

Gov. DeSantis Vetoes \$150k Grant Helping Our Vets



By Kat Stansell

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The Veterans Treatment Court of Santa Rosa County, FL, recently asked for \$150,000 for another year of service to some of our most tragically ignored veterans.

These men and women served us, but ***the Governor of Florida just vetoed that request, and refused to serve them.***

For those not familiar with a Veterans Treatment Court (VTC), it is a construct within our judicial system which helps our veterans who have had a tangle with the law such as substance abuse, motor vehicle arrests, actions stemming from PTSD and other psychological injuries, even brain damage resulting from combat-related injuries. They need a helping hand to rejoin society.

That assistance comes through the VTC as assistance with navigating the court system, to understand what to do and when to do it, whom they can rely on and who/what they need to avoid.

If you have ever had to navigate anything in our courts by yourself, *pro se*, you understand the need for guidance.

The Santa Rosa County Veterans Court request for funding was also asked for unusual, DOGE-type information, a request for the estimated “ROI (return on investment) Justification”, as some kind of proof that they really did need the money. (?)

This was an unusual ask from Tallahassee, but the volunteers spent many days, and produced the answer.

DeGov's team may be sorry they did...

The return on investment for the Santa Rosa Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) request was 757%. Read that again.

The \$150k they'd requested would return over seven and one half times its initial cost in benefits and services. It would also potentially save dozens of lives of veterans who have served our country, and come to the VTC on the brink of giving up.

This veto from DeGov made me wonder about the Live Local Act (SB102), and its return on investment of taxpayer monies. Its initial costs were \$711 million, with indirect costs from tax incentives adding significant financial implications. *Will it return over \$5.382 billion (that's 757% on \$711 million) to the benefit of Floridians, as it provides tax breaks for developers of multi-family residential developments while it removes the decisions to do this, from the proper county authorities – aka the citizens? Remember, too, that the Live Local Act has been amended in both 2024 and 2025, with more of the same.*

Reminds you just how much Tallahassee loves developers... but, back to our vets.

Says FloridaCourts.org, [Veterans who complete the Veterans Treatment Court \(VTC\) are as much as 32 percent less likely to commit another crime in the first year versus the average incarcerated person in the United States. Veterans Treatment Court provides an opportunity for veterans who have substance abuse or mental health concerns to undergo court-supervised treatment instead of going to jail or facing other consequences.](#)

[Florida Veterans Treatment Courts offer a way for veterans of](#)

the U.S. Armed Forces who face non-violent misdemeanor or third-degree felony charges to get the treatment they need for a mental health or substance abuse concern. After applying and getting approval from the State Attorney's Office, they must:

- Undergo mental health and/or substance abuse treatment;
- Go in front of a Veterans Treatment Court judge frequently; and
- Take regular drug and alcohol tests to ensure sobriety.

Participation in this program is voluntary but offers a more favorable outcome than facing penalties handed down by the criminal court system that do not include treatment. Most veterans enter the Veterans Treatment Court as a pre-trial intervention in Florida for their first offense. This allows them to get their charges dismissed after completion of the program.

In addition to using the Veterans Treatment Court as pre-trial intervention, Florida courts also sometimes use post-plea Veterans Treatment Court. This allows the veteran to participate in order to reduce their probation and get the adjudication withdrawn in their case.

This approach allows many veterans to get help for their substance abuse or mental health disorders, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While there are few studies on this concept, Veterans Treatment Court statistics from at least one point at significant benefits of Veterans Treatment Court over jail time or other penalties.

The biggest and most enduring benefit of the program DeSantis vetoed, has been transformative power of hope, structure, and community—qualities embodied by this Veterans Treatment Court in Santa Rosa County.

“If you were to visit our community”, says Carmen Reynolds, Lt. Col. (Ret), USAF), Chair of Friends of Santa Rosa Veterans Treatment Court, “you would witness almost 50 volunteers and

organizations coalescing to support this specialty treatment court. Many of these organizations signed letters of support attached to the Governor's Budget Office request for an ROI Justification.

"These are the type of programs which almost pay for themselves, this one saving more than \$1 million in incarceration costs and unpaid volunteers.

"The Mentor Program is the "secret sauce" which makes the program so effective," continued Ms. Reynolds. "It drops recidivism rates to between 8-12%, compared to the civilian criminal justice rates which exceed 60%." A veteran always has someone to turn to, to ask questions of, to learn from, to feel friendship when needed the most.

"In our minds, with this high ROI," said Lt. Col. Reynolds, "we could never have anticipated the redlining of this \$150,000 appropriation."

Sad to say, DeGov may well have reacted in spite towards another politician or community leader, instead of doing his duty by our Veterans. Santa Rosa's VTC is the newest in Florida, #33 of 67 counties to have such a body of friends to our vets. This would have been their second year of successful operation. Why veto Santa Rosa's??

The amount of one hundred and fifty thousand dollars was apparently important enough to DeGov to veto a line item which would have helped dozens of those who served our country, be able to go on with their own lives on a straighter and safer path. The Santa Rosa citizen volunteers, or "battle buddies", provide transportation, housing, food, clothing, incentives for recovery. They even were able to donate an "E Bike" for a vet who could not drive due to anxiety attacks. They charge NOTHING back to the state; they just give of their personal resources with a blessed spirit.

The detailed impact of this veto by DeSantis was to:

- ♦ lose the full-time Treatment Coordinator, crucial for intake, tracking compliance and resource referrals to the vets. The vets lost a real friend on whom they could check in with and rely.
- ♦ risk loss of contracted urinalysis professional, which undermines accountability for each vet in the program.
- ♦ Exclude vets who have no VA benefits – often homeless uninsured and traumatized – from the Veterans Court system and the help they so desperately need.
- ♦ Eliminate access to *inpatient treatment* for mental or substance abuse issues for those vets without VA coverage;
- ♦ Risk loss of jobs by currently employed veterans, loss of drug-testing “sweat patches” (which will then cost each vet \$360/month out of pocket; and forces purchase of costly alternatives IF available.

“In a county of a total of nearly 30,000 veterans, there have been 596 who have passed through Santa Rosa jails in 16 months. Thirty of those would have been adjudicated and treated by the veterans court system, which saves the state \$38,325 in incarceration costs for every vet who graduates from the program”, say the Friends of Santa Rosa Veterans Court, the group who gives their time and energies to the veterans every day.

Go to the website of the Friends of Santa Rosa Veterans Court, santarosavtc.com, to learn more and help them if you can. Tallahassee somehow won't.

Frankly, this whole thing is NOT a good look for a Governor who is all about appearances. Did DeSantis think no one would notice when he vetoed a relatively small \$150k grant to help our veterans deal with some of life's challenges?? Or was he just “playing politics” and getting back at some back-room foe?

Whatever, Governor, your veto will now be added to the societal costs of the agony of our military service personnel who have done for us, only to find that we will not be able to do for them.

AND, another black mark on your performance, Sir, will be added to your record as governor, by your constituents. The country needs to know these things about you as well. The word will spread.

And more will understand why I occasionally dub you, "DeSmallman."

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