

Specialized court for troubled vets marks year anniversary

by [Jessica Mador](#), Minnesota Public Radio

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St. Paul, Minn. — July marks one year since the state launched its first Veterans Treatment Court, one of several dozen problem-solving courts around the country to help veterans who commit crimes stay out of the criminal justice system.

Veterans who land in trouble with the law can be referred to the Veterans Treatment Court in Minneapolis as an alternative to jail. That's how 56-year old Army veteran Cecil Wooten ended up in the program. He credits the court with helping him get clean.

"I got my third DWI and they had a vets court, and I was fortunate to get involved in it," Wooten said. "And I was thankful from then on."

Wooten lives in temporary Veterans Administration housing and has been sober for about a year now. Hennepin County Judge Charles Porter, who oversees the court, said Wooten's case is typical.

"The original thought was that what we would have is mostly Afghanistan and Iraq veterans," Porter said. "What we have mostly had is Vietnam veterans and they are a little bit of a harder case."

Many of the Iraq and Afghanistan veterans Porter sees have combat-related traumatic brain injury or post-traumatic stress disorder. Most of the approximately 70 defendants in the program over the past year have serious mental health issues. Many are addicted or chronically homeless or both. Many of whom have cycled through the criminal justice system for decades without treatment.

The program is still in its pilot phase. Advocates hope to make the Veterans Treatment Court permanent to help Iraq and Afghanistan veterans avoid the kinds of problems that sometimes arise as they in return to civilian life.

Porter said the court tries to address the root causes of these problems so veterans can get well. To do this, a team of specialists from the VA, law enforcement, corrections, attorneys, social workers and others coordinate each defendant's treatment.

"This is the long term 'get them fixed' approach."

Veterans courts have a national track record of success at preventing veterans from reoffending, and advocates say providing veterans with services is cheaper than locking them up in jail.

Participation is voluntary. Defendants agree to a strict program of counseling or Alcoholics Anonymous, drug tests and meetings with officials who closely track their progress. Porter said in exchange, participants also receive a lot: the court connects defendants to housing, medical care, mental health services — whatever the participant needs, and in the end could even get their sentences reduced.

"We will not use a correctional approach primarily as the consequence of your behavior, and we will insist that you use a treatment approach and we will monitor your treatment approach; support you in your treatment approach but expect that you do it," Porter said.

The court is successful, Porter said, because different from the past, when the VA was notoriously bureaucratic and difficult for veterans to access, the VA is now directly involved in expediting claims.

The court's VA social worker David Holewinski said the idea is to stabilize veterans so they no longer need expensive services.

"If we can mitigate legal charges or help get them the treatment and their support," Holewinski said, "then it gives them a more stable and solid footing to get a job, to get into education, to repair family relationships, which helps minimize or decrease homelessness hopefully in the long run."

Participant Wooten will be graduating from the program soon, but he plans to stay on as a mentor. He wants to help other veterans get the second chance at life the court gave him.

"It has given me a chance to start over and get connected with my kids and my sisters and my brothers after years and years of fighting and struggling through my drinking," Wooten said.