

## A second chance after service

Veterans Treatment Court helps veterans on path of sobriety

By Sara Samora | The Herald-Zeitung Sep 13, 2019

Before G realized he had a problem, he didn't have control of it.

G, whose name is being withheld because of the nature of his story, is also a veteran who's been in the Marine Corps for 20 years.

It was common in that culture to drink all the time. Growing up G didn't drink — not even in high school.

After he got back from deployments, he found himself sinking into the bottle, but he would pull himself out of it.

“But as I got older and life got harder, things got more routine with family and kids and work and where you don't have that time to blow off steam or have a vacation,” G said. “You don't realize you can get kind of overwhelmed with life. And at least for me, how I dealt with that was I would drink — and I didn't want to drink. I didn't even like drinking. I just drank because I felt entitled to a little vacation.”

It was his “me” time. It wasn't a good thing.

“Before I knew it, I didn't have control of it.”

As G approached the front of the courtroom after his name was called on Monday, it was a different experience from his first time.

In this case, he went up to receive a certificate, a dog tag, and congratulations.

Up until recently, G drank, and he drank often. At the time of his misdemeanor, a DUI, he had just lost his job, and his relationship was ending. Life wasn't going well, so he drank to drown the troubles.

Because he is a veteran, G was offered the choice to go through a program called the Veterans Treatment Court.

"Once I was accepted into the program, it was pretty intense," G said.

A year later, he was sober — and he graduated.

## **A harder commitment**

There are 254 counties in Texas, and 39 of them have a VTC.

Comal County's VTC was established in August of 2015 by the commissioners court and is led by Judge Charles Stephens of the County Court at Law No. 2.

"The VTC is designed to reduce arrests, promote self-sufficiency through sobriety, employment and education, and to help you remain in the community as a productive and responsible member of society," according to the county.

Since then, 30 veterans have graduated from the program.

G said participating in the VTC takes a serious commitment. For the first three weeks of the program, he had to attend VTC court reviews, and then he had to attend biweekly.

"It's not just a normal probation, or like going to some classes and checking in with a probation officer," G said. "You're going to be here every week and you're going to have requirements and you're going to have expectations of your time, and there's no ifs, ands or buts about it."

Even if he had a job or other obligations in the civilian life, G was going to have to figure out how to make it work.

"It's not an easy probation," said Brad Ramey, administrator for Comal County's Veterans Treatment Court. "It is perhaps harder to go through a veterans treatment court successfully than it is to ride 12 to 18 months of standard probation, but it's worth it."

Not just any veteran can be sentenced to VTC. For one, they cannot have committed a felony.

Secondly, it depends on the jurisdiction. If a veteran residing in Hays County committed the misdemeanor in Comal, then they will be charged in Comal. But because of limitations of probation supervision, they will be under the Caldwell, Comal and Hays Community Supervision and Corrections Department.

In the past, the Veterans Treatment Court made vets do a service project. Ramey said they took the project out to let the vets focus more on the effective treatment they get.

In addition to their mental health (either through the VA or the Hill Country Mental Health and Developmental Disabilities Center), veterans also need to focus on their physical health, or file for their VA benefits if they haven't already done so, finding a stable job or housing.

If they need help filing a claim, then the mentors can provide resources.

"Basically, adulting," Ramey said.

For those who failed to follow the guidelines, which is a part of the VTC's Participant Performance Contract, the consequences include additional alcohol and drug testing, home arrest, incarceration and fines.

"We want them to come back and visit, but we don't want them to come back in this situation," Ramey said.

## **Finding mentors**

In addition to probation officers, drug tests and court reviews, there are also mentors in the program — other veterans.

"The main thing that I do is I listen to them," said Wayne Bennett, a Vietnam Navy veteran. "Everything they say to me or any other mentee to a mentor is confidential between us."

They do not share with the court, and the court doesn't ask the mentors about it unless the person is in immediate peril of hurting himself or herself or hurting someone else.

“Although we have an open line with the court, the court gives us all their phone numbers and OPSEC, operational security,” Bennett said.

OPSEC, or operational security, is what the military uses to protect critical information. Bennett does not give out their phone numbers, but he and the other mentors get in touch with the veteran participants.

“The main thing we do is we offer sage advice,” he said.

One example he gives is of a mentee asking him if he could drink an O’Doul’s, a non-alcoholic beer.

“Every quarter, they have to fill out a contract with the court,” Bennett said. “One of the things that they agree to is not to have any alcohol. O’Doul’s does have 0.5% alcohol. I reminded him of his contract and he said, ‘OK, that's all I need.’”

According to a 2011 American Public Health Association report, service members who deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan have an increase of major depression diagnosis and a substance abuse disorder, compared to their non-deployed counterparts.

And according to a June 2018 Veterans Affairs National Suicide Data Report, the average number of veterans who died by suicide remains unchanged at 20 a day.

Veterans are assigned to mentors of the same sex. Bennett said they are still in need of mentors — especially women veteran mentors.

On one day, he has had five mentees at one time.

“When they're called before the judge I stand with them, so there will be times where I'd just be going back and forth to my seat and then back up to the court to the bench to stand with my mentee,” Bennett said. “And that gives them my support and that way they know I'm I really there for them.”

He added that if veterans who aren't in the program need a mentor, they can reach out to Ramey, and the mentors can provide resources for them.

During G's experience with the program, he witnessed the people that had gone before had graduated. He saw almost nobody fail.

“You're always expecting someone to have something happen or someone screwing up, but that almost never happened,” G said. “And I think that's just because of the people that they vet to come into the court, and because they're all prior military service. I just think you had a really strong cadre of individuals that came through here and you get to know them and you get to talk with them, and so you develop a little community within the court.”

Some of those people he ended up buddying up with along the way.

“The support network is excellent,” G said. “I can't imagine a better experience going through the court systems and something like this, it has helped so many people.”

For more information on the Comal County Veterans Treatment Court program, visit [co.comal.tx.us/VTC.htm](http://co.comal.tx.us/VTC.htm).

If you're a veteran who needs help, or feeling suicidal, call the veteran crisis line at 1-800-273-8255, and press 1, or visit [veteranscrisisline.net](http://veteranscrisisline.net) to chat.

If you don't want to deal with the VA, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.