



**InsideHCBA**

Insights from the Hennepin County Bar Association

Executive Exchange

## Graduation Day at Veterans Court

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Mary-Margaret Zindren, HCBA Executive Director

The sound of applause filled the courtroom. Everyone—from Judge Charles Porter and the probation officers, prosecutors, and Veterans Affairs staff, to the 20-some members of the audience—was focused on the man at the podium. He was the latest graduate of Hennepin County Veterans Court.

I had the privilege recently to be a guest of Judge Porter for a “judicial ride-along,” and it was in this capacity that I witnessed the celebration of this graduate’s accomplishments and transformation.

The Veterans Court is well-known for its groundbreaking approach to dealing with crimes committed by vets. Numerous news stories have been written since the court first began its work in July 2010, praising it for its unique, case-management approach.

Yet reading those news articles did not prepare me for witnessing first-hand what transpires over the course of a day in this court.

The pretrial briefing session that takes place prior to court appearances is a blend of collegiality, candor, and efficiency. More than a dozen individuals representing a wide range of connections to the court were gathered to discuss the 30 cases that would be dealt with on that particular afternoon. At any given time, approximately 100-110 participants are served by Veteran’s Court staff.

As each file is opened, the probation officer provides a report on the veteran in question. Often the reports lead to discussion of upcoming medical appointments; many of the veterans are dealing with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as well as chronic pain, and for veterans of Vietnam

and Korea, complications of old age. Because many of the offenses involve DWIs or drug charges, there is discussion of sponsors and how often to test for alcohol or drugs. Housing and employment are common issues, and for some there is the need for domestic abuse intervention or grief counseling. The judge hears the perspectives of his team, the data they share, the recommendations they put forward, and makes the call on how each case will proceed.

In court, the stack of case files is brought to life. There are faces to go with the names. Judge Porter greets each veteran before him with familiarity and humor. While only a few sentences are exchanged, and the amount of time spent is less than that given to the same case in the briefing room, it is clear to the veterans that Judge Porter is fully up-to-speed on how well they're progressing. He praises and encourages those who are progressing well, mentions upcoming doctor's appointments and his expectation that they'll be kept, and has tough words for those whose progress has been lagging.

It is clear to everyone that Judge Porter's military background informs his interactions and his decisions. His is a "tough love" approach that manifests little patience for excuses. The one vet who was to be on the docket but showed up with alcohol on his breath will face a formidable force when he comes before the court again the next week. Consequences will follow, but they'll be consequences beyond punishment, designed to get him on track toward a stable life.

All of this and more is what differentiates Hennepin County Veterans Court both from other courts of the fourth District and from other veterans courts across the nation. There is clear recognition of the impacts of war and military service on the ability of veterans to lead normal lives upon return. As our veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan return in ever larger numbers, the Veterans Court's resources will be stretched, and they will face challenges in keeping up with demand.

When the applause rang out that day for the newest graduate, the faces of audience members in the fourth row seemed particularly moved. Their smiles were a little broader than most; their clapping a little more vigorous. I assumed they were the man's family and friends.

But the man left the room alone. By the time the court session concluded, I realized that row four was in fact a mix of current Veterans Court cases and relatives and friends of others who were there before the court, still in the program. The graduate may not have been the reason they came to the courtroom that day, but they left with a particular sort of hope and optimism that only the success of another veteran can provide.

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**HCBA Members Who Are Veterans:** Are you interested in helping a veteran in managing their transition to civilian life? The Metropolitan Center for Independent Living (MCIL) can facilitate support to a veteran with a disability by providing assistance in managing their transition to civilian life. MCIL's *Peer Mentoring Program* is focused on helping each veteran with their goals. Volunteer mentors share their time, skills, experiences, knowledge and resources with other veterans who wish to eliminate/overcome barriers to living self-directed lives. Find out more about being a mentor by contacting Sarah Ditto at MCIL, 651-603-2027 or [sarahd@mcil-mn.org](mailto:sarahd@mcil-mn.org).