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Veterans Courts Try to Keep PTSD Victims Out of Jail

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by: *Mary Susan Littlepage, t r u t h o u t | Report*

Zachariah Parzych, 23, spent eight months in Iraq checking areas for weapons and serving in combat. When he returned home to Orange County, California, his life started to change.

One night he woke up thinking he was stabbing someone's neck. "Me and my wife were sleeping one night and I almost broke her leg because I was thinking I was snapping some guy's neck and basically what happened was that I was drinking to the point where I fell asleep," he said. "But because of me being drunk, I didn't really know - it was harder to tell what reality I was in, and also the post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] of having traumatic experiences in the military kinda had me stuck in that mind frame where I literally thought I was over there. I literally thought this dude was trying to stab me with the knife, so I was trying to kill, stab his neck, but it ended up being her leg."

His wife woke him up, and he got in the shower with his clothes on because he thought there was blood all over him, and that reminded him of having blood all over his mouth and eyes in Iraq. "It kinda brought that back," he said.

Also, he said, "After I got out of the military, I didn't really understand how severe my medical problems were" because he suffered from PTSD and traumatic brain injury (TBI).

had a short temper and got involved in some impulsive behavior.

"There was a moment when I was drinking at my house because I was kind of self-medicating," he said, and a police officer came to the home because of a disturbance complaint.

Parzych assaulted the police officer, and he was arrested and charged with aggravated assault and battery, among other violent charges. He was facing five years at minimum in jail.

He spent 11 days in jail, missing his 4-year-old and 1-year-old sons. Parzych pleaded guilty so that he could attend Veterans Court, which offers treatment-based sentences and drops charges upon completion of a therapy program.

As more veterans return from Iraq and Afghanistan with PTSD, substance abuse issues and other problems, there's a new movement that advocates treatment over punishment for veterans who have committed crimes and who are suffering from mental health conditions such as PTSD.

More than 20 Veterans Courts around the country are treating defendants for underlying problems to try to curb future criminal activity.

The first Veterans Court began in Buffalo, New York, two years ago. So far, the court there has had 23 veterans complete the program and none of them has been convicted of new crimes.

Fast-forward to six months into the Veterans Court program in Orange County. Parzych has stopped drinking alcohol. He goes to two meetings a day three or four times a week and to doctor appointments regularly. He also meets up at church and at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings with other veterans, trying to help them with their problems and get them also to stop drinking.

been sober ever since I started Veterans Court. And he said he has been learning "tips and tools on how to deal with people."

Since he stopped drinking, Parzych said, he feels "less trapped in my head" and "I feel 100 percent better. I feel whole again." He added, "There's a lot more to life than alcohol."

Drinking used to keep him busy. "Now that I'm not drinking, I'm not waking up at 1 in the afternoon or stupid hours," he said.

From participating in Veterans Court, Parzych said he has done a lot of soul-searching, and he said, "I was able to see how my values were screwed up" and "I understand why I was drinking."

He said he had a hard time with family relationships because his mom was murdered in front of him when he was eight years old "and that kind of aggravated a lot of stuff when I was in combat." Also, stopping drinking helped him to want to respect women more, particularly his wife.

Stopping drinking motivates Parzych to get other veterans, including some new veterans in Veterans Court, to curb their drinking. And in time, other veterans often tell him, "Wow, you're right, dude."

Orange County, California, Veterans Court Judge Wendy Lindley had a participant in one of her other programs who happened to be a veteran with PTSD, and he committed suicide. That made her recognize that there needs to be more services and in-depth treatment for veterans, and that's what motivated her to help launch the Veterans Court in Orange County.

Laura Morfin, collaborative courts coordinator for Veterans Court in Orange County, said parents often tell the group that runs the court, "Thank you for giving me my son back" after veterans progress in the program.

and introduce participants to an ongoing process of recovery designed to help them become stable, employed and substance-free while continuing mental health care through community/peer counseling groups or the Veterans Administration.

Veterans Court in Orange County, which has been operating since November 2008, aims to provide an inter-agency, collaborative treatment strategy for veterans in the criminal justice system who suffer from PTSD, psychological or substance abuse problems as a result of having served in combat. Judge Lindley, an advocate for rehabilitation, presides over the Veterans Court, which is in a community courts building in Santa Ana that's kind of like a satellite court or a one-stop shop for programs for Veterans Court participants. County workers and nonprofits share office space there.

People involved in social services and legal aid stop by, and a full-time outreach social worker from the Department of Veterans Affairs are part of the team that treats veterans in Orange County. A public defender, district attorney and representatives from a health care agency also are part of the team.

The 18-month program in Orange County has four phases: After participants enter a guilty plea, they receive treatment plan development, ongoing treatment, stabilizing/mentoring and a transition to graduation. Throughout the program, participants must have no positive drug or alcohol tests. They also must attend program activities and report regularly to the VA coordinator and probation officer.

Most participants in the program are recent veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Veterans are monitored closely, and they are required to be employed, looking for work or be in college.

To participate in the Orange County program, veterans must have served in combat and must live in Orange County. Those who have

Types of cases handled in the program include misdemeanors and some felonies. Cases not handled include charges of serious assault, sexual assault and selling drugs. Domestic violence charges are tricky to handle because sometimes there is underlying PTSD, but sometimes there isn't a connection between the two, so a lot of research must be done to see if there is a true domestic violence case, Morfin said.

Veterans in the program range from 22 years old to 64 years old. Diagnoses include PTSD, TBI, bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia and more.

Along with requirements for graduation, veterans are expected to help mentor new veterans in the program, and Laura Morfin said the county hopes to formalize the mentoring component of the program.

Veterans' courts around the country handle misdemeanor cases, like DUIs and drug possession, as well as felonies, such as assaults and violent crimes. Some courts require that veterans plead guilty before they can get treatment and later get their records expunged after treatment, but other courts don't require veterans to plead guilty before treatment. Also, some require that a veteran not have a dishonorable discharge from the military.

Sometimes veterans aren't so sure they need therapy, but Parzych recently tried to prepare a guy who is going to enter the Marines for combat; he said he told him that, "When he gets back [from Iraq], he won't understand it right now, but when the day comes, before it's too late for him or he ruins his career, seek medical attention right when he gets back from Iraq and go to counseling."

He said it was good that the guy was already attending AA meetings, but that not drinking in the military is a challenge: "Once he gets in the military, I know he's gonna be drinking again, and he understands

staying sober in the military.

Besides attending AA meetings, Parzych also goes to what he calls "doctor meetings" where he and other veterans gather at the VA hospital for group therapy and to learn things such as what can happen to them if they drink alcohol and take antidepressants together. He said that he has learned that alcohol is a downer, and "It takes the 'anti' out of antidepressants." It also "can bring out the bipolar in somebody when you're coming down from alcohol" and contribute to depression, he said. "It's a vicious cycle."

He also regularly attends meetings for a PTSD group at the VA, where he has been learning that PTSD symptoms worsen when PTSD is paired with alcohol. PTSD can make you want to drink, he said, but "when you're drinking a lot, drinking can make the PTSD symptoms a lot worse."

Although there aren't any graduates in the Orange County Veterans Court program yet, there are 30 participants in the program. Still, Morfin is positive about the program. If all goes well and the veterans doing well continue to do well, some veterans will graduate at the end of April, Morfin said.

Most veterans are well-disciplined once they are back on track, Morfin said. "Once they receive all the support from the different entities and they're back on track, they do very well and they excel because that's kind of what they're used to once they are redirected and their medication has been adjusted," she said.

In Colorado Springs, Colorado, El Paso County officials have Veteran Trauma Court, Colorado's first Veterans Court. It links eligible US military veterans involved with the criminal justice system to treatment services that will support their recovery from a range of trauma disorders connected to their military service. The court is based on the model of mental health courts, which provide treatment

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Veterans Court, which opened in December 2009. Earlier that year his office participated in a discussion about having a Veterans Court. "In about October (2009) we started doing plea bargains for Veterans Court before the court actually opened in my office," May said. "So, my office started using the resources in October. The court actually opened in December (2009)." And the Veterans Court has been running ever since.

"My ultimate goal is public safety," May said. "We've found that our veterans are coming back with TBI or PTSD - a guy with a closed head injury from explosions, and PTSD most people are familiar with. When we would normally handle a case and you would get a conviction, you'd put him on probation and maybe an anger management class, and it really wasn't getting to their underlying issues, and it wasn't getting to public safety because sometimes their crimes would escalate.

"With the Veterans Court, we can put them into the court and we can do the normal things and we could also bring a treatment through the Veterans' Administration to actually treat the TBI, treat the PTSD so that when they get off probation, we've done a lot of the things we've normally done, but we've also done a lot of things that are particular for their injuries and their harm."

Veterans Court is for people who are going to be put on probation, and it's voluntary. May and a judge have to agree that it will be a good fit and that the veteran could be successful in the program.

"If (the veterans) get into it, we give them a mentor who is in contact with them a lot," May said. "They have to come into court quite a few times where we're closely monitoring their progress. We're getting them therapy, watching their therapy, making them do their restitution, making them comply with probation, and public service is required. They're monitored much more closely and have a lot more

Although May said the Veterans Court handles cases with some forms of violence, most veterans are there for property crimes.

"We're willing to look at some violence, but we're being very cautious when we're in that area," he said.

He said that murder cases aren't appropriate for Veterans Court, but "low-level domestic abuse," such as shoving someone, is.

So far, 27 veterans have started participating in the El Paso County Veterans Court, and almost all are felony cases.

"It's too early to have any graduates of the Veterans Court," May said, "so right now we're measuring success by the different stages that they progress through."

May said he wants to treat veterans with respect and the Veterans Court does that.

"We have a lot of military people in the area, a lot of our soldiers fighting for our freedom," he said, "so we certainly understand the price of freedom and this allows us to treat our returning soldiers and veterans with honor and dignity but at the same time recognize that they've done a crime that needs to be addressed appropriately and to take care for their needs."

Amy Fairweather is an expert in veterans' issues and is director of the Coalition for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans, a clearinghouse of more than 45 agencies serving a myriad of needs associated with deployment in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. She also is director of the Iraq Veteran Project for Swords to Plowshares, a community-based, not-for-profit organization that provides counseling and case management, employment and training, housing and legal assistance to homeless and low-income veterans in the San Francisco Bay area and beyond.

system and going to jail is positive because in jail, veterans wouldn't get the treatment that they need to tend to PTSD, TBI and substance abuse so that they can get to the source of their problems."

Swords to Plowshares offers in Treasure Island, California, transitional supportive housing, and Fairweather said that she has seen many people succeed with that because it offers treatment rather than simple jail sentences. She said you can teach veterans ways to get on with life by teaching them coping mechanisms and correcting their behavioral problems so they won't be getting into criminal activity and cycling in and out of jail. "If they go to jail, all of their problems are just exacerbated," she said.



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