

## Specialized Detroit court helps out troubled vets

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DETROIT (AP) — Jason Daniels remembers his days in the U.S. Navy as a long time at sea and away from his family. Daniels also remembers the motto of imbibing as a young sailor: “Drink to the foam.” But years later, too many drinks would lead to problems, and the civilian Daniels eventually was arrested for drinking and driving. Luckily for Daniels, a father of four adult children and one young child, Detroit’s Veterans Court was there to help.

The specialized 36th District Court program aims to rehabilitate vets accused of nonviolent crimes, especially those with alcohol and drug problems. Instead of jailing them, the court works at getting them help. The Detroit court is one of four in southeastern Michigan set up to handle nonviolent vets. Since the first veterans court was established in Buffalo, N.Y., in 2008, 120 such diversionary programs have been opened in 35 states, and more are on the way.

Judges and others involved in the program expect an influx of cases as more troops return home from Afghanistan. Now 18 months into his sobriety, Daniels graduated from the program this month and wants to help others. “It’s a helpful program,” said Daniels, 47, of Detroit. “(Veterans) have more problems than the average person.” Daniels could have been slapped with jail time and stiffer fines. Instead, he agreed to go into counseling, attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and participate in regular court sessions through the program.

“I learned how to direct my energy and feelings through Veterans Court,” said Daniels, as he read a letter to Judge Leonia Lloyd, who oversees the program, at his graduation.

Participants attend court hearings with other veterans. Prior to their court proceedings, they participate in meetings where they receive information about counseling services and other resources available to help them. As part of the program, which usually lasts about 18 months, veterans are required to attend alcohol or substance abuse counseling and undergo mandatory drug testing.

Some might be required to wear a tether to monitor possible alcohol use. Once the veteran has successfully completed the program, follow-up programs are available through the Veterans Administration.

According to statistics provided by the Justice for Vets advocacy program, 81 percent of veterans who had contact with police or a court officer had a substance abuse problem before their incarceration. And more than a third of the veterans were identified as having alcohol dependency. “It’s very important for the veterans,” said Phil Smith, director of the Vietnam Veterans of America benefits program in Michigan. “Sometimes the judicial system doesn’t understand veterans as well as it should. Many veterans have some issue coping . after going to war, especially with drugs and alcohol.” Vietnam veteran Roger Stewart, 62, of Dearborn Heights, said he was glad to be part of the program in Detroit. Stewart successfully completed the program in February 2011. He was referred there after being arrested for drinking and driving and said he made sure to follow Lloyd’s orders.

“I did everything she told me to,” Stewart said. “I kept my nose clean.” Lloyd said she saw a need for a Veterans Court because a lot of vets were coming into her courtroom with alcohol and drug-related problems associated with post-traumatic stress disorder and other mental health issues brought on by time in combat. “When I put veterans in regular court, sometimes it doesn’t help,” Lloyd said. “I’m asking them to turn their lives inside out. They have to get out of the cycle of drugs. It’s not going to cure PTSD.” In the past four years, the number of veterans court programs has risen steadily across the country, with about 120 operating in 35 states. About 100 others are planned across the nation, according to Justice For Vets Lloyd and other judges who work with Veterans Court said participants can benefit more from a diversionary program like the specialty court instead of being sent to jail. But jail time is still an option if a defendant violates any part of the program. Besides the program in Detroit, southeast Michigan also has veterans courts in Redford, Novi and the Macomb County Circuit Court in Mount Clemens.

At Redford District Court, the program is overseen by Judge Karen Khalil, who’s in her first year working with veterans. She’s had 22 join the program. “It’s really a nice program for all who have given to our country and deserve so much,” she said. In Novi, District Judge Brian MacKenzie oversees the veterans court. He started the court two years ago and has seen 80 veterans come through its program.

MacKenzie said in the program, “You’ll discover a person suffering who is not getting treatment and is self-medicating with either alcohol or drugs.” He said the veterans court is a way for the community to give back to military veterans.

“We ask these people to sacrifice for us and they come back with invisible wounds,” MacKenzie said. “They come back and they find themselves in trouble for alcohol and drug offenses.” The American Civil Liberties Union in Nevada was opposed to the creation of the courts on the grounds they create an uneven playing field, providing veterans with attention and services not available to other defendants. But Rana Elmir, a spokeswoman for the local office of the ACLU, said the local chapter supports the courts. Such programs “recognize that our criminal justice system is ill-equipped to address the problems of substance abuse, chemical dependency and mental illness that plague so many in our prisons, including many veterans who are arrested and incarcerated,” she said

Lloyd said veterans are under the same amount of scrutiny as other defendants and “they know I’m stern, they know I will sanction them.”

“I said I will be there step by step,” she said. “I tell them I need them to become whole again.”

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