



Matt Shirk

Public Defender
Fourth Judicial Circuit

April 5, 2016

The Honorable Angela B. Corey
State Attorney, Fourth Judicial Circuit
Ed Austin Building
311 West Monroe Street
Jacksonville, Florida 32202

RE: Veterans Court

Dear Ms. Corey,

I wish to bring to your attention your office's defiant stance as it relates to referrals of veterans into the Duval County Veterans Court. Perhaps it is best to refresh your recollection of the posture you have taken since the inception of Veterans Court here in our Circuit.

In 2011, the Public Defender's Office proposed the establishment of a Veterans Court. At that time you questioned the need for such a court and sarcastically suggested that we should also establish a "firefighter court" and a "police officer court." Subsequently, at the urging of then Chief Judge Donald Moran, our office took on the heavy task of surveying each person arrested as to his or her military status (which we have continued to do each day since). This self-report revealed that approximately 150 military veterans were being arrested each month, a statistic that continues to this day.

What we have learned is that approximately half of those veterans have seen actual combat, and nearly all suffer from some level of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or traumatic brain injuries (TBI). Presented with this data, your then-Chief Assistant Dan McCarthy still questioned the need for Veterans Court and indicated that your office continued to oppose establishing a Veterans Court in our circuit. It was not until after Mr. McCarthy left your office that we learned he was simply following your direct orders that a Veterans Court NOT be established. Thankfully better judgment prevailed, and Chief Judge Moran ordered the creation of Veterans Court over your objection.

It is important to include this information, because it highlights an atmosphere of contempt that your office has displayed for our very successful Veterans Court. It is also important to point out that your office's position has almost always been to object, from your day one opposition to your repeated opposition in court to veterans entering the program. It is disingenuous of you to travel around our circuit and praise the success of our Veterans Court in a manner that suggests you supported or were involved in its creation. Quite the contrary, from inception your office has been an obstacle to scores and scores of wounded combat veterans getting the necessary treatment they deserve. They received these wounds while fighting to protect the very freedoms you and I are sworn to defend in court every day and deserve our respect, thanks, and help.

Of the 111 participants and graduates of our Veterans Court, your office has agreed to only 19 veterans participating in the program. Fortunately, level-headed judges have repeatedly ignored your office's position and determined these heroes were eligible and sent them to Veterans Court OVER your office's objections. The attached transcript is simply one of the numerous times your office has consistently and strenuously objected to deferring veterans to Veterans Court to the frustration of our office and even the presiding judge. My hope is that this letter will shed some light on the posture your office has taken on referrals of veterans into our Veterans Court and that you will establish an atmosphere of inclusion from this point forward.

The Public Defender's Office believes in the American values of freedom and justice for all, and our work with veterans who dedicated their lives to defending these freedoms is something in which we take tremendous pride. When we first began this journey nearly six years ago, we never dreamed we would face such fierce opposition from your office to such an unbelievably worthwhile program. I can think of no population more worthy of support from the criminal justice system than veterans wounded while serving our country who defended the freedoms of all Americans.

I look forward to your office reevaluating your position on Veterans Court.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'MS', is written over the typed name 'Matt Shirk'. The signature is stylized and fluid.

Matt Shirk