# A Statewide Survey of Intake Methods and Instrumentality among Veteran Treatment Courts in Pennsylvania

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## Abstract:

In the coming years, thousands of veterans will be coming home from combat deployment, many of them having completed in excess of 10 tours in combat zones. Many veterans will encounter troubles reintegrating into civilian life, and some will run afoul of the law. Rather than process them through the traditional criminal justice process, a new model of Veterans Treatment Court is emerging that seeks to tailor socio-legal interventions to veterans' specific needs, including PTSD therapy and social services. Modeled from other problem solving courts, these veterans courts provide pre-trial or post-plea intervention, including therapy, mentoring, employment assistance, and community service. In so doing, the veterans courts, in theory, facilitate reintegration and allows veterans a second chance to conform their conduct to the law. Unfortunately, very little is known about how these courts operate, what outcomes they expect, or whether they are effective. This study lays the foundation for that research by providing a typology of veterans courts eligibility in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Using semi-structured interviews, this study describes the intake and screening features of the 17 veterans courts currently in Pennsylvania. This data will allow researchers to develop programs and process evaluations to facilitate development of the highest possible quality in veterans courts.

## Research Questions:

What are the legal eligibility requirements for Pennsylvania's 17 veteran treatment courts participants?

What are the administrative eligibility requirements for Pennsylvania's 17 veteran treatment courts?

If differences in eligibility requirements exist, how do they influence veterans' access to justice?

## Methods:

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with members of the veteran treatment court teams, either in person or via telephone; documented and analyzed the interviews, and identified commonalities and distinctions among the various courts. The researcher entered the data from these interviews into an Excel spreadsheet. She will later export the data to an analytic software program for further analysis in the context of a larger study.

## Initial Results:

Surprisingly, every court has different eligibility requirements. There are a number of factors that define a veteran's eligibility into a veteran's treatment court.

More than half of the sample courts only allow veterans whose criminal misconduct is directly related to their service-related disability.

A third of the sample courts allow veterans who were other than dishonorably discharged.

Half of the sample courts allow murder and violent defendants to participate.

## Discussion:

Differences in eligibility may give rise to differences in access to justice. These differences are important for analysis for a number of reasons. With these differences in veterans courts, not everyone is granted the same access to benefits. This results in some veterans getting a second chance in society while others do not. This issue could be seen as discriminatory, because a veteran who is not given the same access to certain benefits such as veterans treatment court will not have the opportunity to make their life better. Since this problem solving court is fairly new, these differences will help us in the future to better evaluate what is and what is not effective.

## Conclusion:

There are great disparities in how veterans courts define eligibility. These disparities result in very different veteran populations within the courts. It appears that access to justice is influenced by this, but further research is needed.

## Future Research:

The researchers are commencing personal evaluations of veteran treatment courts in the northeastern state. This study will help us understand the nature of scope and mission of veteran court models prior to undertaking this personal evaluation.

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