



Madison County sets up new court to handle cases involving military veterans (Video)

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HUNTSVILLE, Alabama -- Madison County Circuit Judge Ruth Ann Hall and the Madison County District Attorney's Office today announced the creation of a new Veterans Court.

The court is designed to handle cases involving veterans charged with non-violent crimes. It will not handle cases involving Class A felonies.

Hall, who has long handled Madison County's Mental Health Court, which works with defendants with mental health problems. The court offers diversion sentencing, which includes counseling and mental health services.

The Veterans Court would work in a similar way, Hall said.

Hall and Madison County Assistant District Attorney Jay Town, a former U.S. Marine Corps officer, said during a press briefing today that the court will follow similar models from around the country which focus on the problems and challenges veterans face returning from combat.

Hall cited statistics that found there were more suicides among active duty military personnel in 2012 than combat deaths. She noted that 1 in 5 soldiers returning from service in Afghanistan and Iraq are diagnosed with mental health problems.

Those problems including anger, physical pain and post-traumatic stress disorder, can lead veterans to drug abuse, homelessness and crimes to cover the costs of "self-medicating," Hall said.

"We sent them there, they did this for us, for our country," Hall said. "They put their lives on the line and they have this medical issue, just like they lost a leg and they deserve our help."

The court will still hold veterans accountable for their crimes, Town said, but it is being set up in recognition of the special challenges veterans of all wars face.

"Our support for our troops cannot end when they take off the uniform," Town said. "They are different, veterans have been exposed to things that non-veterans have never been exposed to. They deserve our best effort."

Town said veterans often face a "cocktail of problems" and he is confident as Madison County residents become aware of the problems area veterans continue to face, they will respond.

Hall said there is still a stigma attached to mental illness and many veterans who are suffering are unwilling or unsuccessful at getting help, including their Veterans Administration benefits.

A VA representative will attend the court sessions, Hall said.

Hall said the court will initially be funded with an \$80,000 grant that will also assist the mental health and juvenile diversion courts. She estimated the court's initial run in handling veterans cases and then seeing them regularly as part of their sentencing, can handle between 35 and 40 defendants.

The defendants will be selected for the court by the district attorney's office.

The court is set to meet on the first and third Fridays of each month, Hall said. A key step will be certifying mentors through the Alabama Administrative Office of Courts. The mentors will be veterans and they will be assigned to defendants in the Veterans Court. The mentors will be a regular presence for the veterans, much like an Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor, Hall said.

The judge also stressed that by helping veterans in the justice system, there will be fewer housed of them housed in the Madison County Jail, which often has homeless veterans waiting months for a court date.

Devinti Williams, a Huntsville attorney, also attended the press briefing. Williams said the local defense bar is committed to helping veterans and he sees the new court as a way to address their unique set of problems.

Town said veterans leaving the military are expected to "hit the ground running" and many are not equipped to do so.

"Our office wants to prevent recidivist behavior, hold them accountable for their crimes and allow veterans to get on with their lives in this community," Town said.