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Lawmakers would allow special approach for troubled veterans in local courts

By Hugh Lessig, hlessig@dailypress.com | 247-7821

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With a push from Hampton Roads, the General Assembly has approved legislation aimed at helping veterans with mental problems who get in trouble with the law.

The plan, which still requires the signature of Gov. Bob McDonnell, allows localities to establish special procedures to steer troubled veterans into treatment, instead of just sitting in jail or being sent back to the street.

It is meant to help the increasing number of veterans and active-duty military who suffer from post traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, depression or other problems related to their service, and who commit misdemeanors or non-violent felonies.

In 2009, the American Journal of Public Health reported that nearly 40 percent of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans in VA hospitals have mental disorders.

And Virginia has more than 800,000 veterans, which includes a concentration in Hampton Roads.

The legislation was sponsored by Del. Chris Stolle, R-Virginia Beach, and Sen. John Miller, D-Newport News.

Lawmakers raised a number of questions as the bills moved through the Senate and House of Delegates. Stolle said the basic intent of the bill remained intact.

"There was a lot of growth as we went through this," he said Wednesday. "It's a more informed approach to the realities of the court system, and I thought that was very valuable."

The bill does not set up an official "veterans' court" that treats veterans as a separate class of defendant. That concerned lawmakers, and supporters sought to steer clear of that.

It also doesn't change anything with regard to mandatory sentencing guidelines. However, it would give judges an option for veterans to get more help.

Even with mandatory guidelines, judges have some flexibility in sentencing, Stolle said. With this program in place, the judge could also direct the veteran into a specific treatment program instead of saying "go get help" but not being specific, Stolle said.

Similar programs exist in 18 other states.

McDonnell hasn't said if he will sign the bill, but Stolle said he is optimistic because the governor's office did not raise objections as the bill was vetted.

The legislation was a priority for the Joint Leadership Council of Veterans Services Organizations, a key voice for

veterans' issues in the legislature.

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