NEWS RELEASE

New York State
Unified Court System

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Hon. Deborah H. Karalunas
Administrative Judge
Fifth Judicial District

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Oneida County Opens Veterans Treatment Court

UTICA, NEW YORK–Fifth Judicial District Administrative Deborah H. Karalunas announced the opening of the Oneida County Veterans Treatment Court (OCVTC). The OCVTC is a problem-solving court designed to serve justice-involved veterans charged with either a misdemeanor and/or felony who may be experiencing addiction and/or mental health challenges. The OCVTC, located in the Utica City Courthouse at 411 Oriskany Street West in Utica, is a collaborative effort of the New York State Unified Court System's Fifth Judicial District, Oneida County District Attorney's Office, local defense bar, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), Oneida County Department of Probation, and local treatment and service providers. The Unified Court System's Office for Justice Initiatives' Problem-Solving Justice Division, led by Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Edwina G. Richardson and Statewide Coordinating Judge for Problem-Solving Courts Debra J. Young, has been involved throughout the planning and implementation of the OCVTC.

Veterans Treatment Courts (VTCs) provide access to substance use and mental health treatment, and other individualized supports as part of court-ordered accountability and supervision. The VA's Veterans Justice Outreach Coordinator, veteran peer mentors, veteran services providers, probation officers, veteran service providers, and other community partners work together to address the unique needs of justice-involved veterans, including connecting them with VA benefits and services. An important component in ensuring a successful VTC is the use of peer mentors - military veterans who volunteer their time to provide guidance, encouragement and support to justice-involved veterans throughout the process.
Veterans who are willing to comply with court-imposed conditions may be considered for participation in the VTC. Veterans with prior or current service from the U.S. Armed Forces, Reserves, or National Guard may be eligible for referral, which may be made by defense counsel, prosecutors, clinicians, probation officers, veteran service agencies, and other community partners. All referrals will be reviewed by the Oneida County District Attorney's Office and the veteran's defense attorney. Veterans will be assessed to determine eligibility for substance use treatment, healthcare, housing, clinical services, and available benefits. Participants who successfully complete the program may be eligible to have their charges reduced or dismissed.

The Honorable Joseph A. Saba, Jr. will preside over the OCVTC. Judge Saba said, “Every veteran who comes into and before this court has a story. My hope is that Veteran’s Treatment Cout will give them the support, accountability and opportunity to write the next chapter of that story.”

Deputy Chief Administrative Judge Richardson said, “Veterans Treatment Courts recognize that justice-involved veterans are navigating challenges connected to their service. This VTC represents the Unified Court System’s commitment to accountability, while ensuring that those who have served our country have access to treatment, structure, mentorship, court supervision, and the support they need to move forward in a meaningful way.”

Administrative Judge Karalunas said, “I'm thrilled that in addition to the Fifth Judicial District’s Veterans Treatment Courts presently operating in Onondaga County and Jefferson County, a Veterans Treatment Court will now serve justice-involved veterans in Oneida County. By bringing together a network of dedicated professionals and mentors, these courts ensure that men and women who face legal challenges after serving our nation are met with understanding, accountability, and the support and services they need to heal and rebuild their lives.”

Statewide Coordinating Judge Young said, “This VTC strengthens public safety by addressing the root causes of certain behaviors. By connecting veterans to treatment, services, and peer mentors, this court recognizes the importance of military service, restoring purpose for our veterans, and providing a path to reducing recidivism in our communities.

Oneida County Public Defender Andrew Dean said, “Our veterans gave their best years to securing our liberties and rights. In recognition of this sacrifice, the VTC will ensure that veterans receive every available resource when becoming involved in the justice system. I am grateful to Oneida County, its agencies, the Fifth Judicial District and Utica City Court for making the VTC a reality.”

Oneida County District Attorney Todd Carville said, “Our society relies on brave, selfless individuals who serve our country in the United States Armed Forces. When those who have served our country are no longer actively serving, we do not forget that service. For those who have entered the criminal justice system and do not pose a risk to public safety, we will identify services needed and provide a support network in the hopes of rehabilitating and restoring our veterans.”

VTC referrals can be emailed at oneida-county-treatment-court-referrals@nycourts.gov
The country’s first VTC was launched in Buffalo, New York, in 2008 and has since served as a national model. With the launch of the OCVTC, there are now 39 VTCs operating in 31 New York counties encompassing urban, suburban, and rural communities.

For more information about New York’s VTCs and other problem-solving courts, visit:
https://www.nycourts.gov/courts/problem_solving/

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