

Court to seek get help for vets accused of crimes

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Shaken by five slayings linked to Fort Carson soldiers within 15 months, a state court in Colorado Springs is setting up a Veterans Trauma Court to help soldiers accused of lesser crimes get help.

Efforts to establish the court were already under way before the Army's July 15 release of a report that found a possible link between intense combat faced while on deployment in Iraq and 11 slayings allegedly committed by 14 soldiers based at Fort Carson between 2005 and 2008. Most were from the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division.

Five of those slayings happened in the neighboring city of Colorado Springs from August 2007 to October 2008.

The court would be similar to other veterans' courts established across the country, including ones in Buffalo, N.Y., Anchorage, Alaska, Orange County, Calif., and Tulsa, Okla. In those courts, veterans accused of crimes receive reduced sentences or dismissal of charges if they comply with terms of their plea agreement.

Terms could include seeking treatment for substance abuse and behavioral or mental health treatment for post traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injuries suffered during combat. Many soldiers who get in trouble with the law suffer are self medicating with drugs, said El Paso County District Court Judge Ronald Crowder.

"It's the right thing to do for people who've gone into harm's way for the good of our country," said Crowder, a former general in the National Guard who as a captain in the Army served a tour of duty in Vietnam from 1971-72.

Crowder hopes the court will be operation next month, though some details are still being worked out.

While homicides won't qualify for the special court, lesser felony offenses such as burglary, theft, forgery and drugs would be handled by the veterans' court, with the district attorney's office deciding which cases qualify.

"We want to make sure the community is safe," said Jeffrey Lindsey, an assistant district attorney for El Paso and Teller counties that surround Fort Carson. "We're not going to shortchange that."

Sheilagh McAteer, who along with Crowder and Lindsey is on a committee working on establishing the veterans' court, said she's seen cases where such a court may have helped prevent more serious offenses.

Kenneth Eastridge, who manned machine guns mounted atop Humvees while on patrol in Iraq's deadly Sunni Triangle, last year pleaded guilty to being an accessory to murder in the December 2007 slaying of

Kevin Shields and was sentenced to 10 years in prison. During Eastridge's sentencing hearing in November, McAteer said Eastridge suffered a brain injury when an improvised explosive device tore through his Humvee, throwing him 30 to 60 feet.

During that hearing, McAteer said Eastridge, who was awarded a Purple Heart, also was diagnosed with PTSD but received an other than honorable discharge from the military and no medical help. He had been charged with felony menacing in March 2006, months before his second deployment in October that year.

"Eastridge is an awesome soldier," McAteer said in an interview with The Associated Press. "But if you start to track his behavior, it's directly related to his injury to his brain.

"If we would have gotten involved in Kenny's case early on... he would have never been involved in the homicide. He could have truly benefited from this court."

One of the components of the veterans' court would be assigning each veteran charged with a crime a peer specialist to help them find help through nonprofits in the Colorado Springs area. Crowder said that specialist might also direct former soldiers to the Veterans of Foreign Wars who have volunteers to help veterans upgrade their military discharge status, which may allow them to tap into their military benefits.

"This gives them an opportunity to have a better record, but at the same time they have that hammer hanging over their head," said Crowder, who will operate the court out of his courtroom.

Rich Lindsey, a job counselor through the Pikes Peak Behavioral Health Group, said many of the Fort Carson soldiers who are suffering psychological or head trauma suffer from memory loss and often miss appointments. They tell him they feel useless and are frustrated at having been discharged early.

"It's too soon and sudden for them to know what do to next," said Lindsey, who is not related to the assistant district attorney.

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