

## Project Abstract: Pinellas County Board of County Commissioners

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Pinellas County Human Services | 440 Court Street, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, Clearwater, FL 33756  
PinellasCounty.org | Grant Opp. #: TI-16-009

**Project Title:** Pinellas County Veterans Treatment Court (VTC)  
**Project Director:** Nicholas Bridenback, Sixth Judicial Circuit  
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**Federal Funding Requested:** \$325,000/per year for 3 years (SAMHSA/CSAT)

In 2013, Pinellas County was awarded a grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT), to support that expansion and enhancement of Pinellas County's Veterans Treatment Court (VTC). That grant, ending in July of 2016, was for \$325,000 per year for 3 years. To continue SAMHSA/CSAT funding for this successful project, Pinellas County, on behalf of the Sixth Judicial Circuit, will need to apply this year. Applications are due April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2016, and the Sixth Judicial Circuit is working closely with its partners WestCare, Solutions and PERC to prepare the proposal.

The cooperative effort of a team approach is a hallmark of the Sixth Judicial Circuit Veterans Treatment Court (VTC). It is a court-supervised, comprehensive treatment court for non-violent misdemeanor or felony defendants, who are serving or have served in the armed services. This is a voluntary program that involves frequent appearances before the VTC judge, substance abuse and/or mental health treatment and frequent, random testing for substance abuse as applicable. It is a treatment-based approach with various treatment options. Successful completion of the VTC plan will result in the dismissal of charges against defendants entering the program through Pre-Trial Intervention (defendants facing a first-time, non-violent, third-degree felony or misdemeanor charge and admitted at the sole discretion of the State Attorney). For defendants entering the Veterans Treatment Court as a condition of probation (post-plea VTC), successful completion may result in adjudication being withheld and/or a reduced length of probation. All participants are required to make frequent court appearances. Participants will appear before the VTC judge every 30 to 45 days. Veterans Treatment Court is a 12 to 24 month program. Persons who have completed treatment and remain drug free and complete all of their Pre-Trial Intervention or probation requirements may petition the court for early termination.

**Need:** There is a need to expand veteran services and improve their effectiveness for returning troops, many of whom have sustained physical and psychological injuries. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that roughly 75,000 veterans are homeless on any given night and nearly 135,000 are homeless over the course of a year and 76 percent of homeless veterans suffer from a substance abuse or mental health disorder ([va.gov/homeless](http://va.gov/homeless)). VTC models are an effective stop-gap for preventing future homelessness as well as providing homeless veterans with the treatment needed to get off the streets ([justiceforvets.org](http://justiceforvets.org)). SAMHSA's National Survey on Drug Use and Health found an estimated 8% (1,850 in Pinellas County) of veterans were dependent on or abusing alcohol or illicit drugs. An estimated 4.6% of veterans (4,260 in Pinellas County) had a serious mental illness. An estimated 340,000 male veterans had co-occurring serious mental illness (SMI) and a substance use disorder in 2002 and 2003. Many Veterans are known to have a warrior's mentality and often do not address their treatment needs for physical and psychological health care. Many who are referred to the VTC are homeless (about 16.5% in Pinellas County), helpless, in despair, suffering from alcohol or drug addiction (100%), and others have serious mental illnesses (>65%) (Pinellas VTC). There is a need for greater supervision and support; increased collaboration with law enforcement and local VA systems; quick identification and referrals of eligible veterans; transferring of cases that traditionally were in either the drug or mental health treatment courts to a centralized singular calendar of all eligible veterans; greater focus on veterans' faulty decision-making; and peer to peer, vet to vet mentoring, to help the veterans build and achieve healthy goals. Without the collaboration of the County, Court, VA and community-based providers (faith-based, social services, grassroots

advocacy) many veterans would continue to have their illnesses untreated and would suffer the consequences of the traditional criminal justice system of jail or prison.

**Population:** The population of focus for the proposed project is adult veterans (males and females) of all ages, races and ethnicity who are diagnosed with substance use disorder as their primary condition. Since post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), military sexual trauma (MST), depression and anxiety are prevalent among men and women who have served in the Armed Forces, an emphasis will also be placed on veterans with co-occurring disorders (e.g. substance use and mental health disorders) who are currently or have experienced trauma.

**Project Summary:** Pinellas County has partnered with the Sixth Judicial Circuit Court and a network of community-based providers of services to U.S. military veterans and their families to expand and enhance the Pinellas County Veterans Treatment Court (VTC). The project proposes an expansion and enhancement of the current Pinellas VTC model and fills significant gaps for veterans participating in the Pinellas VTC. The aim of the Pinellas County Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) is to establish an inter-agency, collaborative, non-adversarial treatment strategy for veterans currently involved with the criminal justice system who suffer from substance abuse problems and co-occurring post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), military sexual trauma (MST) and other psychological and physical problems as a result of having served in the Armed Forces – and to make community-based social services accessible for the families of veterans involved in the VTC. The new model for the Pinellas VTC creates a coordinated system in Pinellas County where 110 veterans eligible for VA services and those who are not eligible can participate. The proposed new model for the Pinellas VTC aligns with the “Veterans Treatment Court Ten Key Components” and employs evidence-based practices and approaches such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Motivational Enhance Therapy and Peer Mentoring to engage veterans and their families in treatment and supportive services. In the new model, the veteran and his family are surrounded by a supportive, strengths-based community-based continuum of treatment and supportive services. The overarching aim of the Pinellas VTC is to achieve a reduction in recidivism and substance abuse among substance-abusing veterans/offenders and to increase the likelihood of successful habilitation through early, continuous, and intense judicially supervised treatment, mandatory periodic drug testing, and use of appropriate sanctions and other habilitation services.

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