

Veterans Court established in county

by Jennifer Cohron

08.10.14 - 09:00 am

District Judge Greg Williams will preside over Walker County's first veterans-only docket on Thursday.

Current or former members of the military who are arrested on criminal charges will now have a choice between either standing trial or entering the Walker County Veterans Court.

Individuals must commit to the program for one year. They will be required to attend treatment for mental health or substance abuse issues, submit to mandatory drug or alcohol testing, appear for weekly status hearings and comply with all other rules imposed by the court.

Successful completion of the program may lead to charges being dismissed or a reduced sentence. Noncompliance will result in a sanction, such as community service or jail time.

The nation's first veterans court was established in Buffalo, New York, in 2008. A similar court was established in Shelby County in 2012.

The Walker County Veterans Court is the first one in northwest Alabama.

Williams expects the number of specialty courts in the state to keep growing at least in part because of prison overcrowding. "We are having to become problem solvers instead of just being consequence based," Williams said.

Justice for Vets, a national nonprofit that supports the creation of veterans courts, notes that individuals who run afoul of the law are likely to reoffend unless they receive treatment for underlying mental health or substance abuse problems that stem from their military service.

One in five veterans has symptoms of a mental health disorder or cognitive impairment, according to a 2008 report from the RAND Center for Military Health Policy Research.

One in six post-9/11 veterans has a substance abuse issue, according to a 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health report.

Since 2004, the number of veterans being treated for mental illness and substance abuse has increased 38 percent, according to the Justice for Vets website.

Veteran Steven Shaver, the director of Walker County's Court Referral Office, said the use of improvised explosive devices and multiple deployments are having an undeniable impact on the current generation of soldiers. "In the past,

most veterans went to war one time. That was enough. These kids today are going five, six, 10 times,” Shaver said.

The Walker County Veterans Court will utilize the Veterans Health Administration and local community agencies to address the individual needs of program participants.

Veterans will be assisted by a comprehensive team consisting of the judge, the District Attorney’s Office, the Court Referral Office, the area Veterans Justice Outreach specialist (VJO), representatives from local veterans organizations and substance abuse and mental health providers as well as a community liaison/veterans advocate.

The team will determine eligibility, make treatment recommendations, discuss the progress or needs of each veteran and make additional recommendations.

Williams added that retired veterans who are willing to serve as mentors are needed to make the program successful.

Mentors will attend the weekly court sessions and offer support and encourage outside the courtroom.

“Above all, they need to be good, compassionate listeners,” Williams said.

Shaver stressed that the new court is intended to help veterans, not absolve them of responsibility.

“This is not a free ticket. The fact that they are not going to jail or prison does not mean that they will not have to pay their debt to society,” he said.

Williams hopes that much like the county’s drug court, the new veterans court will give graduates the tools they need to once again be productive members of society.

“Some of the individuals we are talking about haven’t accomplished a lot in the last few months or years. They’ve made bad decisions that they kept compounding with other bad decisions. Then they start seeing some success through this court, and they start building on a foundation of good decisions,” Williams said.

The Walker County Veterans Court will meet each Thursday at the Walker County Courthouse Annex in Courtroom C at 9 a.m. It is open to the public.

For more information, call Shaver at 384-7251.