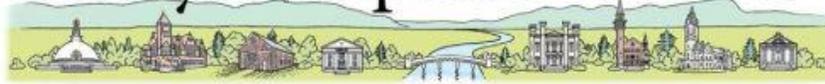


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## Back on their feet

Veterans court graduates two from rehab program

By MICHAEL CONNORS

Staff Writer



Navy veteran Joseph Andrews of Hatfield talks with Judge Laurie MacLeod after graduating from the Western Mass Veterans Treatment Court in a ceremony at Holyoke District Court on Wednesday.

—STAFF PHOTO/KEVIN GUTTING

HOLYOKE — Over the last 18 months, Joe Andrews has appeared in front of Judge Laurie MacLeod in the Western Mass Veterans Treatment Court on a monthly, if not weekly, basis. But on Wednesday afternoon, the Hatfield resident made his final trip to the courtroom. Surrounded by mentors, fellow veterans and family members, the six-year Navy veteran celebrated completion of the two-year court program that aims to help veterans struggling with substance use or mental health. The program is intended for veterans who have committed crimes, with a goal to reduce recidivism.

“If it wasn’t for this, things in my life wouldn’t be what they are,” Andrews said, holding a framed certificate denoting his completion of the program. “I call it my ‘Get out of jail free card.’ These guys saved me.”

Andrews, along with Robert Boyd, of Colrain, were the two sole graduates of the court this time around. The veterans court, which began in 2015 and is located in Holyoke District Court, selects veterans for two years of individualized treatment. The treatment is intended for veterans who have either admitted to or pleaded guilty to a crime.

Andrews said he was charged with drunken driving, and Boyd had been charged with breaking and entering.

Boyd was the first to step in front of MacLeod, who proudly beamed at the Marine Corps veteran for his success in the program.

“It was hard for you, but you did so well,” MacLeod told Boyd as she stepped down from her dais to award him his certificate.

Before he graduated, Boyd said the court helped him find a different approach to dealing with his drinking problem.

“It’s a step in the right direction for treatment for veterans who get themselves in trouble like I did,” Boyd said. “I think we have a long way to go as far as the justice system and treatment is concerned ... but I think overall it’s a good initiative.”

Veterans accepted to the court receive an individualized treatment plan that includes stabilization, drug and alcohol abstinence and therapy through the Veteran’s Administration, Soldier On and other community partners. Volunteer mentors, who are mostly fellow veterans, are assigned to each participant to assist with terms of their probation and to be a supportive and guiding presence during the process.

The court process is split into five phases. During the first phase, veterans show up to court weekly, meet with probation officers and their mentors weekly, begin weekly group Moral Recognition Therapy sessions, home visits and start a 12-step sobriety program. Eventually, veterans come to the court less regularly, but they must maintain sobriety, which is checked twice a week.

“They brought themselves up from really dire situations where they were looking at jail sentences,” MacLeod said. “So to be able to help people and be there as part of the conduit to help them get to a better place is really rewarding as a judge.”

Above all, veterans are expected to follow all orders of probation and the court, and to follow the mantra of “Show Up & Be Honest.”

The veterans court, one of six in the state, has supervised about 70 men and women veterans in the program — 34 of whom have graduated, according to the Northwestern district attorney’s office.

The court program is a partnership between the Northwestern and Hampden district attorney’s offices, along with other organizations. It serves Hampshire, Hampden, Franklin counties and Athol. One person in the program who was not graduating told MacLeod that he had relapsed, prompting her to tell the veteran she was disappointed.

“We’re doing something that’s not done in regular court for the most part,” MacLeod said. “People are slipping up and we say ‘Hey, try harder,’ and we give them more support.” She noted that there can be punishments for violating court orders.

MacLeod said she tries to make the court a welcoming environment, cracking jokes to some of the veterans, asking them about their families and day-to-day lives. But there’s a line that MacLeod tries not to cross, saying, “sometimes, I can be scary.”

“The premise of a court like this is to support people so there isn’t recidivism,” she said.

Partway through the program, veterans start planning for their lives after graduation. And after they finish the 18-month program, they are placed on six months of probation with a review hearing after three months. In special circumstances, a veteran may even have a chance to have their record sealed.

“What we were finding is that people would be with us for 18 months, and they would relapse after they left,” said Michael Russo, assistant district attorney and chief of district courts. “It was almost like they wanted to continue being monitored.”

Andrews’ mentor, Rick Manning, of Easthampton, said seeing his mentee succeed in the program has made him proud.

“When you have somebody tell you that it’s changed your life, that’s when you keep coming back,” Manning said. “It’s easy to volunteer.”

Those interested in volunteering with the court can contact the Mentorship Program coordinator John Sullivan at [johnvetmentor@gmail.com](mailto:johnvetmentor@gmail.com).

*Michael Connors can be reached at [mconnors@gazettenet.com](mailto:mconnors@gazettenet.com).*



Marine Corps veteran Robert Boyd of Colrain speaks with Judge Laurie MacLeod, left, after graduating from the Western Mass Veterans Treatment Court in a ceremony at the Holyoke District Court on Wednesday. Directly behind him is Chuck Battle, his mentor during the 18-month program.

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