

Veterans Court addresses special needs

January 26, 2012

Circuit Judge Robert Krebs is expanding the 19th Circuit Drug Court to include a Veterans Court program to address the needs of military veterans in Jackson, George and Greene counties.

Judge Krebs said he has seen special needs of veterans who have come through his court in the past, and he anticipates that the numbers will increase as more men and women return home from military duty. The Mississippi Gulf Coast has a heavy military presence.

Judge Krebs said that during nine years on the bench, "I've had a number of veterans come through, from various wars, with all sorts of problems, many of which are drug related."

The program will help connect veterans with needed resources, including treatment provided through the Veterans Administration. "Maybe we can put it all together and get these folks pointed in the right direction," Judge Krebs said.

The Veterans Court will pair veterans with other veterans as mentors. Several police officers who are also military veterans have volunteered as mentors.

The treatment-oriented program will operate within the existing Drug Court. The Drug Court will intensely supervise the veterans as it does other participants. However, veterans will meet as a separate group with Judge Krebs and Drug Court staff because their experiences are different from those of other Drug Court participants.

"They have PTSD. They've seen death, dying, dismembered body parts, blood. It's a totally different experience than the street," Judge Krebs said.

The 19th Circuit is the third state trial court to develop a program for veterans.

The 12th Circuit Court of Forrest and Perry counties started a separate Veterans Court in November 2011. Twelve people were transferred from the Drug Court to the new program. The 8th Circuit Court of Leake, Neshoba, Newton and Scott counties started a veteran's component within that Drug Court in August 2010, and is currently working with one veteran.

Circuit Judge Robert Helfrich of Hattiesburg said, "These are men and women that have volunteered to risk their lives for the freedoms we have. Do they deserve special treatment? Absolutely. Do they get special treatment? Absolutely not. They are not treated any differently than a regular Drug Court participant, but they do have different issues and they do have different avenues of treatment through the Veterans Administration, and we try to address those issues and connect them with the services available."

"They have a different set of problems leading to their addiction, and they also have different resources, through the Veterans Administration," Judge Helfrich said. "A lot of times these men and women are not seeking help that is available, and they try to address these issues with drugs and alcohol."

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