



Guest column: Veterans court would save money, provide services

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An unofficial but widely accepted characterization of Jacksonville for many years has been "the most military-friendly city in America."

That is a title I proudly support. Earlier this year, I proposed implementing a Veterans Treatment Court into the Duval County criminal justice system.

This would be a practical addition to our local courts because of the large veteran population we serve.

And it is fiscally the right thing to do because it would shift much of the treatment costs to the Veterans Administration.

For three months, our office and the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office have been collecting data from those arrested as to their veteran status.

The number of veterans who face criminal charges is staggering.

According to the data we have collected, since May 27, a total of 409 veterans have been arrested and 174 of them served in combat.

Another integral piece is collaboration with the VA.

Here in North Florida, we are fortunate to have an active presence from the Veterans Justice Outreach coordination office in Gainesville. This office supports our efforts and indicated that if Duval County implements it, we could receive a dedicated Veterans Justice outreach coordinator.

Support is needed

Early in this process, I became allied with the advocacy group Florida Veterans for Common Sense.

Coordinator Justin Rich is focused on pushing legislation concerning veterans courts. He has been helping me connect with those who want a veterans court established in Jacksonville.

We are seeking community support because people here recognize the sacrifices veterans have given for all of us.

I am happy to report that we are receiving very positive feedback from the community. The administration in the office of Mayor Alvin Brown has indicated interest for city involvement in this effort by providing access to staff who handles veterans relations for Jacksonville.

Also, I have spoken to various veterans organizations and civic groups who stand behind our efforts. Recent media attention to this matter has also prompted dozens of calls and emails to our office that show there is widespread, diverse support of a veterans court in Duval County.

Nationwide, communities are experiencing an influx of combat veterans as our enlisted men and women return from Iraq and Afghanistan; Jacksonville is certainly gaining a fair share.

Mental impairments common

They are returning with post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injuries, conditions known to alter one's behavior.

When these mental impairments result in the individual committing a non-violent offense, our first reaction should be to assist the ailing veteran in getting treatment, thus drastically minimizing the rate at which the treated individuals might re-offend.

While we face declining budgets in government, we believe that a veterans court is viable based on the need of the number of veterans who face non-violent, criminal charges.

Additionally, while the establishment of a veterans court will require minimal realignment within the existing drug and mental health court systems, I do not anticipate this costing taxpayers more money.

In fact, the Veteran's Administration has funding available for establishing and conducting such a function.

Please support a Veterans Treatment Court in Duval County.

Matt Shirk is the public defender in Northeast Florida.

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