

William "Bill" Dudley, Order of La Florida Award Recipient, Part 2, October 8, 2024

Narrator:

You've tuned in to another edition of The Break Room, a weekly conversation about how the city of St. Augustine works from those who do the work every day. Hosted by the city of St. Augustine's communications director, Melissa Wissel, The Break Room offers a closer look at the different city departments and provides updates on current and upcoming projects and events. And now your host, Melissa Wissel.

Melissa Wissel:

Welcome to The Break Room. Thanks for tuning in. I'm Melissa Wissel, communications director for the city of St. Augustine. We recently met with Bill Dudley. He is the recipient of the 2024 Order of La Florida Award, talking about his military service as well as community volunteering and programs that Bill is involved with in St. Augustine supporting our veterans and our veteran community. We ran out of time, so I've invited Bill back to The Break Room. Bill, welcome back.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

Thank you so much for having me.

Melissa Wissel:

We talked so much about the veterans services that you have and some of that programs that are involved, but we didn't really get to talk about some of the other work that you're doing. So I want to make sure that we follow up because it's so, so important what you do. And you and I have talked about, we're going to talk about four things or four projects that you've worked on that you're most proud of, or I'm sure there's many. So I don't want to put words in your mouth, but we're going to talk a little bit about the Clyde Elasson state veterans nursing home, the veterans treatment court program, veterans village and the community clinic. So let's start with the veterans nursing home.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

Sure. Well, years ago, going back in time now, we identified the need for a state VA, state nursing home here in St. Augustine. And at that time, Congressman John Micah was our congressman for this district. And so the veteran council, along with others, but the veterans Council met with the congressman and identified the need. And so we started working with FDVA over in Tallahassee, Florida Department of Veterans Affairs, and picked a site, the location. And then we just started to meeting regularly and we had the approval, got the approval, got the financing to locate a state veterans nursing home here. And so ultimately, after several years, we finally got the clinic, the nursing home built here. We met monthly and ultimately weekly with the people out of FDVA, the contractors and so forth to get it built here. And then in 2011, I think it was just when we opened it, we had our grand opening here. And it has been such a critical provided such a critical need for our veterans here in this community, in this area.

Melissa Wissel:

Do you know how many residents you have right now?

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

There's 120. It's a 120 bed facility.

Melissa Wissel:

And that's a lot of veterans. That's great.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

And during COVID it went down to about half capacity, but it's back up to being filled again now. But the waiting time has, has dropped tremendously. It used to be 90 to 120 day waiting period to get in there. It's down now to a matter of just a few weeks once they have been approved.

Melissa Wissel:

And that's up off 16.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

It's off State Road 16 west of 95.

Melissa Wissel:

It's not so hidden in the trees anymore either, with all that construction.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

It's being built very closely around it now. But it's a beautiful facility.

Melissa Wissel:

It really is.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

I had my next door neighbor. I was able to move him in some years ago. In fact, he passed away there. He was retired Navy veteran. And it's just such a beautiful facility and has done so much for our veterans here.

Melissa Wissel:

That's wonderful. And then you also worked on a treatment court program with one of our judges.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

Well, that one I'm immensely proud of that. Judge McGillin was in private practice at the time, and he used to do a lot of pro bono legal work for veterans. And I used to take a lot of veterans to him for legal work. And on one of those occasions when we were meeting, I asked him, his name is Howard McGillin. I said, Howard, what do you know about veterans

treatment court? He says, I don't know anything about it. Let's talk about it. So we discussed it at length, and he says, it sounds like something we should have in St. John's county.

Melissa Wissel:

So it's a program that other places have.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

There are other veterans treatment courts in the state as well. Duval county has one. Baker county has one. Volusia county has a veterans treatment court as well. We refer to it as VTC. And so he and I started to working on getting one in St. John's county. Took us almost three years, and we worked at it by going to visit other veterans treatment courts. We met with the state attorney, with the state attorney's office. We met with the public defender's office. We met with the sheriff's office. We visited several other VTCs in the area, and we finally got the permission to establish one here in St. John's county.

Melissa Wissel:

And what does it look like? What does that mean? I know what it means. I don't know if our listeners do.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

Well, it's a diversionary court. And veterans who find themselves and have run afoul of the legal system in some way and have been incarcerated and been charged with either a misdemeanor or a felony at a certain level can request to be diverted over to the veterans treatment court rather than going through the normal criminal court system. And it has been hugely, hugely successful. We just graduated in July. We just graduated our 100th graduate out of the program.

Melissa Wissel:

It's basically like a rehabilitation.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

It is.

Melissa Wissel:

You have to meet criteria. You have to.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

It's not an easy court. It's not easy. It's not a free ride. It's not easy for them. And they have to. They have to meet all the criteria. But the major thing is that the key word in it is treatment. Veterans treatment court. They are getting the treatment that they need through the VA healthcare system, that they need to meet whatever that condition is. They got them into the criminal court system to start with. And it has been hugely huge, successful. As a matter of fact, we have a mentor program as well. As a matter of fact, we have had several of our graduates out of the VTC program that have come back now as mentors and are serving as mentors.

Melissa Wissel:

Oh, that's great.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

And they do a phenomenal job because they know both sides of it. So we're immensely proud of that. We have 37 veterans in the program right now. Our court dates are every other Friday. In fact, we've got one coming up on Friday of this week. And we were so blessed to have Howard McGillin be appointed at that time by Governor Scott to fill out a vacancy for a judgeship here. And so the chief judge said, look, we're going to be starting this veterans treatment court in St. John's county. And so he assigned Judge McGillin to the veterans treatment court, and he's been there ever since. And he does an amazing job.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, we've got to be careful. We've got a few more minutes still. If you're just now tuning in, you're listening to The Break Room. I'm Melissa Wissel, communications director for the city of St. Augustine. I have the honor of sharing this studio this week again with Mister Bill Dudley. He is one of our recipients this year of the Order of La Florida. We're talking about the great, great programs that bill's involved with, with our military veterans and our veteran community. Let's talk about Veterans village.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

Sure. Veterans Village is a program that I also had been pursuing for several years. I initially tried to repurpose the old veterans clinic when they moved out of the trailers that were over off of old Moultrie. And I had the buy in by the county. I had to buy in by the state. I had to buy in by the owners of the trailers that own those. The problem was, when we went to the owner of the land itself, an owner up in Georgia, he says, no, I have another purpose for that. So that killed that. We couldn't move any further with it, but we kept trying. And so ultimately, I got together with home again St. John's. They asked me to come on their board of directors, and I did that purposely because they were pursuing many of the same things that we were pursuing in a veterans council for homeless. For the homeless veterans. And so I went on their board of directors, and we came upon this opportunity over on Anastasia Boulevard with Old Town Inn. We knew that it was going to come up for sale, and so rather than have it go on the market, we made a private deal, if you will, and we purchased it. In the meantime, I had applied for a state grant of \$3 million, and that was approved. And so we had the money and cash in hand to buy it and kept it off the market, and it has been hugely successful ever since.

Melissa Wissel:

And how many rooms?

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

There are 20 rooms right now. And we have. We just had our meeting yesterday morning or weekly meeting, and we have 18 veterans in the veterans village right now. We have two rooms that we're doing some more renovation on, and as soon as those are completed, we'll be moving veterans into those as well.

Melissa Wissel:

That's great.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

So that's 20 veterans that we don't have as homeless on the street today.

Melissa Wissel:

That's amazing. It's work that's happening. You're doing it. You're not retired. You're just doing other things. So real quick, last thing before we run out of time, we got about two minutes, three minutes. Let's talk about the outpatient or the care clinic.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

Yes. The VA outpatient clinic. Yes. Okay. That is another one that it took us eleven years to finally. Eleven years that I pursued that. We pursued that divestment counsel. And it used to be in the building where Lowe's is now, the old building there, which was the old Flagler hospital. And then after that property was sold to Lowe's, they moved into the temporary modular units, and then they were there for three years. And all during this period of time, we continued to pursue trying to get a permanent home here for our veterans. It ultimately meant that several of us had to go to Washington and have a subcommittee hearing with at that time, Congressman Ron DeSantis and the VA. And so after that meeting, that subcommittee meeting, things started happening very, very quickly. And ultimately they announced a location site had been selected for our new permanent home for our VA healthcare clinic. It took eleven years to get that.

Melissa Wissel:

That is some serious perseverance and commitment. Definitely puts you into the category of over a long period of time, going right to that first line of the criteria of the award, over a long period of time, has unselfishly devoted time and talent to the welfare and betterment of St. Augustine's citizens and heritage, who has exemplified the finest qualities of citizenship and has contributed extraordinary services to the community. Mister Bill Dudley, I think you more than deserve the award.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

Well, thank you very much.

Melissa Wissel:

We just admire and respect the work that you do. Our veterans are in such better shape for having you in our community, and we're so blessed to have you.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

By the way, I just got my copy of the Forward March newsletter from FDVA in Tallahassee last week, and the coverage of the La Florida award was in that.

Melissa Wissel:

Well, that's fantastic. You absolutely deserve the recognition, and we can't thank you enough. So just keep up. Keep up the great work.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

Melissa Wissel:

Thank you for coming.

Willliam "Bill" Dudley:

Appreciate it.

Melissa Wissel:

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Narrator:

You've been listening to The Break Room, a weekly program addressing projects and programs offered by the city of St. Augustine. Join us each week as the city's communications director, Melissa Wissel, has in depth conversations with the people who make our town work to meet the needs of our community. See you at this time next week for another edition of The Break Room.