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A second chance for vets

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Ryan Harrington returned home from war a broken man.

A former Army Ranger, he served a combined 18 months in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq, and lost his best friend in an attack.

Suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, Harrington, 26, couldn't hold down any one of a series of eight jobs. Always on edge, he'd binge drink to get a good night's sleep; otherwise, he'd be up for days. He fired three therapists after exploding in anger when they wanted him to talk about experiences he had locked deep inside.

A man who served and lived by the motto "Rangers lead the way," Harrington had lost his way in civilian life.

"I thought I was invincible, and I can't hold a (expletive) job," said Harrington, who left the Army more than four years ago.

In April 2008, he hit his wife. A neighbor called police, and Harrington was arrested and charged with fourth-degree assault. She has since left him.

Harrington will not be locked up as a result of a new Thurston County program that convened for the first time last week.

Thurston County Veterans Court offers a second chance to current and retired service members who commit crimes while struggling with war-related psychological wounds, notably PTSD and traumatic brain injuries. Buffalo, N.Y., started the first such court last year, and numerous communities have followed in its footsteps.

The aim is to identify and treat veterans before they get in deeper trouble with the law, increasing the public cost to prosecute and incarcerate them. Defendants are not eligible if they are charged with serious violent crimes or their victims oppose it.

Like other alternative courts, the defendants accept treatment and regular monitoring in lieu of jail time.

If they comply, they get kind words from a judge and support from court officers and others.

If they don't, they land in jail, because the judge can revoke the suspended or reduced sentence they received when they pleaded guilty and joined the program.

Local veterans, including Harrington, have explored this option through Thurston County Mental Health Court. Others, court officers say, turned it down because they didn't want to be associated with the stigma of mental illness.

Officials wanted to offer something to remove that stigma and provide an increasing number of services tailored to veterans to stabilize their lives, including counseling, drug and alcohol treatment and employment and housing assistance through public agencies and community-based organizations.

"We want veterans to know that they're not alone, and that there's no shame in seeking treatment," said Marianne Clear, the court's program manager.

Buffalo City Court Judge Robert Russell presides over the nation's first veterans court, which began in January 2008. Today, between 120 and 130 defendants are enrolled and 15 have completed the treatment program. More than 90 percent have stayed out of trouble, he said.

"For us, not only do we want them clean, sober and healthy, but in addition we want them productive and contributing, which will help them not only with their self-esteem but the stability in their lives," he said.

PTSD LINK

PTSD can be linked to criminal behavior in two primary ways, according to a fact sheet by the National Center for PTSD, part of the federal Department of Veterans Affairs. Veterans may engage in sensation-seeking behavior to resurrect emotions deadened by combat trauma. In other cases, those keyed up by their time in combat may "misinterpret benign situations as threatening and cause them to respond" with violent behavior that is out of proportion with the perceived threat, it said.

It is unclear how many veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are now incarcerated or how many of those committed crimes as a result of war-related PTSD or other trauma, according to an August 2008 study by the National GAINS center, a clearinghouse for information about mental illness and the justice system.

It did cite a 1990 study that concluded nearly half of Vietnam combat veterans diagnosed with PTSD had been arrested one or more times. The study also found that the majority of Vietnam veterans appeared to have successfully readjusted to postwar life.

A survey was conducted of combat veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq diagnosed with PTSD who are receiving treatment from the local VA health care system. The information was provided to the court by Tom Schumacher, director of the PTSD outpatient program at the state Department of Veterans Affairs.

Of the 230 veterans surveyed, 23 percent reported destroying property, nearly 30 percent said they had threatened violence and 14 percent reported getting into a fistfight within the previous four months.

In addition, one in five of the surveyed veterans reported an alcohol problem. They reported being drunk 15 days on average in the previous month. They used drugs an average of four days during the same period.

LOCAL EFFECTS

Thurston County is bearing its share of the public cost of the struggles of some of these returning soldiers. Fort Lewis, the nation's fourth-largest Army installation, has sent tens of thousands of soldiers to war, some multiple times. It should be stressed that most soldiers who return from war do not commit crimes, and the Army has launched initiatives to identify and help those soldiers who do return home with problems.

But some do fall through the cracks. Recent examples include:

- A 23-year-old Fort Lewis soldier who was sentenced to five years in prison last year for burglarizing three Olympia-area homes; he also disarmed a sheriff's deputy before his arrest. The soldier suffered from PTSD and said he had no memory of the incidents.
- A 26-year-old soldier who was hit by a sniper's bullet and suffered traumatic brain injury. He shot at a passing car with his assault rifle in Lacey in November 2007.
- Two Fort Lewis soldiers were arrested in Eastern Washington in September for a string of thefts they said they conducted to purchase OxyContin, a prescription painkiller, to cope with lingering symptoms of combat stress.

As of July 8, 33 of the 436 inmates in the Thurston County Jail, or more than 7 percent, were service members or veterans, court officials said.

The tally didn't include those who were out of custody with pending charges or were cited and released at the scene.

Court officials say they've seen an increase in the number of service members and veterans facing charges, particularly for domestic violence.

"That's one of the first areas where you're going to see stress exposed," said Thurston County District Judge Brett Buckley, a retired Judge Advocate General officer who presides over the new court.

VETERANS COURT

The court convened for the first time Wednesday with three defendants. Floyd Purdy, 26, was new to the court, pleading guilty to fourth-degree assault for strangling his wife in May 2008.

He received an honorable discharge after seeing combat overseas.

Buckley sentenced Purdy to a year in jail, minus time served, and suspended the remaining time if he complied with his treatment and other conditions, including not possessing a firearm, staying away from alcohol and keeping away from his wife. He was released from jail later that day.

That the courtroom broke into applause when Buckley announced that Purdy was the first defendant to enter the new court illustrates the new demeanor the judge brings to this court.

"I'm not running it like an Army officer," Buckley said.

