



KENTUCKY VETERANS' CONNECT PROGRAM

Years of war and multiple deployments have taken their toll on the men and women who serve in the Armed Forces, National Guard, and Reserves, and have led to increased cases of post-traumatic stress disorder and other post-deployment difficulties. Further, combat veterans may not initially seek help to deal with their difficulties and may instead engage in activities that run afoul of the law. Providing help to combat veterans when problems first begin to arise can lead to a better future for veterans and their families.

During its 2010 regular session, Kentucky faced the issue of how to identify veterans who needed specialized services and how to connect those veterans to the services. If a combat veteran is arrested, there is an implication that the veteran may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or other combat-related conditions. In that vein, the Kentucky General Assembly passed House Bill 377 and, in conjunction with the Administrative Offices of the Courts, established the Kentucky Veterans' Connect program. The program requires pretrial investigations and services to ask whether an individual has been in combat and, if so, provide contact information to services available for combat veterans. Vets are connected to a wide range of services available to veterans through the United States Veterans Administration, the state Department of Veterans Affairs and other sources.

Pretrial officers give contact information on the Kentucky National Guard Family Services Program within the Kentucky Department of Military Affairs or similar programs which provide a full range of services for combat veterans to any person who states that they have been in combat, including an opportunity to call the Department during the interview.

The program only required amendment of the form used by pretrial service officers during their initial interview; no additional equipment or software was needed. What was required was the willingness of the pretrial service officers to do the extra work to identify and assist veterans. The pretrial service officers' supervisors also conducted training for the new program online at no or minimal cost. Pretrial service officers have displayed a willingness and enthusiasm to perform this service for those who have served our nation.

From July 1, 2010 to March 31, 2013, more than 19,000 veterans and nearly 8,000 combat veterans were arrested in Kentucky, and every arrestee has had the opportunity to be connected to veterans' services. (The veteran can decline services.) In each instance, the judge has been given the information on combat veteran status. Thousands of Kentucky veterans have received services, many for the first time. The program also brought to light the tremendous numbers of veterans in the state's court system.

In addition to the direct impact of assistance and services to veterans/combat veterans who had been arrested, the program also has created unanticipated benefits. Once the relatively large number of arrested combat veterans was documented and realized, the General Assembly and the court system have worked tirelessly to connect veterans to the available services which they have earned.

Partly as a result of the data generated by this program:

- » Kentucky's Chief Justice created a Veterans Task Force within the Administrative Office of the Courts' Kentucky Access to Justice Commission;
- » Warrants now have a check-off box for veteran status;
- » A Veterans' Court pilot project was established;
- » A Veterans' Diversion program was created; and
- » The Kentucky Administrative Office of the Courts is now producing a program which will add a notice of veterans status to the eCitation system and enable court staff and Kentucky state police to know of veteran status and create a daily report for distribution to the Veterans Justice Outreach Coordinators at the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.

