Court offers new interface in prosecuting offenses by vets with PTSD

By MARK REAGAN The Brownsville Herald | Posted: Sunday, January 19, 2014 8:53 pm

Nearly 2,000 veterans in Cameron County are caught up in the legal system facing charges ranging from substance abuse to assault.

And the Cameron County Commissioner's Court last Wednesday approved the collection of fees for participation and implementation of a Veterans Court to take a new approach for how the District Attorney's Office will handle the prosecution of veterans who suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

"We have 19,544 veterans in Cameron County and surrounding areas. And of that, approximately 10 percent get involved in the legal system, the criminal justice system," said Yasisca Pujols, veterans justice outreach coordinator and clinical psychologist.

The new Veterans Court will be in 444th state District Court, with Judge David A. Sanchez presiding.

Assistant District Attorney Evan Robbins, who is a veteran of the U.S. Air Force, was appointed as the special prosecutor for the court and will handle all of the cases.

PTSD Court

Veterans Justice Outreach Coordinator and Clinical Psychologist Yasisca Pujols, left, sits with Public Defender for Veterans Court Gustavo Ruiz, Cameron County Veterans Director Salvador J. Castillo, Probation Officer Elias Guerra Jr., Judge David Sanchez, County Commissioner Dan Sanchez, Cameron County District Attorney Luis V. Saenz, Assistant District Attorney Evan Robbins, and Veterans Court Coordinator Priscilla Guajardo.

"I basically have two roles. Right now, I am the intake supervisor for felony cases that come in. So in addition to screening the cases to see if we're going to prosecute them or not, I'll also screen them to see if they are eligible for Veterans Court," Robbins said.

However, for a veteran to be eligible for the court Robbins must determine a connection between the criminal activity and PTSD.

"We will bring them in and have them evaluated to make sure there is that nexus between their behavior and their mental health or substance abuse and then there will be a program to meet those needs," he said.

But not just any offense is eligible. For instance, convicted murderer and veteran Randy Bolivar wouldn't have been tried in veterans court. In early January, Bolivar was convicted of gunning down a Brownsville man in 2009.

Murder and sexual assault cases will not be tried in Veterans Court, authorities said.

Robbins said drunk driving, weapons charges, disorderly conduct, drug possession and assault cases will be eligible for Veterans Court because they are the crimes veterans suffering from PTSD typically commit.

Pujols said she has experience in Travis and Hidalgo counties in veterans court and believes the creation of one in Cameron County will be positive.

"There are a lot of positive things that you see coming out of these courts for veterans who have been suffering from addiction and mental health issues like PTSD and traumatic brain injuries," Pujols said. "And we found that with a supportive environment and a group of other veterans going through the same issues that they really come out of the other end supportive and in recovery.

"That's the goal. That they recover from these mental health issues so they can become productive citizens," she said.

Cameron County District Attorney Luis V. Saenz said the court has been in the works for three years and he and his office are excited to see it get off the ground.

"This is our way of reaching out to them and showing our gratitude for what they've been through – traumatic events and experiences in fighting and defending for the life that we have in these courtrooms," he said. "So it's just, this is fitting that we come into a courtroom and try to help them with what they're dealing with in coming back into society."

Veterans Court will open with an official ceremony in the 444th state District Court at 2 p.m. Tuesday with U.S. Rep. Filemon Vela as a special guest.

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