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Lake County to open special court for veterans

By Tony Gordon

The doors are scheduled to open Friday on a special Lake County court program designed to divert military veterans in trouble with the law away from the traditional justice system and toward the help they need.

Veterans Treatment Court will become the third specialized court system in the 19th Judicial Circuit, following the drug and mental health court programs that started earlier this decade.

The three programs share a common design in that each tries to identify treatment plans and social services available to offenders in order to rehabilitate individuals and lead them away from criminal activity. Chief Judge Victoria Rossetti said while the clients of drug and mental health courts are certainly worthy of redemption from their demons, extending a helping hand to those who have been in the military is on a par with paying a debt.

"It is essential that we do everything we can to assist the people who were willing to put their lives on the line for the rest of us," Rossetti said. "We have assembled a talented and enthusiastic team of people who are anxious to get to work."

The program seeks to bring troubled veterans into contact with services such as drug and alcohol treatment, mental health counseling and employment or educational services through the Department Veterans Affairs or local providers.

Veterans Treatment Court will be open to veterans arrested for a felony or misdemeanor crime eligible for probation who complete a petition to be considered.

Those charged with crimes against persons, such as battery and similar crimes, will be admitted to the program only after the victim of the offense is consulted and approves of the diversion.

"We do not anticipate big problems with victims of these crimes signing off on the diversion," Assistant State's Attorney Louise Hayes said. "In most of the cases we will be looking at, the victims are family members or close friends of the offenders who want them to get the help they need."

Screening to determine if the applicant qualifies for benefits through the VA, and if the crime and offender's personal history is appropriate for the program, are the final steps to admission.

Once accepted, a veteran will be directed to the rehabilitation services he or she needs, monitored closely by VTC officials and required to appear in court once per month for an assessment of progress.

Upon successful completion of the program, which is punctuated by rigid discipline, offenders can be given the chance to have their convictions removed from their records.

Because the Veterans Treatment Court makes use of court personnel already on the job and treatment programs currently available, it will operate without additional cost to the taxpayers, organizers said.

"We make use of existing resources in all aspects of the program," Public Defender Joy Gossman said. "Everyone involved is taking on the extra responsibilities because they believe in the job we will be doing."

The court in Lake County will mark the 71st jurisdiction in 25 states to set up such a program, according to statistics kept by the National Association of Drug Court Professionals.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2007 there were 773,000 military veterans serving some sort

of sentence for criminal behavior, or in jail awaiting trial.

In Lake County, there are approximately 39,000 veterans, and 90 to 100 members of that group are currently on probation, according to the county's Veterans Assistance Commission and probation department.

A clearer picture of the percentage of veterans in trouble with the law will be developed as the Veterans Treatment Court progresses, Circuit Judge John Phillips said, because police agencies in the county and booking officers at the county jail are now actively identifying arrestees with prior military service.

In downstate Madison County, which along with Cook County operates the only Veterans Treatment Court program in the state, officials say they have achieved a 100 percent success rate since that program started in 2009.

Brad Levite, superintendent of the Madison County Veterans Assistance Commission, said none of the 99 people screened for that program has been arrested for another crime.

"Veterans court is about giving people the tools they need to be productive, law-abiding members of society," Levite said. "Our clients come in very motivated to change their lives and, by virtue of the fact that they have been in the military, are accustomed to the discipline and dedication needed to make real change."

Lake County officials said they want to add a mentoring factor to their court and pair the veteran participants with people who know how to negotiate the various bureaucratic systems involved. "We want to attract volunteers who are veterans themselves and who have had experiences dealing with the VA and other agencies," said M.J. Hodgins, Veterans and Family Services coordinator for the Lake County Health Department.

"We believe the shared experience of military service and knowing how the process works will be key to creating the foundation for success."

Phillips, a military veteran who headed the committee that studied the veterans court project, said cases involving potentially eligible veterans for Veterans Treatment Court are currently being screened in advance of the first courtroom session.