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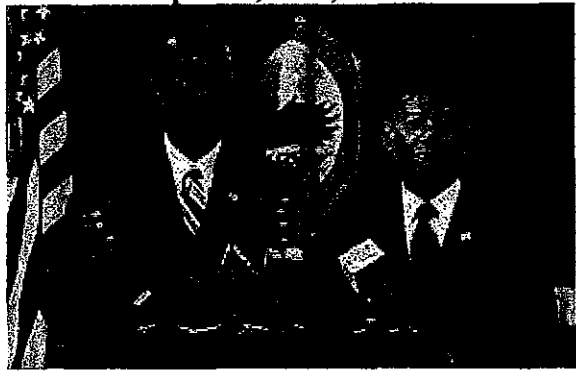
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The Buffalo News

From top level, praise for veterans court

VA chief sees firsthand why Buffalo's is national model

By Lou Michel: News Staff Reporter
Updated: April 07, 2010, 12:14 am
Published: April 07, 2010, 6:36 am



Judge Robert Russell, founder of veterans court, speaks at news conference with VA Secretary Eric Shinseki.
Harry Scull Jr. /Buffalo News

Sitting unobtrusively in Buffalo City Veterans Treatment Court on Tuesday afternoon, he could have been just another court observer. He was anything but.

This particular observer was U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki, a retired Army general and wounded veteran of the Vietnam War. He had come to observe firsthand why the first veterans court in the country is so successful.

"I'm looking for ways I might encourage more opportunities like this," Shinseki said later at a news conference. "Forty courts have started around the country based on this model."

For City Judge Robert T. Russell Jr., who launched the veterans court in January 2008, it was another busy day in a court where veterans are given a second chance to become productive members of society and avoid a criminal record.

"I'm blessed, your honor; it's been 17 months," one veteran said of staying out of trouble with the law. "I'm grateful. I really am."

At the news conference, Russell explained that the success stems from a different mind-set in working with defendants, many of whom have gone astray after returning home from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan because of post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injuries or drug and alcohol abuse.

"It's therapeutic problem-solving. There isn't the conflict as in other courts between the prosecutor and defendant," Russell said. "Everyone is on the same page."

With the VA secretary standing just a few feet away, Russell seized the opportunity to thank him and his department for its support.

"I am extremely grateful for the VA. Not only are they treating veterans, but they have a staff person in the court working on veterans' benefits issues that are not an entitlement, but what they have earned," Russell said.

That tone continued with Shinseki, who as a four-star general served as Army chief of staff from June 1999 to June 2003, a period encompassing 9/11 and the early months of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"When my friends ask me why I took this job, I tell them for three reasons — to give back to the kids I sent to war, give back to those who served in Vietnam and give back to the veterans of World War II and the Korean War — those giants," he said.

Shinseki also promised that under his watch, the VA would clear up long delays that veterans encounter in seeking various services.

"Our intent and commitment in 2010 is to break the back of the backlog ... and increase services," he said.

When it was pointed out by the media that this is not the first time a VA secretary has come to Buffalo and vowed to improve processing of veterans' claims, Shinseki said, "We're a large organization, and we're talking about cultural changes. We have begun pilot programs for clearing claims."

He didn't stop at that.

"The bottom line is, it's not working, ... and this year's efforts will change that," he said, promising that he would return to Buffalo and that the conversation on this subject would be different a year from now.

Erie County Director of Veterans Services Patrick W. Welch, who was also wounded in Vietnam, said it meant a great deal that a member of President Obama's Cabinet would take the time to travel here and view the veterans court.

What it shows, Welch said, is "a commitment by this secretary to make meaningful changes."

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Dallas County creating specialized court for veterans with combat trauma

12:00 AM CDT on Wednesday, March 31, 2010

By **CHRISTY HOPPE** / The Dallas Morning News
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AUSTIN – Soldiers who survive combat only to fall into addiction and depression could face a different kind of justice in Dallas County starting next month.

Specialized courts are starting up in major counties to identify military veterans who show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder or head injuries that could have sparked their crimes. Harris and Tarrant counties already have such programs, and Bexar, Travis and El Paso counties are joining in.

"The veterans have unique problems that come from their service not only in Iraq and Afghanistan, there's still some from Vietnam," said state District Judge Mike Snipes, who aims to hold the first Dallas veterans docket in April.

The courts, fashioned after drug courts, will be run by certain judges in each county. They will oversee the cases of veterans in which treatment and therapy can replace jail time and probation, and veterans can address their problems without compiling a criminal record.

"We're seeing more and more examples of people coming out of there with post-traumatic stress disorder, unique mental difficulties that have to do with combat-related issues," Snipes said Tuesday. He was in Austin for a forum on the special courts, which included information from other states that have already started such programs.

In 2008, Texas' prison system reported that 4,500 offenders entering the state's prisons had served in the military. That's about 6 percent of all new prison inmates.

The Legislature authorized counties last year to start the specialized dockets in existing courts, but didn't provide money for them. And so counties and interested judges have been scrounging for seed money.

Texas' first specialized court docket was held four months ago in Harris County. In one of the first cases heard, a man arrested for evading arrest after a minor traffic accident told the judge that he saw police lights and panicked.

The incident happened two years after he'd returned from patrol duty in Iraq. He was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, and he had no prior criminal record.

Houston state District Judge Marc Carter said he has heard 20 such cases since he began holding hearings for veterans – many of them dealing with addiction, which is how some have tried to cope with the stress.

He said one of the soldiers he oversees had logged 25,000 combat hours. Others had been deployed three or four times, moving from combat-survival mode to civilian life and then back again, he said.

"It is not a switch you can turn on and off," Carter said. Sometimes, the trauma of transition leads to alcohol, drugs and the compulsion to lash out, he said.

"These are probation cases. The only question is, where are they going to be treated? What can we do to change their behavior and help them adjust?" Carter said.

Most judges and even district attorneys volunteering to handle these cases are also veterans, so they speak with an understanding of the battles – both overseas and back home.

Snipes' military career included service with the Army Reserve in Iraq.

"That's why I want to do this," he said.

Assistant District Attorney Craig McNeil, who will prosecute the cases in Dallas County, also served in Iraq.

"If the reason someone offends is because they have underlying issues – post-

traumatic stress or related drug or alcohol addiction – we want to try and treat that," McNeil said. "We want to give people the opportunity to correct an issue that's not really their fault."

Carter said he excludes from his Houston docket cases involving almost all violent crimes. Snipes plans to have similar limits and to accept only veterans who were honorably discharged.

In Dallas, the court will work with the Department of Veterans Affairs for hospital and treatment space. Often, a benefits coordinator will help negotiate veterans' assistance, and they can obtain counseling with fellow soldiers dealing with combat-related stress.

Those who complete the program could be eligible to have their criminal records expunged.

"It provides a mechanism where these individuals can get back on track, get the help they need and not be tagged with a conviction that puts them into a downward spiral," said state Rep. Allen Vaught, D-Dallas, who co-authored the legislation that allows county commissioners to create the veterans courts.

Vaught, who earned a Purple Heart in Iraq, said he is still hoping to find state funding to begin the courts. Currently, the counties are applying for federal and state grants for veterans or criminal justice programs or for set-aside proceeds from a veterans lottery scratch-off ticket introduced last year. The start-up grants are about \$200,000.

State Sen. Leticia Van de Putte, D-San Antonio, said she has been asked by some prosecutors why she helped champion the specialized courts when other types of offenders might also be deserving.

"While others might have mental health problems, they weren't caused by service to our country," she said. "That's why we think this is so vitally important."