

Georgia Chief Justice visits veterans court

by [Ricky Leroux](#)

01.10.15 - 04:00 am



MARIETTA — The chief justice of the Georgia Supreme Court came to Cobb on Friday to observe the county’s Veterans Accountability and Treatment Court program, and, after seeing it first hand, said he hopes to help start similar programs around the state.

Chief Justice Hugh Thompson, who has been on the state’s high court since his appointment by former Gov. Zell Miller in 1994, said he was very

impressed with the veterans court.

“I hope to be able to help other groups get started and help (in) any other ways that are possible for me to do,” Thompson said. “Sometimes I have a bully pulpit as chief justice. Sometimes it works better than others, but I hope to be able to do all I can to encourage other programs to start.”

The veterans court, overseen by Cobb Superior Court Judge Reuben Green, takes in former members of the military with mental health or substance abuse issues who have been charged with a felony and provides an alternative to sending them to jail. Instead, they are enrolled in treatment programs, find employment and work with their mentors — who are also veterans.

The chief justice applauded the efforts of Cobb Superior Court to help veterans.

“We owe a lot to our veterans,” Thompson said. “We really do. And if we can give them a hand up, I think that’s really great because they certainly have given dedicated service to their country.”

Thompson said Cobb is a great place for such a program.

“Cobb County is unique in the fact that it has about 50,000 veterans here. That’s more than any other county in the state. It has a lot of resources, has close proximity to a lot of veterans services, so it’s fairly uniquely situated,” Thompson said.

Green said the program began after officials noticed a large number of veterans showing up in Cobb courtrooms.

“Our district attorney, Vic Reynolds, and our sheriff, Neil Warren, and the Superior Court judges noticed this influx of veterans coming through our criminal justice system,” Green said. “So we started keeping track of the totals, and it’s about 15 every single month that are self-identified veterans being arrested. ... Given that need, we decided to start a veterans court.”

Thompson arrived before the veterans court session started Friday morning and saw some of the work that goes into the program.

“I was able, with Judge Green’s permission, to sit in on the triage, if you will, of all of the cases before court this morning and was most impressed with the team’s devotion and effort in the therapy that they are trying to bring to bear in the lives of all these people involved,” Thompson said.

The chief justice said he came to the veterans court Friday because its mission piqued his interest.

“I have, all my life, wanted to be in a position of helping other people,” he said. “That’s why I got into law way back initially. And this looks to be, from a judicial perspective, one of the most helping, caring, effective approaches to problems people have in our society.”

Thompson said he likes accountability courts, such as the veterans court, especially because of their high success rate. About 93 percent of graduates from Cobb’s drug court program — another accountability court — have not been arrested in the three years since finishing the program, Thompson said, and about 85 percent are employed.

“So they’re paying taxes. They’ve rejoined society, and that’s a wonderful accomplishment for any court,” he said.

The veterans court, one of three accountability courts in Cobb, was established in June 2014 and is the fourth veterans court established in the state. The veterans enroll in an 18-month program consisting of four phases, Green said, and the restrictions on the veterans are loosened as they progress through the phases.

To be considered for the program, the veterans must be eligible for benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs, which means they cannot have been dishonorably discharged. The program primarily deals with veterans who have been charged with a felony in Cobb, though Green has said the program has accepted a veteran from outside the county. Finally, the veteran must have mental health or substance abuse issues.

sponsored from around the web