

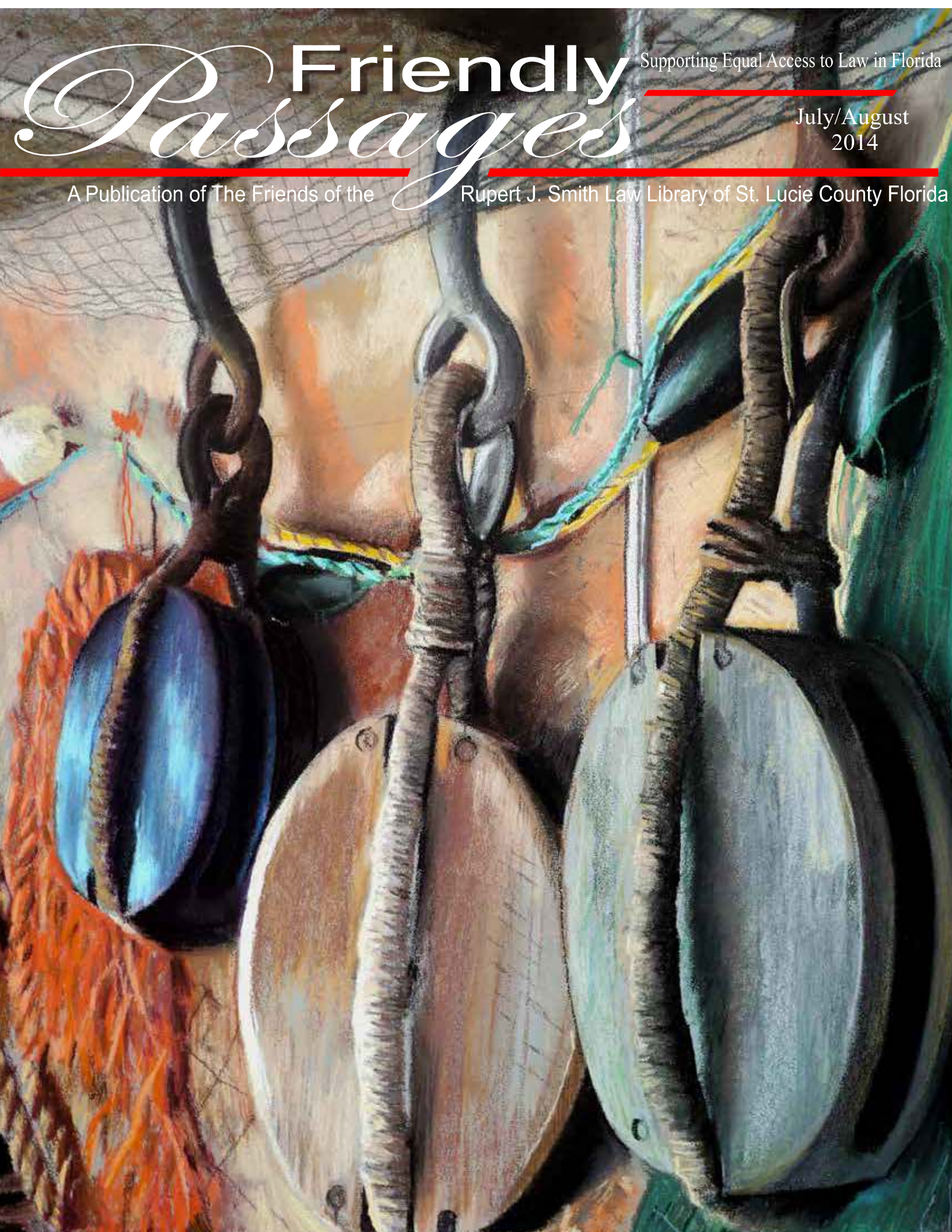
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July/August
2014

A Publication of The Friends of the

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Veteran's Court: The Latest Diversion Court

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Hot off the “press,” so to speak is our latest in a series of successful diversion courts – Veterans Court! Veterans Court is up and running in Indian River County with Judge Hawley and it will be instituted August 8, 2014, in St. Lucie County with Judge Belanger.

The first Veterans Treatment Court was started in Buffalo, New York in 2008, by Judge Robert Russell, after he noticed a large amount of veterans being involved in his Drug Court and Mental Health Court. He wanted to make sure that the veterans were being connected to services they earned. There are currently 16 Veterans Courts operational in Florida.

A veteran who suffers from a military service-related mental illness, traumatic brain injury, substance abuse disorder, or psychological problem, is eligible for voluntary admission into a pretrial veterans’ treatment intervention program.

The admission criteria for both felony and misdemeanor cases is very broad. The statute states that a defendant may be admitted on any party’s motion, even the court’s. The controlling statute is F.S.948.08(7). Any charges can come in as a diversion, except those listed in F.S.948.06(8)(c) which are very serious offenses. The only other exclusion when the court may deny participation to Veteran’s Court as a diversion, is if the client has previously been offered and denied or previously participated in a pretrial veterans’ treatment program.

While enrolled in Veterans Court, the participant shall be subject to a coordinated strategy developed by a veterans’ treatment intervention team. The strategy is to provide treatment specific to the needs of the veteran. Jana Schiffert is the Veteran’s Justice Outreach officer for the 19th Judicial Circuit. She has an office in the West Palm Beach Veterans Administration Medical Center. Her job is to check for eligibility, set up assessments, and be the court liaison with the Veterans Administration.

Services available in Veteran’s Court are funded by the Veterans Administration and provided at the West Palm Beach Medical Center and local VA Clinics. Drug testing can also be done at the local VA Clinics at no cost to the court or the client. If a service cannot be provided locally by the VA, fee-based services can be utilized with local agencies.

In addition to drug and mental health treatment, the VA liaison can help guide clients in getting set up with medical care, or enrolling with the VA for the first time. She can also guide them to the proper channels for possibly upgrading a discharge status that is not honorable, therefore making the client eligible for VA services and therefore Veteran’s Court.

Another big component of the court is Veterans Mentor Corps. These are volunteer veterans in the community who assist the defendant throughout the program. “Veterans Treatment Courts make use of the camaraderie that exists among all veterans. Veteran Mentors volunteer their time and energy to assist their fellow veterans with peer support, housing, employment linkages, job training, education, transportation, disability compensation claims, discharge status and other linkages available at the local, state and federal level.” <http://www.justiceforvets.org/veteran-mentors>.

In summary, Veterans Court is brand new, but has tons of potential and even more support. Along with Drug Court, Mental Health Court, and the Re-entry Program, it’s just another shining star in our circuit thanks to all the cooperation and collaboration that we are blessed to have!

Diamond Litty has been the Public Defender since 1992. Prior to her election she had a criminal defense practice and was with the State Attorney’s office also in the 19th Circuit. A native Floridian, raised in Fort Pierce, she is married to the Honorable Thomas Walsh and has one son, Blaze. She formed with others LifeBuilders of the Treasure Coast, a 501(c)(3) which is designed to help those who have been touched by the criminal or dependency courts in the area.

