

TO: Chief Justice Ann Timmer, Supreme Court of Arizona
Arizona Attorney General Kris Mayes

24 April 2025

FROM: Veterans Court Conference Task Force

SUBJECT: Statewide Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) Conference After-Action Report

1. PURPOSE. To provide an overview of the first statewide veterans treatment court conference as well as recommendations from participants regarding opportunities to expand and improve VTCs in Arizona.

2. BACKGROUND. On June 5, 2024, Chief Justice Robert Brutinel established a task force to plan a statewide conference for stakeholders involved in veterans treatment courts in Arizona. (see Appendix A, Administrative Order No. 2024-88) The order required the task force to submit a recommended education plan and agenda to the Chief Justice. The task force plan and agenda were approved on September 25, 2024 by Chief Justice Ann Timmer.

The task force met on a bi-weekly basis from June 2024 through February 2025, culminating in the presentation of the state's first statewide VTC conference at the Arizona Supreme Court's Judicial Education Center on March 3, 2025.

3. DISCUSSION.

a. Timing and Duration. Given the fact that the state had never conducted such a conference, the task force believed it would be best to keep things simple by limiting the program to one day. The group also agreed that scheduling the conference in 2025 would provide adequate time to coordinate and plan quality programming. March 3rd was chosen as the conference date to facilitate participation by the Chief Justice and the Attorney General. The task force believed their participation would demonstrate the state's commitment to the importance and value of veterans treatment courts.

b. Scope. The task force considered potential themes for this conference and agreed that it should focus on existing veterans treatment courts. Because there had not been a venue for these courts to interact and share practices and experiences in the past, the task force believed that providing an opportunity to do so would provide a solid foundation for future conferences. Moreover, a program focused on existing veterans courts might provide state leadership with a more informed and broader view of how best to support these courts now and in the future. The final agenda (Appendix B) reflects this approach.

c. Participation. As directed in the administrative order, the draft agenda and programming was designed for "judicial officers, prosecutors, defense counsel, and court staff involved in Arizona veterans courts." Note that a significant part of the agenda involved break-out group discussions on best practices for judges and court administrators, counsel (defense and prosecution), and clinicians (treatment providers).

The task force used several methods to invite attendees as well as market the event. A save the date flyer (Appendix C) was sent via email to potential participants using a master list of Arizona veterans courts provided by the US Veterans Administration (VA) Justice Outreach program, as well as distribution lists used by the Arizona Supreme Court to communicate to courts and administrators throughout the state. Task force members also invited community leaders and veteran service organizations to attend. To facilitate participation from throughout the state, the plan accommodated both in person and virtual participation.

A final registration flyer (Appendix D) was sent in mid-January 2025 using the same email distribution lists. A total of 164 people registered for the event: 96 in-person and 68 virtual. Participants included judges, attorneys, administrative staff, clinicians, probation officers, veteran service organizations, state and local government officials, and law students.

d. Conference Program. The conference program was executed as planned. A few minor changes were made to some of the discussion panels just prior to the conference, but the content and scope of the program were unaffected. The hybrid format worked relatively well, including virtual participation in the break-out groups. The conference began and ended on time. COJET and CLE certificates were provided for participants (Appendix E). By all indications, the conference achieved its objectives.

e. Evaluation and Recommendations. At the close of the conference, participants were encouraged to provide feedback and Court staff included an evaluation form in the conference materials provided electronically to all participants. Comments and concerns were also captured during break-out sessions by recorders. The results of the participant evaluation are included in Appendix F.

A summary of the conference evaluation follows:

- Participants rated the conference overall at 4.3 out of 5, very good to excellent.
- This event was a good first effort for a conference, but could be improved with more opportunities for participants to interact and problem solve together.
- Content was helpful for some, but for others who have been working with VTCs, the conference did not provide new information.
- Conference provided good opportunity for networking and informal sharing.
- Difficult for some virtual participants to hear and see everything.
- Staff and facility were uniformly praised.
- More time for break-out sessions and deeper content would make conference more meaningful.
- Recommended program topics for future conference(s):
 - Trauma informed care
 - Mentorship programs
 - Funding sources
 - Assessments/Metrics

- Superior Court involvement
- Post-conviction courts
- More best practices
- Standardization
- Rural court challenges

A summary of break-out session comments/concerns follows:

- Judges/Administrators:
 - Mentor programs are a best practice for VTCs; many courts do not have mentor programs and would benefit from training, guidance, and support.
 - Many VTCs struggle with providing the necessary resources to support their operations. Grants and support from local community organizations help, but are not always sustainable.
 - Cross-jurisdictional coordination is for the most part informal. Some regional courts have formalized mutual support, allowing consolidation of dockets and shared use of scarce resources.
 - Currently there are no standards for collecting data relating to VTCs. Some courts have limited ability to capture data. A centralized data collection system would provide information needed to support grant applications and VTC program assessments.
- Counsel:
 - Prosecutors and defense counsel should be educated to understand the unique challenges presented by veterans in order to be effective participants.
 - Counsel can and should play a role in cross-jurisdictional coordination of cases, i.e. cases in which a veteran defendant is charged concurrently in two or more jurisdictions.
 - Participation by prosecutors and defense counsel in pre-court staffing of cases is critical to the effectiveness of VTCs.
 - Training for prosecutors and defense counsel should be required before participating in VTCs. Some attorneys in the breakout session received training from All Rise, a national organization that supports treatment courts throughout the U.S. Such training should be explored for broader application in Arizona. The task force would add an additional

recommendation that contracts for public defenders engaged in VTCs include a training requirement.

- Clinicians:
 - VTC judges, staff and counsel would benefit from trauma education. Awareness of the actions taken and language used in the presence of veterans, victims, family members, and others who suffer from trauma associated with sensitive cases would make the VTC environment safer and more effective for participants.
 - VTC best practices from a clinician's perspective include providing a treatment plan and offer from the government up front so that veteran defendants clearly understand expectations and potential outcomes.
 - Military service symbols and/or flags on display have a positive impact on VTC decorum.
 - Key to VTC success is treatment of underlying issues (e.g. post traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, military sexual trauma) that often require more engagement than simply resolving the criminal cases faced by veterans.
 - Most VTCs do not have the resources (funding and/or providers) to conduct drug and alcohol testing as a component of their treatment plans/contracts with veteran defendants. Such testing provides greater accountability and improves outcomes.

4. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS. Taking into account feedback from conference participants as well as the task force's own observations, the following finding and recommendations are offered in the spirit of expanding and improving VTCs in Arizona:

- Training and Conference(s).
 - COJET and Annual Conference. Given the level of participation and interest in this conference, the Supreme Court should consider incorporating VTC-related programs as part of its judicial education offerings to include hosting an annual conference. The annual conference should be a separate event focused on VTC stakeholder, rather than integrated into the judicial conference or other training event.
 - Senior Official Engagement. The participation of the Chief Justice, Attorney General and senior officials from the VA and Arizona Department of Veterans Services greatly enhanced the credibility and gravitas of the conference. The message of support that this kind of

engagement sends to those involved in VTCs is critical to maintaining the spirit of optimism and spirit within this community.

- Venue. The in-person registration was limited by the Education Center's maximum capacity. Because this was the first statewide conference, the task force was unsure about the level of interest and attendance. The in-person registration filled up quickly and pushed the limits of the facility—some who would have attended were left to attend virtually after in-person registration was completely filled. The virtual option worked relatively well for those who could not physically attend. If the Court decides to host another VTC conference, a larger venue should be considered to allow for all participants to attend in-person. The task force recommends against a hybrid conference given the technical challenges associated with live virtual participation in a larger conference. Recording of key programs for those who are unable to attend would be beneficial.
- Target Participants. For this first conference, the task force focused on bringing together those who are already involved in VTCs so that best practices could be shared and connections be created and expanded. A next step for a future VTC conference would be to expand invitations to include participants from jurisdictions that have not adopted VTC programs as well as others who have a stake in the administration of justice for Arizona's veterans. For the most part, this conference focused on courts of limited jurisdiction. A future conference should broaden its scope to include more involvement of general jurisdiction courts.
- Attorney Training. Training for prosecutors and defense counsel engaged in VTCs should be a requirement for all VTCs. The task force did not explore all of the potential options for such training. For prosecutors, the Arizona Prosecuting Attorneys' Advisory Council might be a resource for developing and producing relevant training. Coordination with All Rise to explore in-person and on-line training for prosecutors and defense counsel may also yield opportunities for statewide training.
- Areas of Special Interest. Whether as part of a future conference or developed as continuing education modules for VTC stakeholders, the following areas of special interest were identified by conference participants:
 - Mentor programs
 - Building and sustaining community support
 - Trauma-informed courts
 - Resourcing VTCs
 - Data collection

- Funding and Support

- During the conference participants were informed by the Attorney General about her efforts to acquire funding from several sources for VTCs. Funding was a critical issue identified by conference participants. Many VTCs have difficulty in sustaining operations due to limited resources. Whether the current funding efforts at the state level are successful or not, funding for these courts should continue to be part of the Court's and the AG's respective budget plans and legislative agendas.
- Standardization of court processes and procedures is another area where some support might be offered. Although some participants cautioned against a one-size-fits-all approach, there was some consensus—and the task force agrees—that VTCs would benefit from some effort to provide a platform for sharing models and information.
- There is no centralized system for capturing data related to VTC cases. Such data would support grant applications as well as provide better opportunities to assess VTC programs from a statewide perspective. The Court and/or the AG should consider developing a system to track such data. The task force understands that the Court and the AG may already have systems to track data for other cases, perhaps these systems could be expanded to accommodate VTC data collection.

5. CONCLUSION. As an inaugural event, the task force believes the intended outcomes outlined in the Court's Administrative Order of providing an opportunity for "training, coordination, and collaboration among justice partners who administer these courts" was achieved. The level of interest and enthusiasm from the VTC community was overwhelming. Although the task force never doubted the level of commitment of those involved in these courts, it was inspiring to see the level of statewide participation and excitement about bringing this relatively new community together. It was an honor for each of the task force members to serve. The task force is grateful for the personal participation and support of the Chief Justice, Attorney General and the Veterans Administration, and hopes that this first conference sparks the beginning of a redoubling of efforts to support veterans treatment courts throughout Arizona.

Respectfully,

John F. Phelps
Task Force Chair

Appx A: Administrative Order No. 2024-88, as amended
Appx B: Conference Agenda
Appx C: Save the Date Flyer
Appx D: Final Registration Flyer
Appx E: COJET/CLE Certificates
Appx F: Conference Evaluation