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**Delaware County Council and Court of Common Pleas
appoint task force to study veteran's justice initiative**

Delaware County Council joined the District Attorney and the President Judge of the Court of Common Pleas in announcing a Delaware County Veterans Justice Initiative intended to effectively address the special needs of military veterans who are in the court system or prison.

County Council Chairman Jack Whelan said that Council is appointing a 15-member task force to study the implementation of a Veterans Justice Initiative that will include a Veterans Treatment Court. A key component of the Veterans Justice Initiative is to connect veterans with treatment and support services, offered through public and private programs that include the County Office of Human Services and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

"We are seeing that veterans face a number of challenges and combat-related illnesses when they come home from the chaos and dangers of combat," said Chairman Whelan. "We want to take a proactive approach with a specialized treatment court that can better meet the needs of our veterans."

"We are grateful to our veterans for putting their lives on the line to protect the liberties we enjoy here at home, and it is important for us to connect veterans with the treatment and support services they might need in all areas, including criminal justice," he said.

According to Whelan, the task force will study the option of adding a third track to the existing treatment court options in the County's Court of Common Pleas.

Delaware County established a Mental Health Treatment Court Program in 2008, which involves collaboration between prosecutors, public defenders, probation officers, social workers and members of the Office of Behavioral Health and its providers of services. Under the leadership of Common Pleas Court Judge Frank T. Hazel, that treatment court reports that many non-violent offenders have been diverted from the prison system and, with help, have turned their lives around and are now contributing members of our community.

Linda Barbera, Delaware County Treatment Court Coordinator and a member of the Veterans Justice Initiative Task Force, said there has been significant success with the defendants who have gone through the treatment court process. The goal of the treatment court is to treat the offender in order to prevent them from repeating criminal behavior.

"There are benefits to the individual and to the community in improving lives and reducing criminal costs," Whelan said.

Chairman Whelan was joined in announcing the Justice Initiative Task Force by District Attorney G. Michael Green.

(more)

(Veterans Justice Initiative continued)

U.S. Rep. Patrick Meehan was also present to announce that he is introducing legislation that will address service member adjudication through long-term, united treatment and education or SALUTE.

“I commend County Council for their work to ensure that our veterans get the assistance they need,” said Congressman Meehan. “The fact is that Veterans Treatment Courts are working for our vets. I am proud to help support this initiative. Now we must ensure that communities across the country are able to establish Veterans Treatment Courts. I will soon introduce federal legislation to do just that.”

Congressman Meehan plans to introduce legislation that will give communities access to federal assistance to create Veterans Treatment Courts in their area, and improve existing Veterans Treatment Courts. The funding will come from federal dollars already appropriated, according to Congressman Meehan. The bill will not require any new spending.

The Delaware County Veterans Justice Initiative task force is comprised of individuals in law enforcement, criminal justice and human services, and many of the members are veterans including President Judge Joseph P. Cronin, County Veterans Liaison Ralph Galati and Springfield Police Chief Joseph Daly.

Whelan explained that studies show that as many as half of the troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer post-traumatic stress and other disorders and that mental health is the second-most treated ailment for returning veterans in the Department of Veterans Affairs system.

The first Veteran’s Treatment Court was established in Buffalo, N.Y. in 2007. Delaware County would be the sixth jurisdiction in Pennsylvania to establish a special court for military veterans.

More than 1.6 million American troops have served in Afghanistan and/or Iraq and many of the returning veterans are struggling with substance addictions or mental health issues. Courts are seeing a common thread of war-related illnesses that many underlay criminal behavior.

Chairman Whelan said the County has documented 145 military veterans who are defendants that entered the County criminal justice system since January, 2011.

“We are grateful to the members of this task force for partnering on the Veterans Justice Initiative. Helping our veterans requires extensive cooperation with veteran’s networks, service organizations, our police, our District Attorney, our courts, community-based agencies and County government agencies. Working together, I believe we can achieve positive results on behalf of our veterans, who have given us so much,” Whelan said.



Veterans Justice Initiative

Caption: Announcing the Delaware County Veterans Justice Initiative at a press conference Monday, July 18, are (from left) Media Mayor Bob McMahon, County Councilman Mario J. Civera Jr., U.S. Rep. Patrick Meehan, Councilman Tom McGarrigle, Council Chairman Jack Whelan, Pennsylvania Supreme Court Justice Seamus McCaffery, District Attorney G. Michael Green and Fred Johnson, founder of Heroes Today.