

Treatment Court Graduates 500th Veteran

Texas vets in Bexar County get a second chance at life thanks to the Veterans Treatment Court in San Antonio

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Wearing a camouflage robe, Judge Wayne Christian presided over the ceremony for the 500th graduate of the Bexar County Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) in San Antonio on May 6.

Created by the Bexar County Commissioners and Criminal District Attorney's Office in 2010, the VTC works to rehabilitate vets instead of having them incarcerated following charges of misdemeanor-level offenses.

According to VTC Project Director Joshua Childers, the majority of cases are related to substance use (possession), DWI or domestic violence.

"We occasionally have and accept cases outside of this area, but it is case-by-case," said Childers, a life member of the VFW Department of Texas. "We do not take veterans who are charged with violence against children or elderly, or cases that are sexual in nature."

Childers said that the "target population" for VTC are veterans whose criminal cases are somehow related to the effects of their time in military service, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression or anxiety.

The VTC program is 12 months. During that time, veterans receive counseling, therapy and rehabilitation at the VA. Twice a month, participants appear before the court to report their status to Judge Christian at docket calls.

At the end of the one-year program, the judge presents graduates with a VTC challenge coin that reads: "Courage, Honor, Justice."

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To be eligible for the treatment court, a defendant must:

- Have a pending misdemeanor offense(s);
- Be a veteran, or in the reserves or National Guard;
- Be a resident of Bexar County, Texas, or an adjacent county;
- Have a mental illness or substance-abuse disorder, including PTSD, traumatic brain injury, depression, anxiety or psychotic disorders; and
- Have victim's consent, if applicable.

Christian, a Life member of Post 76 in San Antonio, said the most rewarding part of presiding over the VTC for nine years is interacting with former military members and assist them in the civilian world.

Christian recalled a veteran who came to the court with a resisting arrest charge. The Iraq War veteran had been to the VA to get help for PTSD after serving in the infantry in Iraq.

"He was a total mess," said Christian, a retired Army colonel. "I knew what PTSD is, but hadn't really seen what it does to people. He was very hostile. But after a year in the program, he got a job, he was sleeping and had a 100 percent disability rating."

Another case that stands out in Christian's memory bank is a female veteran who had "severe alcohol problems." After six months in the VTC program, she asked the court's permission to go home for Christmas.

"Her mom called our outreach officer and asked, 'What did you do to my daughter?'" said Christian, who served with the 3rd Special Forces Group in Afghanistan in 2003. "She hadn't seen her sober in 18 years."

Christian said he has a jungle camo robe for "old school" guys and a desert camo robe for the newest generation of veterans. He added that the VTC sees everything from privates to colonels to fighter pilots to SEALs.

"Even if a veteran is not eligible for VTC, we do everything we can to help them," Christian said. Childers, an Afghanistan War veteran, was a case manager for VTC from 2017 to January 2019 when he was named project director.

He said the VTC saves taxpayers money by removing the high cost of jail overpopulation. It also creates a group of rehabilitated offenders who display lower risks of re-offending.

"Based on the information available to us and through the nonprofit organization, Justice for Vets, we believe we can confidently say our recidivism rates are less than 5 percent of those who complete the program," Childers said. "Recidivism rates in a regular court are 23 percent."

Unlike similar courts around the country, Christian said Bexar County's VTC allows active-duty troops to apply for the program.

"About 10 percent of our participants at any given time are active duty," he said.

To learn more about the Bexar County VTC, visit bexar.org/1085/Veterans-Treatment-Court.

This article is featured in the September 2019 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.