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**Intro:** Welcome to the Let’s Talk Government Podcast that is provided for you by the Department of Government at Minnesota State University, Mankato located in Minnesota in the United States. I am your host Dr. Pat Nelson the chairperson of the Government Department. I want to thank you for joining us as we explore different topics about government. Some may be surprising to you and some may not, so please enjoy.

**Dr. Nelson:** Welcome to episode 17 of the Let's Talk Government podcast, helping veterans in the criminal justice system. I'm joined by Luke Weinandt and And Penny Nelson. Luke has a bachelor of science in program planning from MSU Mankato and served active duty with the army. And also the national guard. Luke was deployed during operation Iraqi freedom. Penny is a licensed alcohol and drug counselor and serve 20 years active duty in the Navy. During those 20 years, Penny served on numerous aircraft carriers during deployments, and also worked at basis in Iceland, Spain, and the white house. They both serve as current case managers for the fifth judicial district veterans services court. So thank you for joining me today. So let's start out. How did your veteran services court start? I think we'll turn to Luke for that.

**Luke Weinandt:** Um, it was originally a phone call. I had been working for the Minnesota assistance council for veterans. So I was working with, um, homeless and at risk veterans just provided housing, um, and emergency financial assistance and those types of things. So I got a call from Pat McDermott from the County attorney's office and blue earth County, um, suggesting that he wanted to start a veterans court, which was all new to us at the time. And it was a pretty ambitious plan. He was putting together a team to do, um, to serve blue earth Brown Jackson, Martin Nicolette, and Juan Juan counties, and wanted us to be a part of that. Um, and to take on those case management roles as part of the team. And we were fortunate enough to get that grant and move forward with it and that three Ben.

**Dr. Nelson:** So what year was that? That you first got that call

**Luke Weinandt:** 2013

**Dr. Nelson:** So, we're eight years into this now. So, so why do we need a veterans' services court? Why, why would we need a special court instead of just leaving them in the mainstream?

**Luke Weinandt:** That's a great question. As penny also knows our veterans come back with a big list of problems that aren't necessarily, that are very specific to them and things that they entered while they were in service. And we set up a program specifically designed to help those veterans experiencing those types of mental health disorders, substance abuse, problems, those types of things.

**Dr. Nelson:** So Penny, I'm going to throw that over to you too. Why do you think we need the veterans services court? Anything else besides what Luke mentioned?

**Penny Nelson:** Um, I, I can speak from experience being a veteran. Um, you relate more to veterans. It doesn't matter what service you served in which branch of service you served in. You relate to fellow veterans, you have shared experiences, even though they may not be exactly the same and you can kind of relate. Um, and the way that our program is actually structured, we pair you up with a veteran mentor. We try and keep you on the same service. Um, but sometimes that doesn't work out when we kind of switch you around, but to have somebody that's kind of been there and done that, um, and has their own experiences that they can relate to you. It helps out tremendously. And you know, they, it's kinda like we pair you up with a buddy of not because we want you to be best friends, but because we want you to talk to somebody that's not your case manager. Um, because we obviously have our hands full with case management and to have somebody outside of the case management realm that you can talk to about anything, it can be your personal family life, you know what you're going through at work school, um, you know, your addiction issues. If you have those mental health, that PTSD, all that kind of stuff, you know, it's just somebody in your corner that you can talk to that it's not going to judge you and they're there to help you and give you as much support as they possibly can.

**Dr. Nelson:** So before we kind of talk about your expanded services, let's talk about specifically the court services. So this is a diversion program, obviously, is there some sort of cycle or, um, uh, expectations they have to meet? Do they have different phases? Can someone explain how it's laid out?

**Penny Nelson:** Luke, do you want to start out with that?

**Luke Weinandt:** Yeah, I can start with some of the services and then I'll kind of let you walk through the, uh, the phases. So we offer, I mean, we offer one-on-one supervision, which is, is huge for our participants. We found that they, they really they're more successful. If we have that one-on-one approach that we have ready access to the County veterans service officers, we can handle anything that comes through with claims. And a lot of these folks that we see coming through we'll have things that they qualify for through the VA that they may not have been aware of. So right away, we jump on top of those services, get them qualified, and if they have any injuries or anything occurred in service, we get them to their veterans service officer to fill out the appropriate paperwork and kind of start that claims process so that when the VA identifies the, you know, those injuries or mental health disorders did occur in service, that we can go on to treat those with the VA services. Um, we have probation services that are also involved in our court, and we kind of see ourselves as an extension of that probation service. They also have substance abuse, like I said, mental health, family, and councils. So we Run into a lot of different problems. And for those family members, it's a huge relief for them that some of these that the veterans get access to those services in a timely manner. That's probably why they're there in the first place. And we do random drug and alcohol testing, and that's something we stay on top of pretty regularly. That's why we do a lot of one-on-one stuff with our participants. We can also do medication monitoring through the VA. We can call and check in with our veterans justice outreach worker to make sure that they're making their mental health appointments, they're meeting with their counselors and that they're getting the appropriate levels of medications. We also offer employment and housing assistance. So we have a huge team behind us to do that. And partners like Naqvi to take care of all of our housing or any emergency services. And we work with the workforce center has a veterans outreach person that works directly with us. So we can focus on employment during while they're doing all those things. That's all kind of how we structure their goals. And I'll let penny kind of walk us through what those phases look like and how we do the goals

**Dr. Nelson:**Before Penny takes over. I just want you to clarify a couple of acronyms for our listeners. I know you already mentioned what Mac V stands for, but if you could do that one again and what a VSO is.

**Luke Weinandt:** Okay. Yeah. So, um, Mac V is a Minnesota assistance council for veterans and their job is primarily housing and emergency related services. And, uh, VSO is a veteran service officer and you will find one of those located in every County office in Minnesota and that's, and that's the starting point for every veteran.

**Dr. Nelson:** Great. All right. So Penny, tell us about the process.

**Penny Nelson:** So we work on a phase system, um, when you first get accepted into veteran's court by judge Federer's our presiding judge. Um, I will do my initial intake since I'm the primary case manager. Um, so I ended up doing a bulk of the case management stuff right now and that's by design. So that's what I Excel at. Um, so when I do the initial intake with a new client, I basically figure out where they're at in life and where they want to go and how we're going to get there. Um, it is definitely a work in progress and as they go through the four phases, there are certain milestones and goals that they must hit. Um, first there's a time requirement is 60 days in phase one. And then it's 90 days for the next three phases and up through graduation. Um, but that's like the least of my worries, because those are real easy to hit. I mean, you literally just have to be in our program. Um, but if you're not hitting your other goals, you may sit in a phase for an indeterminate amount of time. And so I basically have to put my foot up, you're at a, two-ish putting it nicely and saying, okay, what is the problem? Why are you dragging this out and everything? What do we need to readjust it? Um, do we need to wipe out a gold completely and set a new one? Or what steps do we take to get you to accomplish this goal? Um, there are some goals that like one of the main goals that I tell everyone to set, because there's eight goals that we actually said when we do an intake and their, um, their professional goals. There's one specific to the offense that brought you into veteran's court. There's personal goals and there's family goals. So, um, obviously we run the whole gamut of the age groups. And so I have people that are already retired. They're never going to work again. So obviously they don't have to set career goals. Um, but my young guys, their twenties, they get in there a couple of years in the service and now they're in my program. I was like, okay, so what do you want to do for a career? And they're just like, I don't know what I want to do. So, you know, it's definitely a work in progress. Every time you start getting close to accomplishing your goals, we're going to look at them and say, okay, do you know, do we need to address fire? Did we accomplish this goal? You know, what do we need to get you to where you want to be and everything. So it is a very fluid process. Um, some people require a lot more, um, motivation. So, and I would never call myself a cheerleader, but that's kinda what I do. I'm a life coach and I am here to help you succeed. So it's just like, you know, and the least that we can do is like give incentives. If you're meeting your goals, we usually do this. Like if you get new employment, um, if you graduate from college, um, if you graduate from treatment, which is a huge one, not all of our clients, um, actually have substance abuse or are used to issues. But those that do it is huge if you actually complete a treatment program without having any relapses. So that's another thing that we look at when we're moving phases. You know, how long have you been sober for, are you staying in touch with your mentor? Are you keeping in touch with our veterans justice outreach, to person that Harris through the VA? Um, up in Minneapolis, he's a huge resource for the VA and our clients. Um, you know, so it's just like, how active are you being? Are you attending meetings of us, um, recovery support meetings, like you're supposed to be, um, because if you go through treatment, there's going to be after care requirements. Are you sticking to those? Or are you making excuses? Oh, I couldn't go because of this, this and this, or, Oh, I forgot a lot of things are via zoom right now. Thanks to COVID. So there is really no excuse there, there are literally meetings every hour, 24 hours a day, as long as you have the access, so you can hop on them. So, you know, COVID has been a, both a blessing and a curse at the same time, because it's maybe a lot of the things more accessible, but it makes it so people have to come up with excuses too at the same time for things that they don't want to do. So,

**Dr. Nelson:** So let's talk a little bit about the nuts and bolts here. Um, how does someone get into veterans services court? Are there any, uh, offenses that exclude them that they can't come in? Um, and then is there like a regular court session? Is there a team involved? Why don't we talk about some nuts and bolts there? So let's start out. How do they get into it?

**Luke Weinandt:** Yeah. As far as eligibility is concerned, so we have posters hanging in all these seven counties inside where they would be booked and the sign specifically says, have you ever served in the US armed forces? Um, and that's where that referral process can start. And that's typically how we get most of our participants is coming through those doors and they'll register and send their referral to our court coordinator, Kevin and I don't believe that we've ever turned anybody away. Um, so there hasn't been anybody that we specifically set away for. There's nothing that we can't handle.

**Dr. Nelson:** Well, I would probably correct that you probably can't take somebody that committed like murder or something like that, where they know they're going to jail. For sure. Right. Cause this is

**Luke Weinandt:** Correct

**Dr. Nelson:** Because this is a diversion program instead of having to serve jail time or, or as part of a sentencing. Right?

**Luke Weinandt:** Absolutely. That's correct. Okay.

**Dr. Nelson:** Um, so do you even take people that just do misdemeanors, low level kind of crimes?

**Luke Weinandt:** Yep, absolutely. Felonies down. So we will, we'll take anybody, uh, that we get those referrals that come in, Kevin screens them, they bring that to the team. So it's not like it's my decision or Penny's decision, but it will be sent to the team and they'll make the ultimate decision.

**Dr. Nelson:** Well, and then most programs, you know, once you're sentenced, you don't see a judge again, that you kind of get just discharged. Do you guys have a different system than that?

**Luke Weinandt:** Absolutely. Yep. So we'll meet twice a month. We do the second and fourth Fridays of each month, unless there's, you know, something with the judge, but that's all worked out with scheduling and that schedule set for the year. Um, so, and then we'll do a pre-court staffing meeting just prior to our court hearings for an hour. So that's the time that the whole team comes together and we'll sit and review all those notes from probation, case management and the veteran justice outreach worker. They will go through each individual and maybe redesign or tweak so things along the way, but the judge is incredibly involved with those things so that they, he has those highlighted points and the things that each veteran is going to need to hear, um, when they get up there to see the judge.

**Dr. Nelson:** So you truly have membership from all parts of the criminal justice system on this team, right. Do you even have law enforcement officers or sheriffs involved?

**Luke Weinandt:** Yeah, we have everybody. We have the us department of veterans affairs. Um, the County attorneys, human services, the it's yeah, it's a lot of professionals. They want a room. We even have a defense attorney that can help those individuals prior to going in. So we have a lot of people.

**Dr. Nelson:** So do you guys do anything else besides just case management with your veterans, any outside events at all?

**Luke Weinandt:** We do. Yeah, we do a lot of that stuff. So as the years kind of went by, we added on things that we saw could help, better serve our population. One of those things is doing events outside the court, getting those veterans together and including their family members in those events and their mentors as well. So sometimes we'll do pre COVID. We used to do bowling at the wild zone with a meal. A lot of these events were either sponsored locally by our service clubs or wounded warrior project. These partnerships that we have, we have a lot of partnerships outside of that as well, that kind of help out with those little individual events that we do to kind of keep that calm comradery, all those folks together. If everybody's going to be in this community together, we want them to feel and be a part of the community. And we use our outreach events to try to, to try to do that.

**Dr. Nelson:** Did I hear that you probably have an event coming up here soon?

**Luke Weinandt:** We do. Yes, we do. On Wednesday. We'll have a fishing event out here on Madison Lake that when the warrior project is sponsoring and we'll have up to 25 people out there on the ice, all trying to catch fish.

**Dr. Nelson:**

Good luck with that. So let's talk about your mentor program for a little bit, you know, how does someone become a mentor? Do they have to go through the program or do they have to be affiliated with the program? Talk to me about mentoring.

**Luke Weinandt:** Yeah. So the role of the volunteer mentors is to kind of coach and guide and being a role model for that veteran, as they're coming through, we do have a form that they have to fill out so that to have, um, you know, a good discharge, they will have to serve in a similar branch as their mentee. So we kind of pair them up like that. If we can, we try to find, uh, guys and gals that served during the same kind of wartime experience and we'll match those folks up with someone doing well. That's back here and reintegrated. And that veteran mentor really serves as kind of the backbone for that participant coming through to really interpret their experience back to their, to their mentor. You get support that way.

**Dr. Nelson:** So you don't have any age requirements, as long as they've, they've done the service and a military branch and have had a successful discharge, right. And on honorable or successful discharge. Um, so how do they apply to be a mentor?

**Luke Weinandt:** They reach out to their mentor coordinator and we can take all that information and get them signed up. We usually do a training program once a year, although we've held off on that this year because of COVID. So we've kind of remained with the current ones that we have for now, but we are really looking forward to getting those programs fired back up.

**Dr. Nelson:** Well, when we put up the description, um, if there's an email or a link I can put in there, if someone's interested in being a mentor, I'll share, we'll share that. So, all right. So we've got veterans court, has there been a consistent demand even with COVID? Have you guys had a consistent number of participants?

**Penny Nelson:**

Yes. So we, for a while, when COVID first decided to make as lovely appearance, um, we, we kind of like put everything in place so that we were doing everything virtually. We weren't having court, we weren't graduating people. We weren't moving faces. It's like, we all, we're all in suspended animation. Um, and we did that for a couple of months and then we're like, well, how long has COVID going to last? We can't do this forever. So we started opening new up, um, where we can start graduating people and start moving them through the phases. And we were also taking in new referrals. So we've stayed pretty consistent. Um, we, we had a big run on, um, graduations after we started opening them back up after COVID and we weren't getting any new referrals because we didn't know what was going to happen with COVID. Um, but now as it's kind of balanced out, so we'll, we currently have 20, I think we have new referrals that are pending, um, that we're working on. And I have to put this out there. Um, we are, we do cover the entire fifth judicial district, but just because you don't happen to live down here doesn't mean we won't take you. Um, yeah, we, we can work with everyone. Um, virtual zoom is like the best thing ever right now because I don't have to make it as a long trip up to Marshall to go see my client that's up there. We have a new referral from somebody up in Zimmerman, um, of all places because his charges are down here in blue earth County. Um, and yeah, we're willing to work with them because his local veteran's court won't take him for whatever reason. So it's just like, yeah, we're willing to work with anyone as long as they're willing to put in the time and show up, you know, virtually when we need them to, or make the phone calls and do the things that we're asking them. Um, so that kind of makes us unique in the state. Um, everyone is usually just a single County court except for the fifth judicial district and the third judicial district, which is Southeast Minnesota, but there are actually modeling after us because we've been around for so long. So they really looked to us like, how do we do this? And so, but yeah, we're willing to work with everyone that we possibly can. We don't put, we don't discriminate. Well, let's put it that way. We're like, yeah, come one, come all. We're like the statue of Liberty, a veterans court.

**Luke Weinandt:** And to add to that, I think penny, that we graduated participants from about 23 counties at this point.

**Penny Nelson:** Yeah. It's insane.

**Dr. Nelson:** So what is the advantage of having your district model versus a single County model? Why did we get created as a multiple County district?

**Penny Nelson:** Yeah, so I would just like to say, I think because of where we're at here in Southwestern, Minnesota, we have a lot of little counties and like one or two people from those counties at the most. And so it didn't make sense for them to have like a single County veteran's court. So blue earth County is where most of our clients are at. So they like said, Hey, we can work together with all these counties. And that way it's a bigger buy in for people. And it gives them an opportunity. I had somebody that was over in Jackson that just graduated last month and he's willing to be a mentor. I was like, if I ever get somebody out in that area again, yes, I will definitely use you as a mentor. Um, you know, but they're so few and far between I still always just like, okay. Um, but yeah, it definitely, it has its advantages. And one of the things that Kevin told me when I first started doing this case management was we're the wild, wild West down here. Basically, we kind of do whatever the hell we want to, and we don't worry about what the rest of the state is doing and the single good County veterans courts, because they're doing their own thing. And we're sure as hell gonna do ours and ours seems to be working because it keeps going and it keeps expanding.

**Luke Weinandt:** Yeah. And we, and to Penny's point with blue earth County kind of being that hub, um, as far as veteran numbers are concerned, blue earth County is by and large, we have the most for our region, but to not be able to provide those services as we were setting this up anyway, you know, kind of seems ridiculous if we can help a small veteran population on the outskirts. And we have those referrals for each and every one of those small counties. And like I said, we graduated people from 23 and we were really set up to be able to do that with the amount of staff that we had. And from just background of doing outreach with Naqvi was I started with the Southern 40 counties and having those connections, like I said, with the veteran service officers that like the hub of that to provide services has been an amazing collaboration to get everybody on those outskirts or those people that wouldn't have access to these programs. They have access to it and they have, they see us face to face and they can, when we can guide them to their veteran service officers easily and all these other resources that we've talked about, um, we have everything dialed in really quick. So it's, it's easy, it's fast. We can identify the problems very quickly and be boots on the ground and start shaping and changing that veteran's life, the moment that they sign up a paper.

**Dr. Nelson:** So I would imagine just kind of generalizing the veterans, you see, come into your court into your program, have a lot more social issues than just the one crime that they're there for. And you spend a lot of time getting them stabilized and healthy and helping them with, with reaching their goals. So that's very interesting. All right. So closing thoughts with, what do you see at the veterans, the future of veterans court? Um, do you see anything changing, anything adding, uh, let's have led penny go first and then we'll wrap up with Luke.

**Penny Nelson:** So one of the things, um, when I did my internship with Luke way back when it seems like it was so long ago, it was actually only a couple of years ago, but anyways, um, he asked me what my goals were when I got into the field. And I was just like, you know, I really want to focus on dealing with transitional housing for homeless veterans. And so kind of put the bug in his ear and he's a man of his word. And so last April, um, he and the, our venture capitalist actually purchased a, the old public high school in Winnebago. So we are renovating that. And, um, part of it is going to be transitional housing for homeless veterans, not just participants in the veterans court, but any homeless veterans in the area. And we're doing a veterans resource center and we're going to see how far this expands. Um, so, and also it is going to be part of my capstone project for my master's program, which I start on March 1st, so next Monday. Um, and it kind of like it happened all, it, it didn't happen real quick, but it was kind of funny because we already had bought the school. And then I got accepted into this master's program and found out I have to do a capstone project. I'm like, well, I'm already, you know, two steps ahead of everyone else because they already know what I'm going to be focusing on. So it'll be the expanded services, you know, we call it one-stop shopping where you can get everything done at one spot instead of having to go to this person for this and this person for that and everything this way, you have to literally be all in one spot and we can take care of everything for you and make your life a lot easier. Cause you have enough going on to worry about let alone trying to piece everything together.

**Dr. Nelson:** Luke, what are your thoughts on this?

**Luke Weinandt:** Yeah. And to expand on that just a little bit, like penny said, like we'd done a, an amazing job trying to bring this thing along over the last eight years and that's our next step is to have that center that's well supervised and well supported so that we can have some of those other services so that we can have some of the big things that really help our guts out is yeah, they might be in here for an offense and they're all justice involved, but as all the problems that everybody faces with family finances, all of those things, those are the classes that we're really looking to continue to offer, to help expand our services. So it's not just dealing with the, with the offense, but really to kind of take the whole life approach. And like penny said that life coaching support and kind of put all that stuff to work because it's also incredibly important. They can be just fine knocking out their goals with the things that they've done for that got them justice involved. But if we don't fix their finances, if we don't help them fix their relationships, it's just a house of cards waiting to fall apart again. And that's what we really focus on is getting them absolutely everything that we know to make them whole again, we want to provide all those services in one spot and I think we're on the right track to do all that.

**Dr. Nelson:** Well, thank you both, you know, the criminal justice system is supposed to be set up for rehabilitation instead of punishment. And your guys' program really sounds like it's a rehabilitation, helping someone become a functional member of society again, after being involved with the justice system. So I appreciate you taking your time to talk with me today about the fifth judicial veterans services court.

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