Eighteenth Judicial Circuit

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SEMINOLE COUNTY COURT WINS FEDERAL GRANT FOR VETERANS PROGRAM

Seminole County has been awarded a Bureau of Justice Assistance Discretionary Grant in the amount of $348,000 to further develop the Veterans Treatment Court. The grant targets veterans arrested in Seminole County, 18 years or older, whose charge is a criminal misdemeanor or felony drug offense, or other misdemeanor/felony crimes that are directly related to substance abuse or mental health issues.

Seminole County Court Judge John L. Woodard, III, with assistance from the Seminole County Mental Health and Substance Abuse Task Force, launched the pilot program for Veterans Court in 2012. Judge Woodard recognized the need for the specialized court as a substantial number of veterans, when arrested, were under the influence of drugs or alcohol or were arrested on drug-related charges.

Veterans accepted into this program must adhere to strict guidelines, which includes multiple court appearances, intensive counseling, and random drug testing. If a veteran successfully completes the program, they are eligible to have charges reduced or even dropped.

The program has the cooperation of all county stakeholders, including the State Attorney, Public Defender, and Board of County Commissioners. It began with five participants. Today, approximately 58 participants have been served. "This diversion program is designed to help veterans whose minor criminal offenses stem from the psychological or physical wounds of war," said Judge Woodard. "This includes traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression. The chief aim of veterans court is to provide coordinated services to help our veterans stay out of jail and adjust to civilian life."

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