



Veteran Trauma Court to help local combat veterans

By Rachel Welte

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COLORADO SPRINGS, COLO. -- It has been in the works for years, and Thursday officials with the Fourth Judicial District announced the formal opening of the newly developed Veteran Trauma Court.

The court is Colorado's first, specifically designed to meet the unique needs of military veterans with service-related trauma disorders who have entered the criminal justice system.

The grant-funded court is modeled after other problem solving courts such as drug and mental health courts.

It will offer eligible offenders an alternative to jail through treatment and counseling along with regular court appearances.

"I picked up my first soldier and realized he had been discharged from the military for smoking marijuana, and I realized the reason he was smoking marijuana was because he was self medicating," Deputy State Public Defender Sheilagh Mcateer said.

That was Mcateer's first experience defending a soldier.

She said he was a decorated veteran who unfortunately watched a fellow soldier die overseas, and was experiencing severe post traumatic stress disorder.

"I tried and tried and tried to find services for him, but realized there was nothing out there because he was dishonorably discharged," Mcateer said.

Unfortunately Mcateer said the soldier re-offended and is now serving time in jail.

She said if Veteran Court had been around then, he probably would be in a much better place.

District Attorney Dan May said the court is not meant to be a scapegoat for veterans but rather a place for them to find help and healing.

"This is a lot tougher than just getting on probation, they are going to be monitored very closely, a lot more accountability, they will have to be back in court a lot more, it is a tougher program than the normal person would get," May said.

May said those eligible for treatment and counseling through the court are military veterans charged with a lower-level felony in the Fourth Judicial District.

He said they have to have experienced trauma related to military service and have been diagnosed with a trauma spectrum disorder.

As for Mcateer she said she has high expectations for the court.

"I am hoping that we can expand the concept so that soldiers that are charged with violent offenses are allowed into the program, because that is where I think the nexus is, between the violent offense and the trauma," Mcateer said.

The grant for the court will last around five years.

In that time the Colorado Division of Behavioral Health estimates approximately 1,540 veterans will receive diversion and treatment services.

