

SANTA MARIA TIMES

Vets Court to offer jail alternative for some

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County program will debut Wednesday

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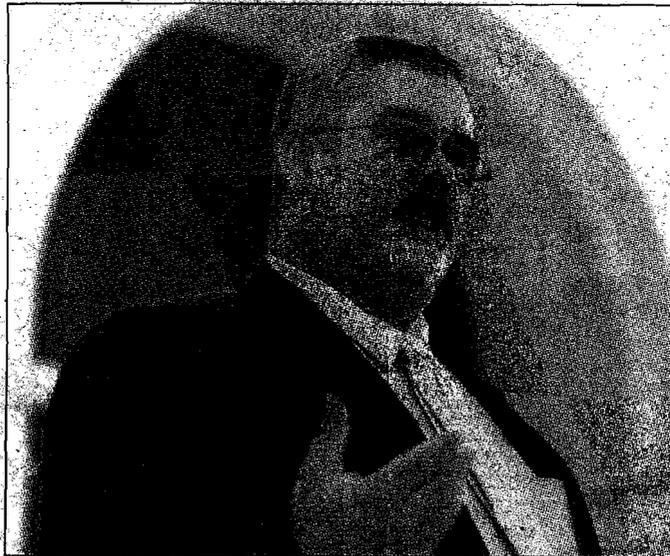
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Some veterans in northern Santa Barbara County who find themselves on the wrong side of the law as a result of a non-violent, non-serious crime or substance abuse will soon have the option of getting help instead of spending time in jail.

Veterans Treatment Court, a collaborative effort by the District Attorney's Office, Public Defender, Superior Court, county Probation and Alcohol, Drug and Mental Health Services, will debut Wednesday in Department 3 at Santa Maria Superior Court.

An official inaugural ceremony will be held at noon Tuesday at the Veterans Memorial Cultural Center in Santa Maria.

The court will be held on the second and fourth Wednesday



Len Wood/Staff

Frank Campo, Commander of American Legion Post 56 and an Army veteran, is a big supporter of the new Veterans Treatment Court, which will help law-breaking veterans get help

of each month before Judge Rogelio Flores, and will be evaluated over the course of a year by a UCSB student who is earning her doctorate in psychology.

The student will determine

success rates in areas such as reducing clinical symptoms of trauma, severity of addiction, and recidivism.

Amy Lopez, who works with county ADMHS, said a new veterans treatment calendar

will be created, and that after a year of showing progress, it may be possible to apply for grant funding to expand and enhance the program.

The court is not funded now, said Lopez, and will operate as a result of the various departments pooling their efforts and working together.

The court offers a second chance to veterans arrested in North County for non-serious, non-violent crimes, and who are determined to have mental health issues such as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and/or sexual trauma.

Unlike veterans treatment courts in some other areas, the option locally is available to any veteran, not just those who saw combat.

Frank Campo, commander of American Legion Post 56 and an Army veteran himself, said the first Veterans Court was started in Buffalo, N.Y., in 2008.

It was developed as a hybrid

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of drug and mental health courts after the judicial system saw more and more veterans returning from deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq and committing crimes as a result of PTSD, TBI or sexual trauma.

One of the most common includes various levels of domestic violence, Campo said.

"They just don't know how to deal with their loved ones or the public when they get back from overseas," he said. "When you're in Iraq and Afghanistan, it's a different world."

Campo related that both his sons are in the Army, and said that when they come back from Afghanistan they don't want to be "touchy-feely."

"Give them their space," he said.

The court is possible as the result of a new state law in 2010 that allows a veteran who commits a non-violent, non-serious crime as the result of PTSD or TBI to go into a diversion program rather than jail.

Campo said the court is a "dream come true" for him.

"I think of how these veterans came back from Vietnam," he said. "Our troops today have homecomings, ceremonies ... when the guys came back from Vietnam they were spit on. They weren't treated too good. But just from the stigma from 40 years ago, society has learned maybe we should do things better."

Campo said the court is expecting an initial load of



Len Wood/Staff

Frank Campo, Commander of American Legion Post 56 and an Army veteran, talks with Air Force veteran Lisa Lews at the post. Campo said the start of a Veterans Treatment Court in Santa Barbara County is a "dream come true" for him.

less than 20, "and that's even far reaching," he said, because a lot of veterans don't want to reach out for help.

"One of the things court has done, if the person is arrested and goes through the booking process, the public defender asks them if they're a veteran," Campo said. "If they are, that starts the process for drug treatment."

Campo said the treatment option will make those men and woman more productive citizens.

"A lot of these guys and gals, mostly guys, they self-medicate," Campo said. "They don't want to go to the VA, they don't want to go seek health care, so they start with alcohol, get drunk on a case of beer. From there

they get some grass, some weed. Whatever. From there it snowballs."

The diversion program is important, Lopez said, because it will help veterans navigate the Veterans' Administration who might not otherwise be able to, and in doing so free up county dollars.

"We're identifying veterans in the justice system, assisting them with accessing benefits through the VA, and by doing that, the VA can and will fund their treatment," Lopez said.

"The veterans have dedicated their lives to serving this country, and coming back from battle or even from traumatic experiences in the military in general, they may

act out and find themselves in the justice system," Lopez said. "We feel obligated to identify them and make sure they're getting the resources they need."

Lopez said the Veterans Administration will have a veterans justice outreach specialist available in court to help defendants with their benefits.

Veterans Court works similarly to Alcoholics Anonymous, in that it pairs offenders with volunteer veteran mentors, Campo said, adding that they're looking for people who are interested in helping.

If you're interested in being a mentor with the Veterans Treatment Court, contact Campo at 588-1006, or Lopez at 614-1566.

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