

Veterans Court Graduation

May 28, 2019

Chief Justice Michael G. Heavican

On behalf of the Nebraska Supreme Court, I am deeply honored to be here with you today to celebrate the first graduates of the Lancaster County Veterans Treatment Court.

Yesterday we celebrated Memorial Day and the lives of our many veterans who have passed. We celebrated their sacrifices for - and contributions to - our great country. How fitting, then, to celebrate today our living veterans who have completed Veterans Treatment Court and who will again sacrifice and contribute positively to our community and country.

Those of you in this room don't need me to tell you that Veterans Treatment Courts are transformative. Everyone who has come here today to celebrate these graduating veterans witnessed that

transformative change firsthand. Treatment Courts can change lives, restore families, and strengthen communities.

As we honor the success of these graduating veterans, I want to pause to consider some national statistics:

- 80% of criminal offenders abuse alcohol or other drugs;
- 1 out of every 6 veterans struggles with substance abuse;
- 60% of individuals arrested for most types of crime test positive for illicit drugs at the time of arrest;
- 50% of jail and prison inmates are clinically addicted, and of the 140,000 veterans in our prisons, 60% have substance use disorders;
- After these inmates are released from prison or jail, approximately 85-95% will relapse and

return to drug use, which in turn leads to more crime and more arrests;

- Those are grim statistics.

But the good news is that problem-solving courts, like this Veterans Treatment Court, can radically improve those statistics. Treatment Courts don't just reduce our jail and prison populations, they also reduce crime in our communities. And treatment Courts are the most successful intervention in our nation's history for leading people out of the criminal justice system and into stable, productive lives.

- Nationwide, 75% of drug court graduates remain arrest-free at least two years after leaving the program;
- In Nebraska, 95% of drug court graduates remain crime-free one year later;

- Nationwide, for every \$1 invested in a problem-solving court, taxpayers save up to three times that amount in avoided criminal justice costs alone;
- It is estimated that Nebraska's drug court programs save taxpayers somewhere between \$2.6 million and \$9.7 million dollars per year.

Statistics like these are not lost on the Nebraska Legislature. When left untreated, substance use disorders and mental illness contribute to increased crime in Nebraska, cost millions of dollars in lost productivity, and contribute to the burden placed on law enforcement, courts, and the correctional systems.

The Legislature has also made an express statutory finding that problem-solving courts are a cost-effective alternative to traditional criminal justice proceedings, and an effective way to reduce recidivism. In other

words, treatment courts are an example of effective criminal justice reform.

In 2016, the Nebraska Legislature authorized the expansion of problem-solving courts to include Veterans Treatment Courts, reentry courts for those being released from incarceration, DUI courts, and mental health courts. The Legislature has given the Supreme Court broad statutory authority to create and administer problem-solving courts (see Neb. Rev. Stat. §§ 24-1301 and 24-1302), and we take that responsibility very seriously.

There are problem-solving courts operating in every judicial district across the State. Nebraska currently has:

- Adult Drug Courts
- Juvenile Drug Courts
- Veterans Treatment Courts

- Family Drug Courts and Family Dependency Courts
- A DUI Court
- A Young Adult Court and
- Reentry Courts

These treatment courts serve different populations, but all operate on the same basic premise: intensive supervision, frequent drug testing, regular court appearances, and accountability.

Every participant is given the treatment and services needed to address his or her substance use and mental health. The participants are required to address issues relating to personal responsibility and accountability. Those who graduate have demonstrated stability and commitment to their recovery and have become law-abiding, productive, and responsible members of our communities.

Today there are approximately 1,500 people participating in problem-solving courts in Nebraska. Forty of our busy judges have stepped up to oversee those treatment courts, and do so in addition to their other judicial duties because they see the powerful impact these courts can have in their communities. These judges are supported in that work by dedicated probation staff and a long list of treatment providers, therapists, and community agencies providing services and support to the participants.

Nebraska's problem-solving courts continue to expand. They serve as a shining example of how the third branch of government can innovate and improve the delivery of justice in our State.

We continue to improve and ask whether we can do this better. We are currently conducting a 36-month statewide program evaluation and cost-benefit analysis of Nebraska's Adult Drug and DUI Courts to

examine adherence to current best-practice standards, outcome evaluations, recidivism, and a current cost-benefit analysis.

It speaks volumes that even in the midst of a budget crisis the Legislature appropriated \$2.6 million to problem-solving courts for the 2018 fiscal year and increased that amount for the 2019-2020 biennium. In large part, that is because we have been able to demonstrate that our problem-solving courts are effective at reducing crime and cost taxpayers significantly less than jail or prison. But even more important than the cost savings are the lives that are saved and the generations that are lifted by the transformative change that occurs in problem-solving courts.

I would like to close by commending each of the graduating veterans on their powerful examples of hard work, resiliency, and commitment to recovery. It

is your sense of honor, duty, leadership, and respect that inspired you to serve and protect our country.

Those same traits have allowed you to successfully complete this Veterans Treatment Court program. Your dedication and resolve is a testament to the limitless potential of our veterans when they are given the resources and support they have earned.

I also want to thank the judges, probation staff, and all other members of the Veterans Treatment Court team – the coordinators, supervision officers, veteran mentors, VA treatment providers, drug court technicians, and prosecutors and defense attorneys. You have all played a critically important role in the success of these graduating veterans. The work you do every day is transformative.

Last but not least, I want to acknowledge that some of the most important contributions to our problem-solving courts are made by people whose

names I don't even know – family members and friends who have come here today to share in this celebration with the graduates sitting here.

This program is demanding. I'm sure there were times when each of these graduates had doubts about whether they would be able to succeed. At such times, it is often the support of veteran mentors, family, and friends that provides the motivation and encouragement necessary to spur them on.

On behalf of the Nebraska Supreme Court, I join with everyone on the Veterans Treatment Court team, and all of the family and friends here today, in commending these graduates. We are grateful for your service and inspired by your example.

Thank you.