

# Court-Assisted Re-entry (CARE) Court

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Southern District of Florida



# Our participants...

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- All general and treatment cases are reviewed upon intake for the following:
  - Have 3 years or more of supervision
  - PCRA score of moderate or high risk of recidivism
  - Can have substance use history however not an addict
  - No severe or persistent mental health history/diagnosis
  - Not in violation status
  - No sex offenders
  - Must volunteer

# Our goals...

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- CARE Court operates as “horizontal” rather than “vertical” justice. Though Judges preside over the CARE Court sessions, the team and participants are encouraged to work collaboratively to be change agents to assist CARE Court participants.
- What do participants gain by being a part of CARE Court?
  - During the course of the program, participants get connected with significant community resources to assist in their re-entry. This includes: financial literacy, employment, vocational skills and housing assistance, and assistance with health and medical resources. CARE Court has also established a network of pro bono attorneys for legal needs and has been able to provide assistance to its participants on family law and child support issues, immigration, and in obtaining identification. These services are part of the pitch during recruitment as benefits of the program.
  - The main incentive offered upon completion of the program is a one-year reduction of the term of supervised release. If participants who graduate are willing to continue to assist the program, additional time off may be given, up to a total of two-years off.
  - An additional benefit (though not necessarily one that is “pitched” to potential participants) is changing the participants’ view of the justice system. We present an opportunity for the participants to see judges, attorneys, and other Court personnel as persons who want to help, rather than punish. This builds and fosters the participants’ trust in the justice system, and society, as a whole.
- Our goals include:
  - (1) to assist participants become productive citizens
  - (2) to promote community safety by reducing recidivism and victimization
  - (3) to save taxpayer dollars by lowering direct and collateral costs of incarceration
  - (4) reduce the number of revocation proceedings before district court judges

# Our program requirements...

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- Participants must attain 75 points in order to graduate from the program:

## Mandatory for all participants (60 points):

- Participation in CARE Court (2 points per session; 50 points total)
- Moral Reconciliation Therapy (“MRT”) or equivalent cognitive behavioral therapy (10 points upon completion)

## Individualized Plan Goals (15 points required):

- Stable/permanent housing (10 points)
  - Stable employment for 6 months (10 points)
  - Vocational job training/GED (5 points)
  - Stable transportation/reinstatement of license (5 points)
  - Compliance with release requirements (including restitution and abstaining from drugs/substances) (5 points)
  - Financial literacy (5 points)
  - Community service (5 points)
- Total points from mandatory requirements: 60 points
  - Total possible points: 105 points
  - Points necessary for graduation: 75

# Our origins and structure...

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- When was the program started?
  - The pilot program, spearheaded by Judge Seitz, officially started on April 7, 2016. The program became a permanent part of the S.D. Fla. Miami division on January 31, 2019.
- Is CARE Court the only re-entry court of its kind?
  - CARE Court is currently the only “problem solving” court in the Southern District of Florida. However, “problem solving” courts—including re-entry courts, like CARE Court—are more common than you might think. According to the Federal Judicial Center, there are approximately 130 “problem solving” federal courts nationwide.
- Overview of how CARE Court sessions work:
  - The US Probation Office sends bi-weekly progress reports on all participants, noting both positive growth areas and areas where assistance is needed.
  - The team meets every other Thursday to discuss the status reports and formulate plans to provide assistance as needed and, just as importantly, to help the participants identify how they can help themselves.
  - After Team Meeting, CARE Court convenes at 3pm. Each participant approaches the podium and discusses, in their own words, the items identified in the progress reports. The team puts the participant in touch with community partners and encourages the participant to identify their goals—including an action plan to achieve these goals—for the next two weeks and beyond. Participants are then awarded points, if applicable.
  - The team also works with participants and community resources beyond the CARE Court sessions as needed to help accomplish goals.

# Our team...

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- Judge Ursula Ungaro, U.S. District Judge
- Judge Donald L. Graham, Senior U.S. District Judge
- Judge Patricia A. Seitz, Senior U.S. District Judge
- Judge Chris M. McAliley, U.S. Magistrate Judge
- Jonathan Stratton, Assistant United States Attorney
- Elizabeth Blair, Sara Kane, and Laura Saylor, Assistant Federal Public Defenders
- Connie Irimia, Acting Chief Probation Officer
- John Minnelli, Kurt Alexander, Supervisory United States Probation Officers
- Melissa Fife, Senior United States Probation Officer
- James “J.D.” Smith, Reentry Coordinator, United States Department of Justice
- Law Clerks, Pamela Armour, Candice Diah, Mark Moon, and Al Mufti

# Our team...

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## Various community partners, including:

- Gera Peoples, Akerman LLP
- Lisa Blair, Miami-Dade Family Learning Partnership
- Paulette “Tinkerbell” Pfeiffer, Silent Victims of Crime
- United Way, John Cardenas
- Laura Drosdowech and Julie Grimes Heafey, Miami-Dade College Hospitality Institute
- David Tucker, Transition Inc.
- Steve Zuckerman, “Rise Up” Entrepreneurial Bootcamp

## Researchers:

- Dr. Marisa Omori, formerly with the University of Miami
- Dr. Jacqueline Lee, Boise State University

# Our incentives and sanctions...

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To reward positive behavior, we use the following incentives:

- CARE Court utilizes a point-system whereby two points are awarded at every session to every participant who has attended CARE Court and satisfactorily completed their goals over the previous two-week span.
- Upon completion of MRT Step 7, a participant receives a gratitude journal as a gift.
- Upon completion of the entire MRT program, a participant is not required to attend CARE Court every two weeks. At that point, the participant is only required to appear once a month.

With regard to negative behavior:

- Points are not removed from a participant for negative behavior. Rather, points are not awarded at the following CARE session, and may be continually withheld until the negative behavior is corrected.
- Participants may also be terminated from the program if they are determined to be disruptive to the process, or show a pattern of resistance to change.

# Some of our standout graduates...

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- **Antron Rodgers:** extensive criminal history; no legitimate work experience. Through CARE Court, he completed MRT, had his driver's license restored, obtained a certification to work in construction, performed 250 hours of community services, and obtained a construction job and has received promotions. He continues to inspire CARE Court participants by appearing in a recruitment video and speaking to our participants.
- **Tavares Simmons:** strong arm robbery conviction, and felon in possession of a firearm conviction. Through CARE Court, he obtained a job in a commercial laundry, earned raises and was promoted to a leadership position (earning \$1000/week). He is also a positive influence on other participants and helped one obtain a job.
- **Stephen Chisholm:** Before CARE Court, he lived in an unstable housing situation with an ex-girlfriend. He spent months searching for the right place to go, that he could afford, and that would not restrict him due to his background. With CARE Court, he was able to save his money to move into his own apartment. Additionally, when Mr. Chisholm began CARE Court, he had to travel approximately 3 hours a day for his job in Pompano Beach off-loading trucks. While in CARE Court, he was able to find a job with Goodwill, receiving multiple raises and ultimately being promoted to a managerial position.

# More standout graduates. . .

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- **Otis Walker:** when Mr. Walker joined CARE Court, he was living in a slum – his unit was infested with rodents, and his landlord manipulated the water bill so that Mr. Walker was being charged for his unit, another unit, and a storefront property. The landlord then illegally shut off Mr. Walker’s water. Mr. Walker moved to Chapman Partnership, a shelter, with his wife and children (including a newborn baby). After a long housing search, Mr. Walker and his family were able to find stable, affordable, and clean housing. CARE Court also helped Mr. Walker get his driver’s license back and helped with child support issues.
- **Morris Henderson:** convicted of conspiracy to possess, and possession, with intent to distribute MDMA. Had previously worked as a longshoreman. One of his goals upon joining CARE Court was to get his Transportation Workers Identification Credential Program (TWIC) card so that he could work at the port again. After a lengthy appeal and re-application process, Mr. Henderson finally obtained his TWIC card. He also gained sole custody of his son, Malaki, with the help of CARE Court pro bono attorney Anthony Genova.
- **Nathaniel Higgs:** convicted of possession with intent to distribute crack cocaine. After serving nearly 30 years in prison, he completed the CARE Court program in one year. He has decided to have his graduation in person with the other participants once CARE Court resumes in person. When he is not busy working full time and raising his step daughter, he volunteers cooking and distributing food and sundries to the homeless.

Lawyers who would like to volunteer to help CARE Court participants on a pro bono basis should email Pamela Armour at [Pamela\\_Armour@flsd.uscourts.gov](mailto:Pamela_Armour@flsd.uscourts.gov)