

ANOKA COUNTY VETERANS COURT

FAQ FOR VICTIMS

What is Veterans Court?

Veterans Court, or Veterans Treatment Court, is a specialty court that handles criminal defendants differently than “typical” court. U.S. veterans who meet certain criteria are invited to participate in the program, which emphasizes incentives over punishments. A team of agencies works together in a way they ordinarily do not. Judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, VA representatives, probation officers, and others meet bi-weekly to review defendants’ progress and discuss individual strategies to keep them on track.

The hands-on approach results in a closer rapport between defendants and the criminal justice system officials in place of what would typically be an adversarial relationship. As with many treatment plans, milestones are celebrated and missteps are navigated. This carrot-and-stick approach to the criminal justice system can be frustrating for some victims but has proven for this category of defendants to be successful.

What is the process and why?

Before they can join Veterans Court, defendants must plead guilty in district court. From there, participation in the program is voluntary and defendants are expected to actively work on goals. They are provided with a network of resources and services, like therapy, chemical dependency treatment, peer mentorship, or veteran-specific domestic violence programming. Veterans Court is held every two weeks and it takes approximately 18 to 24 months for participants to progress through the four phases to graduation.

Treatment courts in general humanize the criminal justice system by acknowledging some defendants may not be in it but for certain circumstances. Veterans Court takes that a step further by extending a reformation opportunity to men and women who have served their country.

What can I expect in court?

Veterans Court sessions look and feel much different from standard criminal proceedings. The team of judges, attorneys and agency representatives know the defendants by first name. The exchanges between them have a more familial feel than any other criminal court hearing, and the rules of procedure are relaxed. In this setting, the notion of justice is less punitive and more therapeutic: the primary focus is on the underlying problems that contributed to criminal activity, and the goal is rehabilitation.

How can victims participate in the process?

At the outset, Victim/Witness Services will contact the victim for input to be provided to the Veteran’s Court team. That input is considered as a treatment plan is customized for the defendant. In Domestic Violence cases, victims are asked to fill out a questionnaire. This is not a required form for victims to complete, but rather a tool for them to feel like their voice and input is being heard.

As in every criminal case in Minnesota, victims have rights, including: notification of plea recommendations, the right to object to plea agreements, and the right to provide a victim impact statement at sentencing.

How do you measure success?

A defendant’s success in the program is dependent on their cooperation and participation and what services they take advantage of. Success looks different for everyone, but the ultimate goal is that they don’t reoffend, they get treatment for their own needs, and learn skills to be better citizens, partners, and people.

For more info and resources:

<https://www.anokacounty.us/1394/VictimWitness-Services>

<https://www.anokacounty.us/1549/Veterans-Court>