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Judge: Veterans court 'incredibly rewarding'

by [Ricky Leroux](#)

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MARIETTA — Cobb Superior Court Judge Reuben Green said the best part of his job happens every Friday at 9 a.m.

Green said presiding over adoption hearings and weddings are also high on the list, but the thing he enjoys the most is meeting weekly with the group of men and women in Cobb's Veterans Accountability and Treatment Court

Program.

"To help fellow veterans that are having a tough time, that are in a bad spot in their lives, to help them or at least give them the opportunity to help themselves, I think that that is incredibly rewarding," said Green, a former Marine.

The veterans court takes in former military members with mental health or substance abuse issues who have committed a crime and provides an alternative to sending them to jail.

"Cobb's got one of the highest veteran populations in the state — second highest to Fulton (County)," Green said. "We've got about 50,000 veterans in Cobb County, and then of course we've got Dobbins (Air Reserve Base) as well, with about 4,500 active duty and reservists there. So I think there's going to be a huge need for a veterans court going forward."

Green said there are about 15 identified veterans arrested each month in Cobb County.

The county's other accountability courts, a drug court and a mental health court, have led to a dramatic drop in repeat offenders, as well as employment rates, Green said.

For instance, Green said 85 percent of those that graduate from the county's drug court are employed and 93 percent have not been arrested in the three years after finishing the program.

The veterans court functions more like a support group than a legal proceeding. Green called the veterans up one by one, and with their mentors by their sides, most of the veterans would stand in a "parade rest" position before the judge: shoulders straight, hands behind their back, feet shoulder width apart.

In almost all cases, Green's opening question was "How are you doing today?"

Green would then get an update from his charges, not only asking if they were

following the rules of the program, but also if they were enjoying their jobs and how their families were doing.

He also asked personal questions and knew many details of each of those who came before him. For instance, one of the veterans was recovering from dental surgery and Green asked about her recovery.

Don Geary, a chief assistant district attorney who oversees the county's accountability courts and a former Marine, said although the veterans court is still in its early days, it has been very successful thus far.

"If it remotely achieves its objective (and) makes a difference for a couple of these young men and women, it's worth our time and effort," Geary said. "This is not, to me, just a service we provide to them. I think we, as a society, with the sacrifice they've made, it's a duty we owe them."

'We want to

help each other'

The program started June 20 and was the fourth veterans court to be established in Georgia, Green said. Today, there are 13 in Georgia that have either started or are in the process of starting, he added.

In less than six months, the program has added nine veterans to bring the total to 13. Another veteran is set to join at the next meeting and two others are being considered, Green said.

Green said in order for someone to be considered for the program, they must be a veteran eligible for benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs, which means they cannot have been dishonorably discharged.

The veteran has to have been charged with a felony in Cobb, although Green said the program has taken in a veteran from Douglas County.

Finally, the veteran must have mental health issues, substance abuse issues or both, Green said.

"So they have addiction issues or they have PTSD," Green said. "Post-traumatic stress disorder is the most common, or they could have traumatic brain injuries or depression or any other diagnosed mental health illness. The idea is, for it to be an accountability and treatment court, we have to have something we're treating. If it's just a veteran that commits a crime, they're not necessarily eligible to come into the program."

Each veteran in the program is paired with a mentor, all of whom are honorably discharged veterans who volunteer to help those in the program, Green said. The mentors commit to coming to the weekly court sessions with the veterans and provide support throughout the week.

There are four phases veterans progress through over the course of the 18-month program. In order to move to the next phase, a veteran in the program has to do what the court requires of them.

“If they’ve got a substance abuse issue, they go through a substance abuse treatment program at the VA. If they’ve got a mental health issue or post-traumatic stress disorder or something like that, they go through trauma recovery at the VA, and those are sort of intensive treatment programs.”

After those programs, the veterans attend community self-help groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous, and must submit to three drug tests each week, Green said.

On Friday, Green told three veterans they had made enough progress to move forward into the next phase, and for each announcement, the crowd in the gallery cheered and applauded.

“I think that’s one of the unique characteristics of veterans: We want to help each other,” Green said. “We don’t want to leave anybody behind. We want to help our fellow military people.”

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