

**SB 2002**

**House Appropriations Committee**

**Education and Environment Division**

**Testimony Presented by Constance L. Cleveland**


**District Court Judge, East Central Judicial District**

**March 6, 2025**

**Chairman Nathe and members of the Committee:**

I am Connie Cleveland, one of the District Court Judges in the East Central Judicial District, which includes Cass, Traill and Steele counties.

I am here to support SB2002, but more specifically to urge this committee to restore the funding removed by the Senate that relates to Treatment Courts. I want to be clear that this funding request is not for new courtrooms or new judges, but to support programs that have proven effective as alternatives to incarceration and successfully address recidivism. The funds requested reflect necessary administrative costs for implementing specialized dockets that have been developed and vetted and are based upon proven successful models that hold individuals with criminal convictions accountable through intensive probation and active judicial supervision.

 Each treatment court included in the Supreme Court's original budget has a judge committed to spend additional time working with a multi-disciplinary team

on an intensive basis with convicted individuals sentenced to a treatment court for a minimum of a year rather than long term incarceration.

My commitment has been to establish a Veterans Treatment Court in the East Central Judicial District. The term veteran, as used here, includes individuals who have been in active duty as well as guard and reserve members. Individuals who have served our country mostly on a volunteer basis and have returned to civilian life but have unique training, demonstrated values, and experiences. Other states have taken steps to address the need of veterans who become court involved, and as of 2021 there were over 600 Veterans Treatment Courts in the United States.

With the approval and support of the last legislature, Judge Donald Hager in Grand Forks established the first (and currently only) Veterans Treatment Court in North Dakota. The model that Judge Hager implemented reflects the research that has resulted from other successful courts, and is the model that the East Central Judicial District has adopted. This is a yearlong program, and one of the essential elements is the volunteer mentor that is assigned to each participant. Mentors are individuals with military experience who provide support and guidance and are familiar with the values instilled through training and service. Those mentors, while aware of and experienced regarding military, also need

guidance with regard to the role in this setting, which is why there is a coordinator and trainer as part of the financial request. The Grand Forks Court has already produced graduates and is proving successful. The proposed Veterans Treatment Court for the East Central Judicial District has gathered support from members of the community, demonstrated a need through evaluation of the population of the jail and the numbers of defendants' self-reporting prior military experience in our district, has a policy manual that has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Specialized Dockets, and has been approved by the Supreme Court as warranted to address the specific needs in the communities we will serve.

The cost for the Veterans Treatment Court for the biennium is \$122,892. That represents the administrative costs for training, a coordinator, and a mentor recruiter/trainer. When you consider that incarceration of one individual for one year is approximately \$55,000 in North Dakota, I feel very comfortable coming before you to urge you to re-instate that amount – in light of the long-term benefit, the financial impact, and the reflection of our commitment to make sure our veterans have the support they need to return to successful civilian life.

Thank you.

# INSPIRATION NOT INCARCERATION

Veterans Treatment Court Removes the  
Bars from Mental Health Accessibility

WRITTEN BY: AMY WIESER WILLSON  
PHOTOS BY: URBAN TOAD MEDIA

Most crimes aren't black and white. When it comes to combat veterans especially, extenuating circumstances often intertwine with the actions they take. Many turn to drugs and alcohol as a way to self-medicate for post-traumatic stress, which only leads to more problems – such as ending up in court with charges filed.

For many, treatment, not incarceration, is what they really need. A new program in Cass County will provide that option.

## EXPANDING TO CASS COUNTY

Veterans Treatment Court began a little over a year ago in Grand Forks County, and their first veteran recently graduated from the program. Judge Constance Cleveland kicked off the effort in Cass County in April 2024, and the momentum grew when it was taken to the Cass County Commission in June. Next up is to request funding for the program from the State of North Dakota and to begin training.

“Judge Cleveland took the initiative and is the driving force behind getting a Veterans Treatment Court in the East Central Judicial District,” said Dan Bertsch, a veteran and attorney working on the project. “She did all the work to have the North Dakota Supreme Court approve a Veterans Treatment Court in the District, met with all the players to get the needed support, met with the Cass County Commission, and has spoken with veteran groups and the media in order to garner support.”

While Veterans Treatment Court will have similarities to Drug Court, it's not limited to those with substance abuse disorders. Rather, those who choose to participate will receive treatment for mental health concerns.

“Service in the military is done by very few in our society, and so many don't understand the cost and the impact on those who serve and on the family,” Cleveland said. “Sometimes, the impact is negative and