



Judges hear that veterans' courts change lives, Wyoming jurist vows to bring one to Kent County

Khalil.JPG

17th District Court Judge Karen Khalil and Army veteran Matthew Heichel discuss veterans' courts on Wednesday, March 26, at the Michigan Judicial Conference at the Amway Grand Hotel. (*Barton Deiters* | *MLive.com*)

Barton Deiters | bdeiters@mlive.com By **Barton Deiters** | bdeiters@mlive.com

Email the author | **Follow on Twitter**

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GRAND RAPIDS, MI – Too often veterans return home from war and find themselves before a judge facing time behind bars for behavior that would have earned a medal when they served, service members told Michigan's judges Wednesday.

Veteran's courts are making a difference across the state for working with armed forces personnel who have run afoul of the law and access programs that can make a help them with issues developed during service or as they try to re-adapt to civilian life.

For Wyoming District Court Judge Pablo Cortes, hearing from vets whose lives have been turned around has convinced him that the Grand Rapids region needs a court specifically for those who have served.

Cortes said his court sees its share of veterans struggling with life and he has wanted to get specialized services set up for them. The presentation on Wednesday has only reinforced his dedication.

"I'm going to do everything in my power to make it happen," Cortes said. "We've asked them to do some horrible things in the service of their country and these things may have caused them to engage in illegal behavior."

Cortes said the courts do not create special justice for veterans and do not impact how a defendant, who happens to be a veteran, is sentenced. He said often the veterans' court puts additional conditions on probation that go beyond what a non-veteran would get.

Cortes and other judges, who are in Grand Rapids during the Michigan Supreme Court Judicial Conference at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel, listened to veterans' stories on Wednesday, March 26.



Nathan Niedermeyer, who served as a Marine in Afghanistan, discusses veterans' court on March 26, 2014.

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Matthew Heichel, a sergeant with the Army's 101st Airborne during three tours in Iraq between 2004 and 2010, told his tale of dealing with post-traumatic stress when he returned to his home in Southeast Michigan.

"In short, part of me was still at war," said Heichel, sometimes wiping away tears.

Heichel told the judges that he found himself using alcohol as a way to drown the memories of war and engaging in dangerous behavior, including driving his motorcycle 180 mph.

He said the anger, rage and hostility that saved his life in combat became a liability in civilian life.

"I lost everything that was important to me, my family," Heichel said.

Heichel said that changed when his case was diverted to the veteran's court in Redford Township before Wayne County District Court Judge Karen Khalil.

The court was able to connect him with the resources available to veterans to help them find jobs and other support that helped reintegrating with civilian society.

There are 14 veterans' courts in the state, including those in Allegan and Ionia counties in West Michigan.

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Khalil said veterans present a challenge for the court systems because they have issues that have a different underlying cause than the so-called average criminal.

She said she became aware of this when a defendant's grandfather told her that she needed to understand that the man she had in lock-up was a Marine who had been trained by the U.S. government to be a killing machine.

She said understanding the post-traumatic stress that these soldiers suffer from is key to understanding how to deal with them as defendants. She said that is a large part of what the veterans' court provides.

The court is able to connect with the Veterans Administration and other services that many of those who have served don't know exist or have avoided until they are ordered to use the services by the courts.

Nathan Niedermeyer, a Marine corporal who served in Afghanistan in 2009-10, said the veteran's court helped him overcome his sense of isolation and abandonment that came over him after he served.

Niedermeyer said his behavior was a result of his post-traumatic stress which kept him from sleeping and cause him to have flashbacks. He drank two fifths of liquor every night to "self-medicate."

He ended up in Livonia Court and then got the help he needed from the veterans' court.

"Veterans' court was the first time I felt some compassion," Niedermeyer said. "It was amazing."



Wyoming District Court
Judge Pablo Cortes
Courtesy Photo

Cortes said any court based in the Grand Rapids area is in the very beginning stages, but he says it will happen.

"These veterans have earned their own court," Cortes said.

E-mail Barton Deiters: bdeiters@mlive.com and follow him on Twitter at twitter.com/GRPBarton or Facebook at facebook.com/bartondeiters.5

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