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Veterans get their day in Cleveland Municipal Court's treatment program

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By Brian Albrecht
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CLEVELAND, Ohio -- In the service, veterans had their buddies to watch their backs, both in and out of combat

In the civilian world, things can get more complicated, confusing and lonely for vets.

That's why Cleveland Municipal Court is creating a Veterans Treatment Court, starting in September, that will solely handle the cases of vets who run afoul of the law in Cleveland.

Judge Lynn McLaughlin-Murray will preside over the court, with Judge Angela Stokes serving as alternate.

McLaughlin-Murray said the court will handle mostly misdemeanor offenses involving substance abuse, domestic relations, mental health, housing and other issues, plus minor felony drug cases.

She said Cleveland's Veterans Treatment Court will be the 78th in the nation since the first was established in Buffalo, N.Y., in 2008. In Ohio, there also are veterans courts in Mansfield, Youngstown and Hamilton and Stark counties.

The courts offer treatment and rehabilitation instead of jail time for veterans who can be struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder, chemical dependency, homelessness and other problems.

According to the judge, some 85 to 100 defendants currently on probation with the court, mostly for repeat offenses involving driving under the influence, could qualify for the voluntary program.

The court would utilize resources of the county Veterans Services Commission and Department of Veterans Affairs to provide what McLaughlin-Murray described as a "wrap-around service" to ensure that a defendant is receiving all medical, counseling, housing and other support assistance available to veterans.

Additionally, fellow veterans would be assigned to each defendant as a volunteer mentor/coach to



PD file

Cleveland Municipal Court Judge Lynn McLaughlin-Murray on Veterans Treatment Court: "These specialized dockets really make a difference in defendants' lives, and give them the tools they need to succeed."

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keep them on track with rehabilitative programs.

From talking to judges in other veterans courts, McLaughlin Murray said, she learned that "veterans really respond well to a structured environment and when interacting with other veterans."

"If they're in a place surrounded by people who understand them, who speak the same language, they're able to break down barriers and successfully complete programs," she added.

The court is seeking volunteer mentors. Interested veterans can contact **Derek Moore** in the probation office at 216-664-4930.

McLaughlin-Murray said other veterans courts have seen reduced recidivism and lower costs when comparing treatment to incarceration.

"There is a cost savings, absolutely," she said. "These individuals don't come back."

There is also a personal pay-off for the judge who is not a veteran, but saw enough of them as a Cleveland Municipal Court magistrate, and earlier during college as a homeless shelter volunteer, to grasp the scope of their problems.

Plus, "the thing I really love about my job is the opportunity to help individuals," she added. "These specialized dockets really make a difference in defendants' lives, and give them the tools they need to succeed."

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