

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF VETERANS TREATMENT COURT PEER MENTORS: ROLES, EXPERIENCES, AND EXPECTATIONS

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VALUE STATEMENT

To better understand and improve mentor programs in veterans treatment courts (VTCs), this study highlights issues and successes identified in a study of VTC peer mentor experiences that may serve as a foundation for future examinations of peer mentor/mentee relationships. Practitioners can use these findings to inform their VTC mentor policies and practices, as well as to develop research questions related to their own programs' use of veteran peer mentors and their impact on outcomes, such as treatment compliance and graduation in VTC.

ABSTRACT

In recent years, veterans treatment court (VTC) scholars have begun to unravel the complexities surrounding these new problem-solving courts and their effectiveness. Yet, surprisingly, research designed to better understand VTC peer mentors, who are considered a hallmark of VTCs, is absent from the existing literature. It is the purpose of this qualitative, exploratory study to address this gap within the literature in order to better understand the roles, experiences, and expectations of VTC peer mentors from differing geographic and military backgrounds. Findings include peer mentor perspectives concerning personal experiences, individualized methods regarding how each peer mentor approaches their role within the selected courts, the importance of building trust and friendship through the use of confidentiality, feelings of separation from the court treatment team, and issues with inadequate training in preparation for their roles as peer mentors. These findings are an initial and important first step toward better understanding VTC peer mentors in order to advance future research on their utilization and impact within VTCs.

KEYWORDS

Veterans treatment court, peer mentors, veteran mentors, problem-solving courts, courts

INTRODUCTION

Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), and Operation New Dawn (OND) are some of the recent conflicts fought by the United States (US) under the Global War on Terror. These and other conflicts and engagements have produced many injuries, both physical and mental. As such, it is estimated one in five service members who have returned will exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, suffer from traumatic brain injury, develop substance abuse issues, and/or be diagnosed with a mental illness such as major depression or anxiety (Hawkins 2010). Further, ballistic armor plating that protects vital parts of the body, such as the head and chest areas, and vehicular armor plating have been successful in reducing soldier deaths from improvised explosive devices (IEDs), increasing survivability, and enhancing individual emotional and psychological issues

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for returning service members (Berenson 2010). Belmont, Schoenfeld, and Goodman (2010) have estimated that the percentage of US military personnel killed in action due to gunshot wounds, blunt force trauma, and explosions has been reduced from 33% in prior military engagements to 4.6% of military deaths during OIF, OEF, and OND, with IEDs accounting for an overwhelming 75% of military injuries sustained in these conflicts.

This increase in survivability, while inherently good, has had a direct impact on returning military personnel as the decrease in military service members being killed in action has resulted in returning service members having to cope with severe emotional issues, (e.g., depression, hyper-vigilance, anxiety, irritability) that have developed as a result of their experiences (Freidman 2006). This has led to the labeling of traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder as the signature wounds being suffered by veterans of OEF, OIF, and OND (Christy et al. 2012). These invisible wounds are taken home by returning service members and have resulted in increased contact with the criminal justice system (Elbogen et al. 2012). Veterans who are experiencing issues and are coming into contact with the criminal justice system have not gone unnoticed by those in the criminal justice system, and veterans treatment courts (VTCs) have been developed as a result (Russell 2009).

VTCs were developed to mirror the widely implemented drug court model, which has proven successful at lowering recidivism, reducing jail and prison populations, and increasing time-to-recidivism for graduates who come back into contact with the criminal justice system (Brown 2011; Heck, Rousell, and Culhane 2008; Shaffer 2011). While VTCs differ from drug courts in respect to eligibility (VTCs require participants be veterans), they follow similar operational methods.² However, while the drug court model has been largely effective, there should be concern that this success may be more difficult to achieve within the more complex VTC.

While the drug court model has been developed to deal with substance-abusing offenders, VTCs play host to a number of potential issues including co-occurring substance abuse and mental illness, driving under the influence, simple assault, disorderly conduct, and other charges. The fact that VTC eligibility requires only veteran status creates the potential for a wide range of issues being considered suitable for court involvement. Further, veterans may be hesitant to speak about their issues with non-veterans, which presents the unique challenge of making connections between those participating within the court and the court facilitators. Finally, there may be variations between service in different military branches (Army, Marines, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard), differing types of service requirements (active duty versus reserves/guard), differing military occupations (infantry, communications, artillery, military police), length of service, and combat involvement. It is no surprise, then, that VTCs differ from drug courts through their use of peer mentors to assist the VTC participants during their time within the court. These peer mentors are veterans themselves and are central to the VTC model given the unique experiences shared by many veterans.

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²See Lucas and Hanrahan (2016) for an overview of VTC utilization of therapeutic jurisprudence and effective intervention.

Veterans are a distinct population within the United States who share experiences that are unique to those of civilians. These experiences range from service within the military hierarchy to deployment and the accompanying stressors of extended tours of duty in foreign, and sometimes hostile, countries. VTC teams have noticed this and instituted peer mentorship programs. Peer mentors can assist with court requirements (e.g., drug and alcohol treatment, anger management, and mental health screenings) as well as lend support and motivation to the court participants while reporting the participants' progress and challenges to the court treatment team (Baldwin and Rukus 2015; Knudson and Wingenfield 2015; McGuire et al. 2013). Peer mentors can come from a variety of sources, such as from the community as volunteers or may be provided by the Veterans Administration (VA).

If peer mentors are considered a critical component of VTCs given their absence in other problem-solving courts . . . they must be researched to better understand their utility and effectiveness.

While traditional volunteer peer mentors do not have specific requirements other than service within the armed forces, VA Peer Support Specialists have to meet certain requirements. These requirements have included being a veteran with a discharge status of other than dishonorable, being in recovery from a mental health condition for at least one year, and receiving training and certification by a VA- or State-approved not-for-profit organization (McGuire 2016). Regardless of whether the peer mentor is a community volunteer or VA Peer Support Specialist, his/her role is one of importance that needs to be studied and understood. While the peer mentor/court participant relationship within the VTC is an understudied topic, it is the focus of the present study.

If peer mentors are considered a critical component of VTCs given their absence in other problem-solving courts (McGuire et al. 2013), they must be researched to better understand their utility and effectiveness. However, there is minimal research available about VTCs due their relative newness, and much less is known regarding the operation and effectiveness of the mentors within these same courts. The current study examined peer mentors within three VTCs in Pennsylvania to answer the following research question: what are the roles, experiences, and expectations of peer mentors within the VTC? Developing a better understanding of peer mentorship and how its inclusion and use within these courts will provide a foundation for future research to focus on their effectiveness at assisting veterans who have come into contact with the criminal justice system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Drug Courts

Drug courts are considered the first model of problem-solving courts and were developed in the late 1980s as a direct response to criminal court dockets becoming inundated with drug offenders (DeMatteo, Filone, and LaDuke 2011). This influx of substance-abusing offenders can be attributed to the War on Drugs which had begun under President Richard Nixon in the late 1970s. The success of the drug court model can be credited to their specialized approach to handling eligible drug offenders

within the court; drug courts utilize community offender management to provide adequate treatment and rehabilitation while under court supervision (Heck, Roussell, and Culhane 2008). By combining judicial oversight (judge, prosecution, and defense) with law enforcement, treatment programs, and social service organizations, drug courts identify the needs of each offender and mandate treatment models accordingly (Marlowe et al. 2006). Drug courts implement specific components outlined in the United States Department of Justice publication *Defining Drug Courts: The Key Components* (1997). While these key components initially were created from information neither empirically researched nor supported (Gilbertson 2008), they have been shown to be largely effective by existing research.

The growth of drug courts in the US is the result of their success at lowering recidivism and relieving financial strain at the local and state levels. The success of the drug court model at lowering recidivism, decreasing jail and prison populations, and making the criminal justice system more cost-effective has increased the number of adult drug courts operating in the US. During the past two decades, adult drug courts have grown from 1 in 1988 to 1,438 in 2012 (National Drug Court Resource Center 2012). While drug courts operating in different jurisdictions and regions may approach their court functions dissimilarly, empirical research supports the effectiveness of the drug court model.

Carey, Mackin, and Finigan (2012) selected 69 evaluations of drug court processes for review based on adequate sample sizes and similar measurements of cost-effectiveness and recidivism. They found that the drug courts following the ten key components have significantly better outcomes, such as reduced recidivism and cost to the criminal justice system. Specifically, drug courts that work collaboratively as a team, provided structure and accountability, offered wraparound services, trained team members, and monitored performance outcomes were the most cost-effective. Further, investments in community treatment, community supervision, staff training, program evaluation, and management information systems brought lowered costs for both the criminal justice system and the taxpayer. Additional research has also confirmed the benefits of the drug court model, such as lower recidivism rates for life-course persistent drug abusers following program completion (Heck, Roussell, and Culhane 2008; Schroeder, Giordano, and Cernkovich 2007); significantly shorter mean jail time for re-offense and longer periods of criminal abstinence (Brown 2011); and greater cost-effectiveness than traditional sanctioning (Cissner et al. 2013). These positive outcomes for drug courts and the municipalities in which they exist have been linked to the successful implementation of court objectives under the ten key components of drug courts as well as the flexibility in tailoring treatment and court operations by varying jurisdictions (Hiller et al. 2010; Shaffer 2011; Zweig et al. 2012). With this validation, it is no wonder that local, state, and federal funding is available for the creation and operation of the drug court model, and the number of operational drug courts has grown rapidly since their inception.

Drug courts have been successful in assisting offenders with substance abuse issues since their start in the criminal justice system. The number of drug courts across the nation has grown steadily during the past two decades. As a result, jurisdictions with operating drug courts have seen recidivism rates for participants decrease and financial savings for both the criminal justice system and community members. These successes have not been ignored, and VTCs were created following the drug court model.

Veterans Treatment Courts

While empirical evidence on the effectiveness of VTCs is scant given their relative newness, existing research has looked extensively at how drug abuse and mental illness can relate to crime. As a result, there is little argument that a causal link between substance abuse, mental illness, and criminal behavior exists (Pinals 2010). However, veterans returning home and entering the criminal justice system have not been researched in great detail (Christy et al. 2012). It is estimated that one in eight service members returning home from duty has post-traumatic stress disorder and that 20% of all frontline troops suffer from traumatic brain injuries with less than half seeking help for these disorders (Cartwright 2011; White et al. 2012).

One reason attributed to veterans choosing not to seek mental health services is the stigma associated with service members who seek such care and the negative outcomes attached to seeking mental health services, such as being denied for promotion. This negative view continues to impact service members once they leave the military and, for some of the veterans who do seek care, they may choose to avoid VA services altogether to further distance themselves from the stigma of having a mental disorder (Adamson et al. 2008). It has been suggested that the avoidance of the stigma of mental health treatment may lead to drug and alcohol abuse through self-medication or an increased likelihood for engagement in sensation-seeking behavior (Cavanaugh 2010). While their overall numbers have been shown to differ across service eras and recruitment criteria, justice-involved veterans have been predicted to steadily increase in the coming years due to the recent-era conflicts and the nature of having an all-volunteer force (Greenberg and Rosenheck 2009). While a definitive relationship between these injuries, the avoidance of mental health services, and crime has yet to emerge, the criminal justice system has recognized increased numbers of veterans coming into contact with the criminal justice system (Russell 2009). As a result, VTCs have been used increasingly to assist with this population.

VTCs were created following the successful drug court model. As previously discussed, drug courts accept individuals with substance abuse histories as their main diagnoses. While it is not rare to have participants in drug courts with co-occurring diseases, substance-abusing behavior is given precedence over the other when accepting new participants. However, VTCs do not exclude either diagnosis and will accept participants who may suffer from one or multiple diagnoses as long as they have served in the armed forces (Russell 2009).

While preliminary evaluations have shown positive results, especially for graduates (Hartley and Baldwin 2016), VTCs are moving forward into the unknown due to the fact that they are dealing with a population of veterans whom little is known about and who may be suffering from co-occurring diagnoses (Brummett 2013). VTCs do not focus on one type of offense or condition, but rather accept participants who may be experiencing drug abuse or mental illness separately, co-occurring, or not at all. While a necessity, this may create additional obstacles and impede successful outcomes due to the VTC having to manage multiple diagnoses and offenses where other courts (e.g., drug and mental health courts) focus on specific charges or diagnoses. Further, an essential component of VTC, and one that has not been researched to date, is the appointment of mentors to the individual participants. The use of peer mentors may assist VTCs with better understanding the diverse population of justice-involved veterans with varying issues, diagnoses, and backgrounds. These mentors are modeled after other peer support programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), which have used sponsors to assist with support, motivation, abstinence, and recovery from substance abuse.

Alcoholics Anonymous Sponsorship Effectiveness

Similar to VTCs, having a sponsor is one of the key components of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous 2010). It is a relationship that is considered extremely personal and one of equals. Interactions are to be comfortable (outside of crisis), confidential, and meaningful. Within these interactions the sponsor is expected to be a reliable, consistent contributor of knowledge to the mentee, be understanding and unbiased, and assist with the facilitation of prosocial networks (Alcoholics Anonymous 2010). Research looking specifically at the effectiveness of AA mentorship has shown positive results, establishing its importance in facilitating positive life changes.

Abstinence is one of the main goals of AA and has been empirically researched as a result. Research has shown that sponsorship is a significant factor when predicting both current and future abstinence (Kaskutas, Bond, and Humphreys 2002; McKellar, Stewart, and Humphreys 2003). Further, research has indicated that AA sponsorship aids in agreement with the program (Witbrodt et al. 2012), future completion of AA steps (Gomes and Hart 2009), positive relationships in the mentee's life (Subbaraman, Kaskutas, and Zemore 2011), and attendance within the program (Tonigan and Rice 2010). While mentorship within AA is proven to be effective, the success of the program may not translate directly to VTCs given the participants' involvement within the criminal justice system and the inclusion of court-required updates on the progress of the court participants.

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Mentorship within VTC

While sponsorship shows positive results within AA, it may prove to be a more difficult relationship within VTCs. Sponsors in AA are advised to be confidential when working with the mentee. However, given that the VTC participant is being supervised by a judicial court complete with judge, prosecution and defense attorneys, probation officers, and treatment providers, keeping information pertaining to the participants confidential may violate court policies. Mentors may have to inform the court of details of their interactions with VTC participants as the mentor (i.e., sponsor) may also be under the oath of the court. These circumstances may invoke lack of trust or paranoia when dealing with court mentors if they are seen as working for "the other side." If a lack of trust develops, any positive effects of the relationship may become void with negative effects, such as drug abuse and non-reporting, becoming pronounced. The potential for mistrust becomes problematic given the hallmark use of mentors within the VTC model.

McGuire et al. (2013) conducted a national survey of Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists (VJOs). VJOs were created by the VA to assist veterans involved with the criminal justice system and are involved with VTC programs across the country. These specialists are responsible for assisting the VA with identifying veterans who have become involved with the criminal justice system and linking these veterans with appropriate services to assist with their rehabilitation. They also serve as an essential team member within the VTC model. Of the VJOs surveyed by McGuire and colleagues (2013), 55% reported that their VTC had a mentor program with an additional 21% of courts reporting their VTC

had a mentorship program in development. The VTCs reported a total of 851 active mentors at the time of analysis with each VTC averaging nine mentors.

The high number of VTCs utilizing peer mentorship can be equated to military camaraderie and the experiencing of unique situations many in the civilian sector do not and cannot fully understand. Mentors within VTCs are volunteers who understand what being in the military entails as well as the very unique experiences that come with serving in the armed forces. Similarly to AA sponsors who are recovering addicts themselves, VTC mentors are an essential part of the VTC model given their ability to bridge the gap with a population of veterans who may feel alone given their backgrounds in the military, enhancing their use and necessity within the court.

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The use of peer mentors is further reinforced by the findings of a survey of active military members and veterans who, when asked whether they believe peer mentors are beneficial, 90% responded that they are beneficial in some way (Rieckhoff, Schleifer, and McCarthy 2012). However, the respondents were speaking about mentorship in a general, non-VTC model which, while showing the potential use of military camaraderie to assist those in general need, does not address the mentor/mentee utility and effectiveness in VTCs.

METHODS

Site and Sample Selection

As there exists no empirical examination of the roles, experiences, and expectations of peer mentors within VTCs, this study aims to explore these elements. The current study is an exploratory qualitative examination involving interviews with peer mentors within three VTC programs in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania has 18 active VTCs—second largest number within a single US state (Baldwin 2013)—with the first becoming operational in 2009 and the most recent addition being added in 2015. Pennsylvania also contains the fourth highest population of veterans in the US, numbering 1.03 million, with 12% having a service-related disability and approximately 5,000 under some form of criminal justice supervision (Reed, Nash, and Griffith 2014; United States Census Bureau 2012; United States Department of Veterans Affairs 2010).

Using purposive sampling, three counties with operational VTCs were selected based on their location (rural, suburban, and urban). Geographic location was used to explore any differences in training of mentors, approaches to mentoring, or differing resources that may vary based on court location. In Pennsylvania, rural and urban counties are designated once their total population is divided by the square mileage for each respective county. A county is designated rural if the population is 284 residents or less per square mile, with the remaining counties exceeding 284 considered urban (The Center for Rural Pennsylvania 2016). The designations given to the VTCs within the current study are as follows: 1) rural (209 residents per square mile); 2) suburban (233 residents per square mile); and 3) urban (351 residents per square mile). For this study, the counties under study were kept confidential at the request of the selected sites.

The current study employed maximum variation sampling to identify mentors who would be contacted for inclusion within the study. Maximum variation sampling yields findings that are representative of the entire range of variation within the sample and allows the researcher to document both the uniqueness between cases as well as important shared patterns whose importance stem from their emergence from heterogeneity (Maxwell 2013; Patton 1990). When using small qualitative samples, heterogeneity can be an issue due to differences between the participants. Maximum variation sampling reduces this limitation; differences between participants will be identified, which is useful for exploratory studies such as this one, and, as Patton (1990) states, “Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects or impacts...” (172). For the purpose of this study, variation between participants was determined by identifying different geographic regions, branches of service, and lengths of service. Geographic location was determined by the population size the courts serve. Military branch served as the second dimension and used the Air Force, Army, Coast Guard, Marine Corps, and Navy as potential selection criteria. Lastly, length of service was chosen by whether the peer mentors continuously served in the military up to 48 months or more than 48 months. The dimensions of branch of service and military service length were chosen due to the impact these dimensions have on various outcomes for veterans of the military and the limitations of current research incorrectly treating branch of service and service length as unidimensional. These dimensions impact the military occupation role within the different branches; rank obtained; training received; number, frequency, and type of deployments; risk of combat; and veterans benefits available. All of which can influence the peer mentors’ perceived roles, expectations, and experiences when dealing with other veterans within the VTC.

The above dimensions separated the sample, and five peer mentors from each court were purposively selected for inclusion within the study once they were deemed to meet the above criteria. The rural court had a total of nine mentors, with the sample representing 56% of mentors within the court. The suburban court had 11 mentors, with the sample representing 45% of the mentors within the court. The urban court had 16 mentors, with the sample representing 31% of the mentors within the court. The selected individuals formed an initial sample size of 15 mentors (n=15).

Table 1 provides the age and gender breakdown of the sample—a total of fifteen (n=15) peer mentors chosen based on differing court location, service branch, and service length. The ages for the study sample ranged from 55-69 years old with an average age of 62 years old. The impact that age and gender have on the sample will be discussed briefly in the summary of findings below and in more depth within the discussion section.

Military service branch for each court location sampled is presented in Table 2. Five participants (n=5) served in the Army, four (n=4) served in the Air Force, five (n=5) served in the Navy, and one (n=1) served in the Coast Guard. In terms of service length, seven (n=7) served four years or less, and eight (n=8) served more than four years. Eleven participants (n=11) were within the enlisted ranks (E-1 through E-9), and four (n=4) were officers (O-1 through O-6) upon their discharge from the military. The entirety of the sample (n=15) was discharged honorably from the military.

TABLE 1
AGE OF PEER MENTORS

AGE	Male	Female
	n %	n %
50-60	3 20	2 13.3
61-69	10 66.7	— —

TABLE 2
SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

	MALE		FEMALE	
	N	%	N	%
SERVICE BRANCH AND LOCATION				
ARMY				
Rural	4	26.6	—	—
Suburban	1	6.7	—	—
AIR FORCE				
Rural	—	—	1	6.7
Suburban	2	13.3	—	—
Urban	—	—	1	6.7
NAVY				
Suburban	2	13.7	—	—
Urban	3	20	—	—
COAST GUARD				
Urban	1	6.7	—	—
LENGTH OF MILITARY SERVICE				
Four years or less	7	46.7	—	—
More than four years	6	40	2	13.3
RANK AT TIME OF DISCHARGE				
E1 - E9	11	73.4	—	—
O-1 - O-6	2	13.3	2	13.3

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Participants were asked identical questions in an open-ended format, and the interviews were audio recorded. Interviews were conducted at local veterans resource centers tied directly to each of the VTCs within the study. Follow-up phone calls and emails were utilized to clarify any responses that the researcher was unclear about or to request additional information.

Transcriptions of interview recordings were completed by the researcher and input into NVivo. NVivo is a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQ-DAS) that assists in identifying important concepts and themes within data. Important themes that emerged from the interviews with peer mentors were identified and coded in order to begin to understand their roles and perceived responsibilities when mentoring VTC participants. While interviewing 15 mentors could permit the researcher to achieve an information saturation point, additional mentors could have been chosen if saturation had not been reached after the initial interviews were completed. Saturation was deemed to occur when the information retrieved became redundant with no new themes emerging.

RESULTS

The primary data were used to answer the study’s primary research question: what are the roles, experiences, and expectations of peer mentors within the VTC? The specific themes that emerged from the interviews provide insight into the understudied area of VTC peer mentorship with a focus on the following: roles and success; confidentiality, trust, and friendship; military branch, rank, and matching; and issues and challenges. Court location, branch of service, and service length are represented by the following when presenting direct quotes: RC (rural county), SC (suburban county), and UC (urban county); AR (Army), NA (Navy), AF (Air Force), and CG (Coast Guard); and 4L (four years or less) and 4M (more than four years).

Roles

When discussing their roles as peer mentors, the individual experiences shared between the mentors and mentees were imperative to understanding the challenges experienced by the VTC participants. Eleven (n=11) peer mentors mentioned personal experience directly. This experience comes from their personal struggles with addiction as well as their time being counselors for others trying to maintain sobriety.

I feel that in order to have a positive impact on these guys is whether or not you can relate to them. Not just relating to military service,

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which is important enough, but relating to them and being able to say that I have been there before. I have been sober for quite some time now, and it is not easy and it will always be something I have to monitor and think about. They respect that. They see that it can be done and that not all is lost. There will be good days and bad ones, but hey, I get it. (Mentor #15 - UC NA 4L)

I have, really, been on both sides of the law and I have struggled with my inner demons. More importantly I made it through, you know? Once, I guess you could say I found my way, I was able to become a counselor myself. How can you really mentor someone when you don't really know what it is that they wake up with every day? How can you look them in the eye and tell them how to approach a new way of thinking when you have never thought that way? I wear my scars with pride and use them to help some of my guys. (Mentor #10 - SC NA 4L)

Peer mentors (n=13) also believed that being a positive role model for their mentees was important in guiding their behaviors. When asked about what being a positive role model encompassed, responses included being there for fellow veterans and understanding the challenges they are facing.

I view it as being a shepherd. You are there to just make sure, not live their lives or make decisions for them, but if they start straying a little bit, you have to keep them in line. It is kind of like parenting. (Mentor #7 - SC AF 4M)

My role is strictly advisory, one that does not carry as much weight as the court orders and things like that. Strictly, I do not know any more of the law than anyone else. My role is more of a common sense role of an older guy that's been around and can help these guys not feel so alone. (Mentor #3 - RC AR 4M)

Also recognized was the importance of not providing constant advice to the mentees and that being a sounding board was more important than having all of the answers all of the time. As one mentor (RC AF 4M) stated, "I think that is probably, it is a sounding board, and as I have learned more, that is the most important thing a mentor can do." Other peer mentors felt similarly.

I don't really pry unless they want to talk about something or if they are really concerned about something. If that is the case, they will let me know and we can move ahead, hopefully, in a good direction. Most of the time I just let them take the lead. I am there as a sounding board. (Mentor #3 - RC AR 4M)

Some of these guys have been through an awful lot for their age. It makes you think about it, really, what they have seen, what they have been through. It is a shame that they have to go through these situations alone with nobody to vent to. These guys can vent on me. I may not have the best answers, but I will listen. (Mentor #6 SC NA 4L)

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The importance of being a sounding board and someone the mentee can vent to also allows the mentors to better understand the struggles the mentees are going through and relay that information back to the court. Ten (n=10) mentors explicitly stated that this information allows them to become liaisons between the mentee and the VTC team.

The longer I have done this you see gaps, there are a lot of people on the team, but you can start identifying the cracks in between them. It is a shame that some of the men and women cannot

get backup help when they have been clean but may be struggling with staying clean. So I think the mentor needs to help the mentee understand what is going on and let the other people in the court know what they are going through. (Mentor #5 RC AF 4M)

I am a real big fan of trying to, I have a real strong belief that, these guys were at their best when they were in the military and you try to get them back to that. Making that reconnection to the service, to what they were like when they were in the service, the values and details, reconnect them with that and then help them connect to the court team and what they are trying to do. Bring both sides together. (Mentor #9 SC AR 4M)

It isn't about graduating but rather taking to heart changing their lives and getting on a more positive track for the future.

The peer mentors believe that personally understanding what the mentees are experiencing and effectively listening to their thoughts permit them a more thorough understanding of the current issues each mentee faces, which they then relay to the court. These important themes lead directly to what the peer mentors feel constitute success when dealing with their mentees.

Program Success

Interview responses relating to what the peer mentors consider success within the court ranged from the standard court requirement of graduation to more in-depth quality of life factors that entail post-graduation growth and understanding.

Success is when they look you in the eye and you see clarity, a plan of action. Not that they did not have one before, but they are doing it themselves and staying clean and sober, going to treatment. That will get them to graduation and lead them to success. Getting out of the court and back to normal. A positive transformation. (Mentor #14 UC NA 4L)

Other peer mentors (n=10) included post-graduation success as including quality of life changes ranging from staying clean and law abiding to having positive interactions with family, as stated by (Mentor #11 UC NA 4M): “It isn’t about graduating but rather taking to heart changing their lives and getting on a more positive track for the future.” Additional interviewees had similar responses.

Well, you know the programs benchmark will be graduation. That is the programs benchmark. My benchmark is a little different from that. I would like to see them continue in a positive way to turn their lives around. More than just graduation, and I am sure the court wants to see them do well into the future, but they have to show it works, and that is through graduation. You do not receive a coin and get better all of a sudden. (Mentor #11 UC NA 4M)

The court looks at graduation as success, their measuring stick, and it is a good one to show that the court works. This is good because if the court doesn’t look like it works, then what are we doing? But to me, and this is my personal feeling toward the veterans in the court, is if they are happy and their lives are fulfilling. Are they good husbands or boyfriends, do they look after their kids, are they honest with themselves and others. A lot of it comes back to military ideals, respect for self and others. That is what I gauge my success on. (Mentor #10 SC NA 4L)

Confidentiality

Contrary to other court actors, such as the treatment and probation team members who must report all interactions and updates on the participants to the full VTC team, a large majority of peer mentors (n=13) stated that keeping interactions with their mentees completely confidential and not reporting them to the court was necessary in order to build a positive and open relationship.

...we have a meeting every time we go to court in the judge's chambers and we review each client going through there for about half an hour to an hour. They ask what we talked about and I tell them I can't really tell you, but I can give the general scope. The biggest thing would be sharing personal experiences. The shit we've seen, we know that we are on the same team, we know where each one is coming from and keep it between us. (Mentor #1 RC AR 4L)

Confidentiality is key to our relationship. If I have to go and run back to the court and tell the judge every little thing, that will destroy what I am trying to do, I cannot do my job as a mentor when always having to tell the court about personal issues that the veteran felt comfortable telling me about, which is not very easy for some of these guys. (Mentor #14 UC NA 4L)

Within keeping this confidentiality the peer mentors also saw themselves as being separate from the VTC team and their supervision mandates.

No, I don't tell the court everything. They will get that from their reports from probation and from the VA and the group sessions. The court is getting reports from everyone on the treatment team. We are not on the treatment team, we are adjunct to that. The only thing I am required to report is if I have information that the veteran is going to harm themselves or another person, that is when confidentiality goes out the window. But anything else stays with me and the veteran. (Mentor #13 UC CG 4L)

If they tell you after the fact, that they went drinking or something, and it didn't show up on one of their urine tests, you keep that confidential and work with them. You do not run to the probation officer or someone else. That would be counterproductive. You address the issue and talk it through with them. (Mentor #11 UC NA 4M)

While many respondents were adamant that they were keeping confidentiality due to the relationship building between themselves and their mentee, it may also be due to the mentors feeling disconnected from the VTC team as a whole. As two study participants responded:

No, but I think we may start getting there. That was actually a communication that I had with the judge. I got the sense that we are over here and the treatment team is over there and there is, I don't want to say friction, but a definite disconnect. (Mentor #11 UC NA 4M)

We are not on the treatment team, we are adjunct to that. The only thing I am required to report is if I have information that the veteran is going to harm themselves or another person, that is when confidentiality goes out the window.

My expectations were that I would be more involved with the veteran's process in the court system. And my expectations now I can see how the court leaves the mentor out of everything that is going on with the veteran. And I understand there are some issues with privacy but you do not know what is going on with the court and the veteran himself. I have no idea what is discussed there [in the pre-court meeting]. I don't know. No one has ever actually told me why the mentor is not involved with the veteran pre-court discussion every two weeks. They discuss everything prior to the court hearing. Then they come out and of course the veteran goes through his little thing, but you never know how he is making out, what progress he is making. (Mentor #8 SC AF 4M)

I got the sense that we are over here and the treatment team is over there and there is, I don't want to say friction, but a definite disconnect.

However, other mentors stated that, while the mentors are left out of the pre-court treatment team meetings and they feel separate from the treatment team, the court may have good reason for operating in this manner.

I am thinking that it is probably a good thing that you are not there [in the pre-court meeting] so that the veteran feels that you are kind of on his side and not talking about him with the court and probation and the rest. But on the other hand, I think they should have a meeting with the mentors sometimes to say hey, keep a watch on your veteran, they are the trained professionals, I am not, but maybe I am missing something and they can tell me what they think and a heads up. It is a double-edged sword there. You do not want to alienate the veteran so he comes and talks to you but you also want to know what is going on behind the scenes and how he is doing. (Mentor #10 SC NA 4L)

I try to keep everything confidential and not report anything back to the court unless I have to. I think this way helps to keep an even keel between the court, mentor, and veteran within the court. This is probably why we do not have a lot of contact with the treatment team, they do not want to damage the relationship between us [the mentor and mentee]. (Mentor #15 UC NA 4L)

Trust. While it is unclear if the perceived mentor/treatment team disconnect is the product of necessity or one which needs to be addressed, the mentors (n=12) are in agreement that confidentiality, and their approach to it, is the main path toward building trust with their mentees. According to the sample, building trust is not easily done and, in some cases, it is never fully established. One mentor (Mentor #5 RC AF 4M) felt that building trust was difficult due to the mentees having spent "...so much of their life lying and covering things up and they throw what they think is most acceptable out to the court and me. You can't tell what is the truth and what isn't." Others, such as (Mentor #1 RC AR 4L), mentioned that trust is not built in every case.

Everything we talk about is not being relayed back, I want to get the trust and that is pretty hard to get. It is not there off the bat. I don't, I am trying to think now, I think that only two out of the six [mentees], that the trust level developed overtime pretty well. (Mentor #1 RC AR 4L)

The lack of trust seems to be present from the beginning of court participation with the potential

mentees not fully understanding the approach that the mentors take. Further, some courts do not specifically order a mentor/mentee pairing. These issues contribute to many participants not engaging the mentor services.

They are offered our services, and I was surprised because I thought they would all accept them. Maybe pride and privacy are the two things that make them afraid that we will get too close to them in their personal lives. (Mentor #4 RC AR 4L)

We are not probation, we are not going to be spying on them, we are not going to be asking them for urine tests. That we are there to help them and be on their side as veterans. I think more would sign up for it if they knew that beforehand. (Mentor #14 UC NA 4L)

However, it seems that the mentors interviewed were adamant about not telling the court information regarding their mentees and that building trust was their top priority.

The hardest part is getting close to the guys at the beginning. They don't trust us, they think we are probation officers and they are afraid that we are going to tell others what they tell us. It all stays confidential. If I have a problem, I will call [the mentor coordinator]. But I am not telling the judge or anyone else. I don't even have numbers for the probation officer or lawyers, but I would never tell them anything negative anyway. (Mentor #2 RC AR 4L)

Additionally, according to nine (n=9) of the study participants, the court will not ask the mentors to violate their trust between themselves and their mentees.

She has to understand that she can trust me and if she tells me something I am not going to run to the judge, probation or anyone else. That is a huge part of being a mentor and what we do. Whatever you say to your mentor stays between you two and the court will never ask you about the kind of conversations you have. (Mentor #12 UC AF 4M)

As difficult as gaining trust is, the challenge does not end there as the mentors must continue nurturing their relationship while keeping their mentees in compliance with court requirements.

I would say that it is pretty high. But you have to work at that, right? I have a personality that, and it comes from having kids, you have to nurture your relationships. I always say, what happens when you do not? You will shut them down. A lot of these guys have very low self-esteem. You have to build that relationship with them so that they entrust you. Just build it and nurture it. (Mentor #7 SC AF 4M)

I think as long as you let them know that you are there and that your ear is open all the time to anything they have to say, good or bad, I think the trust comes natural. I feel like he knows, at least I hope he knows, that he can call me anytime he wants. If he needs an ear to chew on, he calls. I feel that the trust is there. It is just a matter of keeping it and not losing it. (Mentor #6 SC NA 4L)

Friendship. The process of building trust through confidentiality, as stated by VTC mentors, is one of nurturing and providing assistance by acting as a sounding board and confidant. This process, unsurprisingly, led some of the study

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sample (n=6) to become close friends with their mentees. One mentor (Mentor #4 RC AR 4L) stated, “With my veteran, I feel that we have become sort of good friends. I see other mentors and their relationships becoming like that as well.” This friendship can carry over even after the mentees graduate from the VTC.

The one guy that I was involved with, he graduated but I think it is the kind of thing, at least with him, that he needs an ongoing friend. Another guy got booted from court for a new charge and he and I have maintained contact regularly, not as intense as when he was in the program, but we exchange texts once a week and we probably see each other once a month. (Mentor #9 SC AR 4M)

I have gotten close to some of my guys. I have summer plans with one of them and I think we are both looking forward to it. I would have no problem having one of these guys living next to me or being a close neighbor. We develop respect for each other and the friendship, well I guess that just comes naturally after that. (Mentor #13 UC CG 4L)

Other mentors (n=5) gave insight into why the mentor/mentee relationship becomes a friendship, such as military background and camaraderie.

We are not as disconnected from their lives as the treatment team is. I mean no disrespect there, but they look at them on paper, are they checking the boxes or not. I help my veteran with jobs and personal decisions with his girlfriend and other stuff on top of what he is doing with the court. It is all connected but I see my veteran in a different way, something deeper than if he is just staying clean or not. We are in this together. (Mentor #15 UC NA 4L)

Military Branch and Rank

When asked if there were any issues that arose from different military branches or ranks between mentor and mentee, fourteen (n=14) mentors stated that they have not experienced any issue outside of the normal joking that takes place. For example, “No, just the normal joking between the military branches. You will always have the joking, but a vet is a vet” (Mentor #11 UC NA 4M). “No. I am the only officer and rank has never come up. As far as branch goes, just the normal type of kidding” (Mentor #12 UC AF 4M). “No, never had that. Never had that problem. I think we treat it as a veteran, no matter what service, no matter what rank. A veteran, is a veteran, is a veteran” (Mentor #3 RC AR 4M). “No, so far I have been matched with infantry, like me. I do not see that as making any difference” (Mentor #2 RC AR 4L).

Matching. Whether the mentors believed that branch of service presents an issue or not, the majority of study participants (n=12) agreed that matching mentors and mentees based not only on branch of service and combat, but also on general background was imperative.

I would focus on the matching between mentors and mentees with those who are similar. You want to be careful who you put them with, if they are really religious, you have to put them with someone similar to enhance their chances of bonding. (Mentor #9 SC AR 4M)

It is all connected but I see my veteran in a different way, something deeper than if he is just staying clean or not. We are in this together.

Matching is important, a key role of being a mentor is knowing what they are going through, something most veterans can understand and reiterate to the mentees. It is a struggle, but I have had some bad times. It is important to have a veteran. It would be the best, if possible, a women veteran mentor with a women veteran mentee. We just do not have that many female mentors. It would be great even, like my current guy is a Navy vet, and I am an Army vet...I have been working in the field a long time so I understand the Navy, but that is not always the case. He should have a Navy guy, can't do that, but that would be perfect. (Mentor #3 RC AR 4M)

Matching based on combat experience also was seen as necessary for success as well. I get the impression, in my mind I think they should stick someone who was in actual combat with other young guys who have been in combat. I have never experienced that but for me to be a mentor for someone like that, I really don't have any advice or words to share with them about their experiences. (Mentor #6 SC NA 4L)

It is finding that balance with each one of these guys and what they need. This is where you can choose who you want to work with in the beginning. When you are in a platoon of 17 and you are the only one that comes back, and you are 23 years old? Oh my God! There is not a lot that I can help with there, I can help with the other stuff. You have to know what your limits are and what you are capable of. The match from the beginning is what we try to get right every time. (Mentor #7 SC AF 4M)

Issues and Challenges

When coding the interview responses three main themes presented themselves through what the mentors saw as specific issues and challenges they face: age, time availability, and inadequate training prior to becoming a peer mentor.

Age. Age presented as a challenge to eight (n=8) of the interviewees. Responses included having to become familiar with new social media platforms, how these platforms are no substitute for face-to-face meetings, and their thoughts on how the mentees are exposed to much more than they were at their age.

Trying to understand them is pretty hard. So far my guys are in their early twenties, so it is a completely different culture with Instagram and Facebook that I don't do. I have had to familiarize myself with these things, something I had no idea about before. (Mentor #2 RC AR 4L)

Difference in age was surprising to me. I didn't text much before, maybe a little with the wife and kids, but now that is the main way that I communicate with my guys. It was slow going with him at first, maybe just getting to know one another, but as soon as he texted me the first time it is pretty constant. It is no replacement for face-to-face meetings, you can learn a lot about a man from looking at him, watching his eyes, but the texting is the contact that is most frequent. (Mentor #14 UC NA 4L)

... it is a completely different culture with Instagram and Facebook that I don't do. I have had to familiarize myself with these things ...

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the age of the peer mentors within the study sample was 55-69 with an average age of 62 years old. All but one (n=14) were married at the time of data collection. This age and life experience gap between the mentors and their mentees presented itself as a parenting role to some in the sample (n=6), which was not necessarily seen as a negative aspect.

My age had more to do with him than anything else. Never feel the mom issue with the girls, but it felt like I was giving him mom advice which is not necessarily bad, but I felt I came across that way to him. (Mentor #5 RC AF 4M)

These guys are younger than my kids. I like to think that I can be a positive factor in their life. Be there to answer their questions just like I would with my kids but with a different relationship. (Mentor #6 SC NA 4L)

Time. The time commitment needed to be an effective peer mentor was described by the mentors as having a direct impact on recruiting new, younger peer mentors, meeting their court obligations, and one that can fluctuate with each mentee.

Yes. Time is a large obstacle. There are a lot of people who would like to do it, but cannot due to the time commitment. We have had younger guys come in [to the training] but never finished due to the time it took [to be a peer mentor]. (Mentor #12 UC AF 4M)

A lot went through it and many did not become mentors due to the time commitment recommendations. They have jobs and are trying to make, trying to advance through life. At a young age you don't have time to take off of work or tell your boss you can't make it in. I understand that. (Mentor #3 RC AR 4M)

Court obligations, such as participating in the weekly and monthly VTC hearings, presented a unique challenge to eight (n=8) of the study sample.

In my case the fact that I work fulltime, time is a large issue. It is always a time thing for me and getting to the court meetings. With anything I do, I belong to a lot of things, I am juggling a lot of the time. (Mentor #3 RC AR 4M)

I want to be at court and stand with my veteran. That is a large part of what we do; we have their backs when they stand in front of the court. We represent them, if they need us to, but I can't always make it. I am retired but have appointments for my health and family members that I have to go to. I can't be in two places at once and sometimes I have to choose [which to attend]. (Mentor #15 UC NA 4L)

The mentors also find it difficult to meet face-to-face with their veterans due to the time commitment which can also hinder the mentees' availability as mentioned by (Mentor #12 UC AF 4M) and (Mentor #4 RC AR 4L), respectively: "Of course time is a challenge. Another issue is that the participant does not find time to meet but the judge takes care of that," and "Well, the thing is it takes time and you have to have time to dedicate to it. It is hard for some of these guys to find time to meet with work and other commitments." The time commitment varies across different VTC mentees and, according to the study sample, largely depends on the level of need presented by the individual mentee.

The other thing I have to admit, those that have a difficult mentee spend much more time than those of us who don't. I am also aware of that. Again, when you are in the judge's chambers prior to, you hear the mentors talk about the mentees, I can see that in many ways they are spending much more time with their mentees than I do, because they have to. I personally think, especially

for those mentees that are alcoholics or drug users, man, the best mentors are the ones that are clean and sober and have been there before, but also have the amount of time to spend with them as well. (Mentor #3 RC AR 4M)

Training. The training received by the peer mentors within the study sample was largely seen as inadequate, leaving them to proceed in their roles through what they believed to be the right thing to do. Some mentors also had difficulty with understanding what role the VA plays and if they are doing all that they can.

They didn't really know what we would be doing. But I sort of left thinking that we would be figuring it out as we go. It was, they were just figuring out what mentors needed to know about the program. Some of it was overkill, in my opinion, but I remember leaving and thinking that it didn't feel quite right. (Mentor #5 RC AF 4M)

We found that the VA was just trying to push people through to say, "yep, there is another one complete," for the sake of a number. We want a measure of success of how many individuals do we put back into society as productive citizens and never in the court system again. If that is what the VA is doing, and I don't know much of what they do there, then it isn't going to work. (Mentor #7 SC AF 4M)

The primary suggestion on how to enhance the training and make it more beneficial to future peer mentors was to include previous mentors and mentees who can speak to the training group and discuss their experiences, both positive and negative.

Training the mentor, by people that have mentored before and have mentored with success and failure stories. The structure of the training peppered with examples. The training should include stuff like who contacts who and some basic things like, my first young fella didn't always show up for court and he would text me and say my car broke, who do I tell? What is the best way to pass information? That goes back to having a good point of contact for each situation. There will always be new situations, but to include some in the training would be great. (Mentor #5 RC AF 4M)

One thing they could do is bring back one of these individual participants and have him give his side of the story. You know, sometimes we can help these guys and sometimes we cannot. To have a good success story would help a lot for the newer mentors and for us as well. Just integrate it into the training, bring them back that has a success story and show that the program does work. (Mentor #4 RC AR 4L)

DISCUSSION

When discussing their roles as peer mentors within the selected courts, having shared experiences with their mentees was imperative. Sharing personal experiences with their mentees allowed the mentors to become positive role models within the lives of their mentees by creating a social bond built on mutual respect and understanding. Additionally, the approach the mentors agreed was best suited for their roles was simply being a sounding board; the mentees could speak their minds and express their feelings, whether positive or

To have a good success story would help a lot for the newer mentors and for us as well. Just integrate it into the training . . .

negative, while the mentor listened without providing detailed guidance, advice, or directives. Previous research about the relationship between mentor and mentee support this approach as, when providing positive feedback and building their relationship with the mentees, peer mentors are found to be just as effective as traditional treatment providers in providing positive outcomes for the mentees (Clarke et al. 2000; Klein, Cnaan, and Whitecraft 1998).

Additionally, mentors with similar experiences to that of their mentees have been shown to have positive results that fit within the goals of both court mandated treatment requirements and with increasing the mentee's quality of life. When mentors have experienced, and successfully overcome, similar negative circumstances as those they mentor, previous research shows reduced inpatient services and improved relationships with their individual providers, whether that be mental health or substance abuse services, and also fewer re-hospitalizations than those with mentors without shared experiences (Chinman et al. 2014; Min et al. 2007; Sledge et al. 2011). Committing to treatment services and maintaining an ongoing, positive relationship with their peer mentor are shown to create a number of quality of life enhancements such as improved satisfaction with life situations, finances, and overall life problems (Felton et al. 1995); improved social functioning and reduction in life stressors (Klein, Cnaan, and Whitecraft 1998); improvement in mental functioning and a decrease in number of days homeless (Van Vugt et al. 2012); and increased levels of empowerment and hopefulness for recovery and the future (Chinman et al. 2014).

The approach taken by the peer mentors and the positive effect this approach has produced in previous research has direct benefits to the veteran population. First, by improving quality of life and increasing satisfaction with life situations and interactions, veterans and their families can begin to heal through the veteran's positive reintegration back into their families (Walsh et al. 2014). Additionally, increased engagement with treatment providers can decrease issues of self-medication and lack of treatment engagement, which are key barriers to effectively treating justice-involved veterans (Hawkins 2010). Last, decreasing the number of homeless days experienced by veterans is imperative as veterans experience a higher risk of being homeless compared to the civilian population and currently represent 10%, over 160,000 individuals, of the overall homeless population (Hammett et al. 2015; Tsai, Mares, and Rosenheck 2012). The particular approaches taken by peer mentors, at least within this study sample, have the potential to positively impact the veterans they mentor.

Confidentiality was seen as an important part of the mentor/mentee relationship. This confidentiality differs from that of the court treatment team which is required to discuss personal details regarding each individual veteran, including his/her involvement in treatment, urinalysis test results, relapses, and program involvement. While information sharing was the status quo for the VTC team, the mentors were adamant that they would not violate their mentees' trust outside of them hurting themselves or someone else. The mentors stated that having to tell the court anything about their interactions with their mentee would not only hinder their effectiveness at providing support to their

Sharing personal experiences with their mentees allowed the mentors to become positive role models within the lives of their mentees by creating a social bond built on mutual respect and understanding.

veterans, but also would decrease the effectiveness of future mentors and fewer court participants would want to accept mentor services if they believed mentors would tell the court about their conversations, a barrier that was mentioned as being difficult to overcome. Keeping strict confidentiality between mentor and mentee has been shown to have positive benefits for those being mentored, and it is a highly coveted trait according to AA mentees (Stevens and Jason 2015). However, while keeping all shared information confidential strengthened the mentor/mentee bond, it also distanced the mentors from the VTC team.

The mentors stated that they did not feel as connected to the court as the treatment team was. Many were not able to sit in during the pre-court sessions and were not updated about their mentees' progress by the court treatment team. There was a general feeling that while the treatment team worked directly with and for the court, the mentors were solely there for their mentee. Interestingly, while some of the mentors spoke of the need for greater cohesion between the court, treatment team, and mentors, they understood why the court may want to keep them separate; in order to have the mentors build trust through confidentiality, the court should not expose them to situations in which they may violate the trust, whether in actuality or perceptually. These feelings of separation from the court and the reasoning behind them need further examination for both clarification and utility in order to assess its impact on the mentors themselves. Regardless, the positive impact that confidentiality has on building trust and friendship, as noted by the peer mentors, cannot be overlooked.

Mentors within the study developed friendships which went beyond the mentor/mentee relationship and, in some cases, lasted well after the mentee's involvement with the VTC. This friendship can allow the mentee to form positive community contacts with not only their mentor, but also with the many groups the mentor may be a part of, such as military and veterans groups. Previous research (e.g., Koenen et al. 2003) has shown that veterans returning home who had community contact which was positive exhibited lower rates of post-traumatic stress disorder than those veterans returning home to what they perceived as a negative community reception (e.g., the lack of support for returning Vietnam veterans). Becoming involved with their mentors allows the mentee to strengthen their social bonds and enhance their treatment outcomes (Koenen et al. 2003). Furthermore, as the positive social support increases, the risk for, and symptoms of, post-traumatic stress disorder decrease (King, et al. 1998). These outcomes are the result of positive social bonds impacting how an individual processes thoughts and feelings, particularly fear, anxiety, and mistrust (Charuvastra and Cloitre 2008). The power of creating positive social bonds through the development of trust and friendship between mentor and mentee seems to be vital to VTC mentors and mentees; it enhances positive outcomes and decreases those which are classified as being anti-social.

The majority of mentors, when asked if military branch and rank had any impact on the relationship with their mentees, responded that they have not experienced any issues at all. This parallels the feelings of camaraderie that military service creates in those who have served. In this sense, prior military service functioned as the only connection that was needed to begin the mentor/mentee relationship. It seems that this underlying sense of respect and dedication to other

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veterans is unique within VTCs as it may differ from relationships formed by sponsors within AA. While the respondents did not mention any detrimental issue regarding military branch and rank and that a veteran is a veteran, when matching mentor and mentee there was agreement that the most appropriate way to do so was through similar military and personal background.

Many of the mentors had gone through difficult times themselves, and there were numerous comments regarding their (the current mentors) need for a VTC prior to their creation. The mentors related their struggles directly back to their military service. Their inability to adapt to civilian life upon their release from the military created a deeper understanding of what their mentees were experiencing. While being a veteran is a primary requirement in order to be a mentor within the selected VTCs, the fact that they were able to relate to their mentees and, more specifically their struggles, was imperative to appropriately guiding their veterans toward VTC graduation and increasing quality of life, which needs further exploration. Combat also was mentioned as a factor on which mentors and mentees should be matched in order to get the most out of the pairing. While mentor responses on matching may seem contradictory to their statements regarding not having an issue between differing military branch and rank, they are not; the mentors understood that to help a veteran you need to be a veteran, bottom line. However, to enhance their assistance of the veteran in the best way possible, matching on personal and military experience are factors that may increase positive outcomes according to the study sample.

Three issues and challenges that the peer mentors perceived within their roles were the age differences between themselves and their mentees, time availability, and inadequate training prior to becoming a peer mentor. Age was frequently brought up by the mentors and, as noted above, the average age for the mentors within the study sample was 62 years of age. While this study cannot determine the impact that age has on the mentor/mentee relationship, it does provide insight into how these relationships may evolve; having an older peer mentor may be beneficial to the mentee given the combined experiences within military service, readjustment to civilian life, and overcoming their own personal issues. These experiences allow the peer mentors to relate to the mentees and their individual issues more personally and on a deeper level. On the contrary, the age gap also may create distance between the pair if the mentee perceives the mentor to be out of touch with what is going on now, whether factual or not. Likewise, having a younger mentor may allow for the mentee to feel that s/he has more in common with the mentor when in fact the mentor may be less stable, not as experienced, and/or not have as much time for their mentees.

When speaking about time, the mentors stated that their mentees found it challenging to find time to meet face-to-face. While meeting face-to-face was still a goal for many of the mentors as they can see how someone is doing much better in person, they understood that the time constraints had to do with being young, starting a family, and/or employment requirements. These constraints also affected the recruitment of younger mentors into the courts; many younger veterans who were interested in becoming a mentor decided not to do so after attending mentor training due to the time commitments and their already hectic schedules, according to the mentors. It seems that age and time are important interactions within the selected VTCs, and, while intriguing, their impact should be studied further before any conclusions are drawn.

The issue of inadequate training was mentioned by the majority of peer mentors within the study. This was surprising given that utilizing peer mentors is a unique function of VTCs and considered

one of their hallmarks. This led many of the mentors to approach their roles and responsibilities with what they personally believed to be the right thing to do. Furthermore, while separating peer mentors from the treatment team may be the court's attempt at promoting confidentiality and mentor/mentee cohesion, allowing the mentors to operate individually based on what they feel they should be doing may expose mentees to inadequate mentoring services. While the mentors could find little of what they liked about the training, there was no shortage of suggestions on what to implement to make the training more effective, such as:

- Bringing in past mentors and mentees to discuss what worked and did not work for them
- Allowing better access to and knowledge about current treatment options
- Explaining what the mentees experience when they go to the VA for various types of treatment
- Establishing a proper chain of contact in case an emergency occurs
- Providing better guidance to the mentors about what the court expects from them and whether they are accomplishing their goals as peer mentors

FUTURE RESEARCH

The importance and uniqueness of the use of peer mentors within VTCs are considered essential to the success of the participants (Russell 2009). To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this study is the first to qualitatively examine peer mentors within VTCs, making the exploratory findings essential to informing future research. The perceived disconnect from the VTC team (courtroom workgroup and treatment team) was a consistent source of contention and frustration within this study's sample. While the majority of the peer mentors interviewed felt that the disconnect may be due to issues relating to building a strong bond between themselves and the participants, further research needs to be conducted in order to uncover if this also is found within other courts and, if so, the impact it may have on participant outcomes.

Also, the lack of existing literature that empirically assesses the effects of differing military training within and between different branches needs to be addressed in order to understand dissimilarities between specializations in the military and how best to match justice-involved veterans with peer mentors in a VTC. Future research should also examine and control for differences between active and reserve status in order to determine if there are any differences between the two. In addition, while there were female VTC peer mentors within the study, there was no mention of female mentees. The influence of peer mentoring on female VTC participants is in need of further exploration in order to uncover information on those relationships. In regards to the mentors themselves, while they mentioned their experiences with substance use and abuse, there was no mention of their direct involvement with the criminal justice system. Justice system involvement and navigation are important experiences that should be included within future research on peer mentors.

Finally, future research should utilize the findings of this exploratory study to create variables that will further unravel the use of peer mentors within VTCs. While this study was an important first step, which followed the practice of good research by exploring the topic qualitatively, it cannot provide definitive and generalizable results as this exploratory analysis purposively choose participants from pre-selected courts from rural, suburban, and urban areas using maximum-variation sampling. While not a direct limitation as the purpose of exploratory qualitative analysis is not to generalize its findings,

but rather begin to build information toward better understanding an understudied phenomenon, future research should focus on the quantification of these findings. As such, future research should focus on formulating strong variables to study quantitatively and on a larger scale before any definitive conclusions are drawn.

CONCLUSION

The current study expands upon the VTC literature and the peer mentors within them. The use of peer mentors is unique to VTCs and is labeled as a hallmark of these programs. The above findings are an initial and important first step to better understanding their roles and experiences so that researchers can begin to unravel their utility and effectiveness. It is vital to continue to understand these courts in order to assure and enhance their effectiveness in working with justice-involved veterans. While VTCs mirror the successful drug court model, given their focus on individuals who are experiencing problems across a varied spectrum of drug, alcohol, mental health, and social issues, more research needs to be conducted before they can be claimed a success. This study was an initial and important first step toward this goal.

The current research's findings suggest that while the interviewees' approaches to mentoring were validated through previous research on mentor/mentee relationships and align with positive outcomes, this may not always be the case. An overwhelming number of interviewees stated that the training offered by the courts was inadequate and lacking any real description or guidance for the peer mentors, possibly impacting the delivery and consistency of services. Future research should use these findings to advise forthcoming research in order to definitively answer these questions and further advance the empirical literature about VTCs.

The perceived disconnect from the VTC team (courtroom workgroup and treatment team) was a consistent source of contention and frustration within this study's sample.

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