

Canine Assisted Therapy in the
Courtroom: Enhancing Outcomes in
VTCs through Service Dog Training

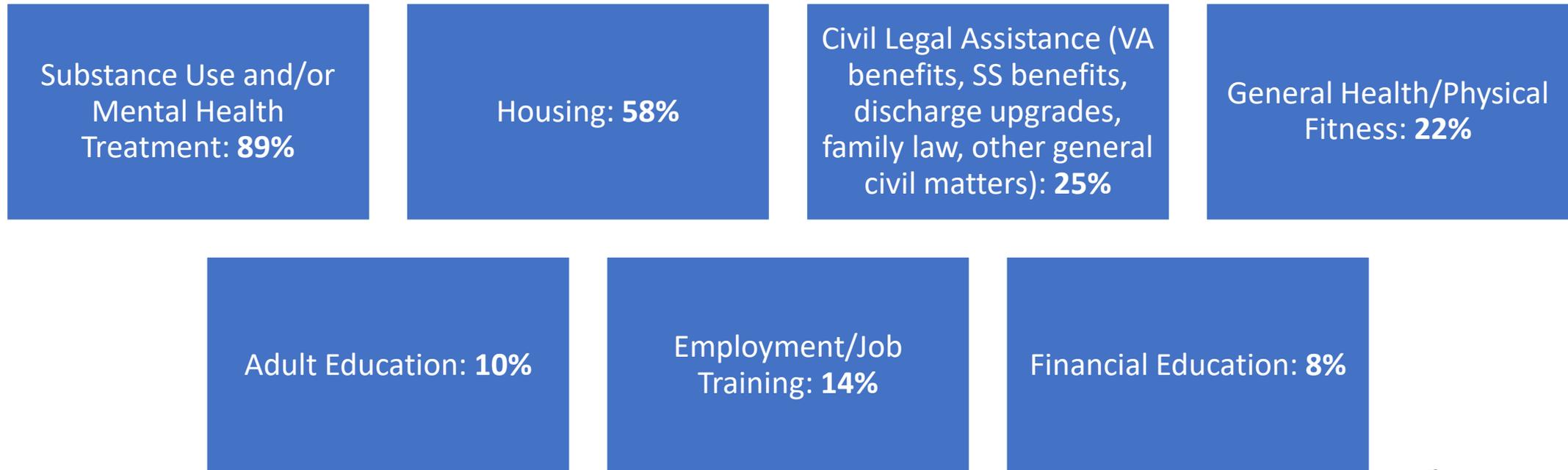
The Honorable Halee F. Weinstein
Rick Yount
Jamie Meyers
Jaffar Hassan

Baltimore City Veterans Treatment Court

- Judge Weinstein saw a number of veterans coming through the Early Resolution docket and proposed an idea for a veterans specific docket
- Timeline:
 - **December 2014:** Initial meetings with court personnel, service providers and relevant stakeholders to discuss the possibility of a VTC in Baltimore
 - **January 2015-September 2015:** Numerous meetings and planning sessions to work out the logistics of schedules and partnerships
 - **October 13, 2015:** Official VTC launch to the public
 - **October 2018:** Three Year Anniversary
- Baltimore City's Veterans Treatment Court takes place at the Eastside District Court. Baltimore's VTC serves VA and non-VA eligible veterans who have been charged with a misdemeanor offense



Needs* of Participants in Baltimore VTC



*Note: Most VTC participants present with multiple needs



Statistics

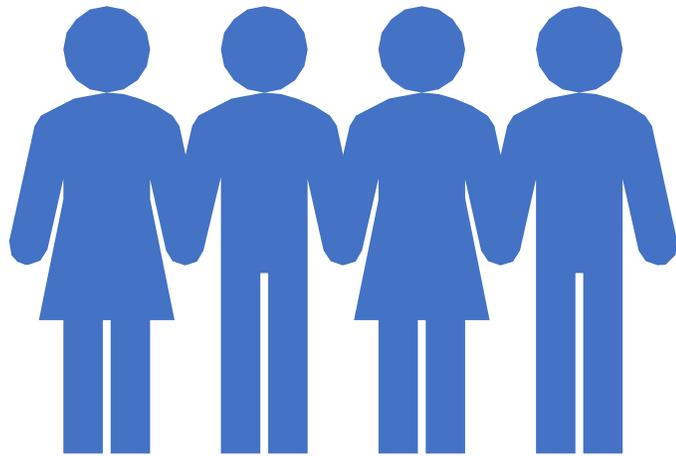
Since the Fall of 2015:

- Over 350 individuals have been screened for the Baltimore VTC
- 106 participants have entered the program
- 31 active participants
- **61 successful graduates***
- 4 unsuccessful completions
- The remaining individuals either had their cases dismissed, transferred to other courts, or their probation ended

*Only two graduates have been charged with new offenses since graduating. One case was dismissed and the other was found not guilty.



Community Service Options



- All Baltimore City VTC participants are required to complete 20 hours of community service before they finish the court program
- Before the Warrior Canine Connection partnership, there were only two options for community service:
 - The 6th Branch
 - Court Community Service Office
- The court was very open to considering other alternatives for community service, specifically more options that would allow VTC participants to serve other veterans

Baltimore's Introduction to Warrior Canine Connection

- July 2017—Judge Weinstein and Jamie attended the NADCP conference and sat in on a session hosted by Warrior Canine Connection (WCC) to learn more about their Mission Based Trauma Recovery Model with veterans
- March 2018—After months of phone calls and planning, WCC held the first training session in the Baltimore VTC courtroom



What is Mission Based Trauma Recovery (MBTR)?

- Warrior Canine Connection's Mission Based Trauma Recovery Model (MBTR)
- Piloted in Trauma Recovery Program at Palo Alto VA in 2008
- Combines the healing power of the Human-Canine Bond and the Warrior Ethos or core value of caring for your Battle Buddies
- Learning to train service dogs for fellow Veterans provides healing opportunities for those Veterans engaged in this important mission
- Veterans in the VTC earn community service hours through their participation in WCC's MBTR

Learning Through Service

The MBTR program is designed to address these key areas:

- Meaningful and Purposeful Activity
- Forming Healthy Relationships
- Effective Communication
- Emotional Numbing/Regulation
- Isolation and Avoidance
- Parenting and Family Relationships
- Mindfulness



WCC Program Dogs

- Golden and Labrador Retrievers (purpose bred)
- Socially responsive
- Soft tempered
- Low aroused
- Early socialization and training helps to foster success of the Veteran trainers





Typical Training Session

1. Introduction of Veteran Participants
2. Session Structure
3. Topics/Training Commands Covered

Participation & Outcomes

- WCC operates VTC programs in CA, NC, and MD
- **81%** of *active* Baltimore VTC participants have attended at least one WCC training session
- **394** community service hours earned by participants through WCC since inception in March 2018
- **160.5** Hours of MBTR Programming in 2018
- In 2018, Baltimore VTC had 30 Unique Veteran Participants
- Program recidivism rate of 0%
- Judge incentivizes participation



Partnership Outcomes

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- Self assessment surveys noted the following improvements, which are consistent with results WCC has seen in other VTC programs:
 - 85% of Baltimore respondents reported improvements in their overall mood
 - 63% of Baltimore respondents reported decreases in pain; and importantly
 - 73% of Baltimore respondents reported decreases in their stress level

Lessons Learned

- **The dogs help build community among the Veterans, staff, and court personnel.** The dogs are a calming presence in a highly stressful and busy environment.
- **Community service is critical to assist with Veteran transition, rehabilitation, and community integration.** Court-associated interactions can increase Veterans' anxiety and associated symptoms. Despite its rehabilitative collegial efforts, the court room is viewed by many Veterans as a place of judgement, punishment and labeling as criminal offender. As Veterans engage with WCC's VTC programming and train a service dog for a fellow disabled Veteran, it helps them feel like "a person and not a criminal," as one Veteran participant noted.
- **Therapeutic community service program provides access to Veterans not receiving VA benefits.** WCC's involvement with the Court has allowed Veterans who are not receiving benefits to access this therapeutic community service option.



Lessons Learned cont.

- **Partnership with probation and VJO staff increases attendance.** After spending significant time in Court and developing positive relationships with probation officers, VJO staff, judges and other court staff—recruitment and expansion followed with ease.
- **Bridging Veterans to career opportunities.** After training the dogs in the community and seeing the impact these dogs have on the lives of others, some Veterans have begun pursuing careers in dog training and other helping professions as a way to continue to give back.
- **Patience, self-confidence and pride instilled through real-life training.** WCC's Service Dog Training Program has utilized real-life training in Court rooms, Court lobbies, and other public venues to instill a sense of pride and renewed self-confidence in participants. Additionally, learning to navigate public settings with a service dog in training has provided real-life examples of the importance of practicing patience in order to be successful.



Quotes from the Baltimore VTC Team

“I watch our participants when they walk into the weekly training sessions with WCC and I see them when they walk out. You can just tell that something is different, like a little bit of weight has been lifted off their shoulders.” -VTC Mentor Coordinator

“Warrior Canine Connection has greatly impacted the veterans in a positive manner and improved their overall well being.”
-Baltimore VJO

“In all my years of legal practice, I’ve never seen a more effective partnership in the courtroom, it really changes the lives of the VTC participants.” –VTC Public Defender





Questions?

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