

## New veterans court aims to help soldiers struggling at home

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

March 22, 2010

Chaska, Minn. — The Pentagon estimates that as many as one in five veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will suffer from mental health problems as a result of their military service.

Many returning veterans with conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder get in trouble with the law. Some wind up in the criminal justice system for years while their PTSD goes untreated.

This summer, a new court opens in Hennepin County to divert these veterans from prison, and get them the services they need to recover.

Veterans Treatment Court aims to help veterans like former Marine Jonathan Wheeler.

With his two children napping upstairs, Wheeler's townhouse in Chaska is quiet. But until recently, things weren't so peaceful.

Wheeler pulls open a sliding closet door he ripped out of the frame, in one of many violent rages.

"Pictures that used to be hanging here are gone, because I broke them," said Wheeler. "I broke a lot of pictures of my wife and I. I don't know why I was so mad at her. I wasn't. I think I was just taking it out on her. But I broke a lot of pictures and ripped up a lot of stuff that was memorable, because of how angry I was. I took my anger towards something else, an object or something."

Wheeler, who's 31 and stands 6 and a half feet tall, couldn't quiet the demons that still haunt him after his deployment to Iraq in 2004. Wheeler's Marine battalion was part of the first major invasion of Fallujah, a hot zone early in the war.

"That city was like a horror picture show, crumbling, on fire, smoke and death everywhere," he said.

Soon he was recruited for a special unit that roamed the war zone, hunting "high-value" insurgents. Wheeler says nothing could have prepared him for what that assignment required.

"The government wants us to make sure that anybody who is killed over there isn't a big player. So each body -- we would have to go up and unpile this rubble of this bomb that just hit, and take the bodies out so [the commander] could identify them. It's just a lot of sights and sounds that you'll never forget," Wheeler said.

Wheeler's trouble started on his way back to Minnesota. Like the other Marines in his unit, he used alcohol and marijuana to numb his memories. He failed a drug test one month before his discharge and spent 30 days in the brig.

Then, more than a year after getting home in 2005, Wheeler began to feel strange.

He couldn't sleep, and when he did he had terrifying nightmares. During the day, he had panic attacks that made it impossible for him to work. He says he "drank himself into oblivion," but that only made things worse.

"I felt guilty that I didn't die, and these guys left their kids and their families behind," said Wheeler. "I came back, and the life that I did have, I was screwing it up. I was running myself into the dirt."

As horrible as it was, Wheeler's situation isn't unique. In fact, it's part of a serious and growing problem.

A recent study by the RAND Corp. found that only about half of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans with PTSD or depression have sought help. Of those who did, only about half got adequate care.

The same study found that PTSD and depression cost the nation as much as \$6.2 billion -- and that's just counting the first two years after deployment. The study accounts for medical care, lost productivity, and suicide.

After a night of hard drinking, Wheeler was arrested. The cops found drugs in his car and he was thrown in jail.

He got out of jail after a few days, but he wasn't out of trouble. The experience pushed him further into despair until finally, a few months ago, his family convinced him to go to rehab.

For the first time in the five years since coming home from Iraq, Wheeler got counseling. He quit drinking. Doctors diagnosed him with post-traumatic stress disorder and a possible traumatic brain injury.

Despite what he's been through, Wheeler says he doesn't regret serving in Iraq.

"I still love the Marine Corps. I just wish it was handled better, maybe me getting some counseling and some alternatives, a diversion program," he said.

That's exactly what the new veterans court hopes to provide. Judge Richard Hopper will run Minnesota's Veterans Treatment Court when it launches in July.

"What we have learned from our previous wars is that these people do not go away, and their problems are not solved by time," Hopper said. "Instead, they continue to ramp up their behaviors and end up getting into more and more trouble, and needing more and more services."

Hopper says combining social services with the threat of legal consequences makes the model successful.

The court requires veterans to follow a strict, personalized treatment program designed by the judge, probation officers, social workers, defense and prosecuting attorneys and the Veterans Administration. By completing the program, a veteran may be able to skip incarceration. Failing to adhere to the program may lead to jail.

The new veterans court in Minnesota is modeled after a program in California.

Research indicates veterans in that county who go through the regular criminal justice system have a re-arrest rate of about 50 percent, compared to just 18 percent for those diverted to veterans court.

"By doing this we are really, in the long run, benefiting society cost-wise, and I think obviously, behavior-wise," said Judge Hopper. "Because there are going to be fewer victims out there that are going to have their lives impacted by someone who is out of control."

The cost for similar specialty courts has been calculated at approximately \$5,000 per defendant. A White House estimate pegs the average cost to incarcerate an inmate at more than \$5,000 per month.

Jonathan Wheeler feels more stable these days, but his situation remains fragile. As of today, he has been sober for 92 days.

Wheeler has had to grapple with his problems alone. His stay in the brig cost him easy access to VA programs, but that was the result of a bureaucratic mistake. He's re-applying for benefits and has a good chance of getting them.

Wheeler doesn't want other veterans to have to go it alone like he and most of his buddies have -- some survived the war only to take their own lives after returning home.

Wheeler plans to volunteer with the new court as a mentor to help other veterans.

"Something about a veteran -- they need other veterans to heal, somebody who has been through what they have been through and understands what they are feeling," Wheeler said.

Peer mentoring is a key part of Veterans Treatment Court. For some veterans, the court's early intervention could be the difference between life and death.



*Jonathan Wheeler helps his children with coloring at their home in Chaska, Minn. Friday, March 12, 2010. Wheeler is struggling with the effects of PTSD resulting from his service in Iraq, but hasn't received benefits from the military because of a less-than-honorable discharge. (MPR Photo/Jeffrey Thompson)*



*Wheeler in Iraq*



*Wheeler and family*



*Wheeler and son*

**"I felt guilty that I didn't die, and these guys left their kids and their families behind. I came back, and the life that I did have, I was screwing it up."**

*- Former Marine Jonathan Wheeler*