



The evaluation covered a four-year grant period, from 2019 to 2022, and found that 88.5 percent of the Veterans Court's participants successfully complete the program. Madison County's Veterans Court is a specialized type of diversion court, geared

specifically toward military veterans. Jewell said most diversion courts, also known as alternative-treatment courts, achieve a graduation rate of about 50 percent. “To achieve a graduation rate in our Veterans Court of almost 90 percent is really astonishing,” Jewell said. “It’s a testament to the hard work by the entire court team, but also the participants, obviously. They did the work, as well.” The Veterans Court is a collaborative effort of the judges, the Veterans Administration, the State’s Attorney’s Office, the Public Defender’s Office, the Probation Department and several community partners. The program offers a viable option for a select group of offenders whose needs are better met through treatment intervention rather than incarceration.

The Veterans Court is a program through which lower-level offenders can get their charges dismissed if they successfully complete the program, which typically involves months of treatment, drug-testing, counseling and adherence to any guidelines set by the court. Jeffrey L., a combat veteran with 22 years of military service, is among the roughly 250 graduates of the county’s Veterans Court. He said he used drugs and alcohol to cope. “In my experience with Veterans Court, it is a path to success,” Jeffrey said.

“I was able to get the support I needed from the court system, but there’s a requirement for me to do the work, on my side.” Jeffrey now is finishing up a graduate degree in public policy. Deputy Chief Probation Officer Mike Wilkinson, who has served the Veterans Court since it began in 2009, said participants include veterans who are trying to cope with post-traumatic stress, as well as ones who have become addicted to painkillers or try to self-medicate after suffering injuries. Circuit Judge Sarah Smith, herself a combat veteran, presides over the Veterans Court. State’s Attorney Tom Haine, who served four years as an Active Duty Army Captain, said the Veterans Court’s high graduation rate is only one indicator of its success.

“The State’s Attorney’s Office has seen first-hand how this court has helped veterans to again become the upstanding, respected members of society that they’ve already demonstrated they can be,” Haine said. “Typically, the participants are good, honorable people who haven’t been given the resources they need to help them deal with underlying issues such as post-traumatic stress. First Assistant State’s Attorney Chad Loughrey takes great personal pride in this court, and he does a fantastic job for our veterans.” The goal of Madison County’s innovative Veterans Court is to provide a strategy of treatment, rather than jail, for veterans who have entered the criminal justice system and suffer from PTSD or psychological or substance-abuse problems as a result of their service to their country.

Information about the Madison County Veterans Court is available by contacting Madison County Problem-Solving Courts at Criminal Justice Center, 509 Ramey St., Suite 304, Edwardsville, IL 62025 or (618) 692-8961.

