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## News: El Paso Veterans Court Program offers soldiers a path to resiliency

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EL PASO, Texas – The El Paso Veterans Court is offering alternatives to jail sentences for soldiers, working to redirect veterans and active duty service members from incarceration into treatment programs.

Modeled after the Houston Veterans Court, El Paso's 364th State District Court began development of their program in February and implemented it in August, offering a different approach for veterans who find themselves in front of a judge.

"Some of the other courts have taken three years to set up and we've taken a year to set up. This is going to be huge and a very much-needed program," said Angie Juarez Barill, presiding judge, 364th State District Court. "It's a program that's going to grow. We know that when our veterans are charged with felony cases that's a big deal. This is where we come in."

When a veteran commits a crime, is arrested and sent to jail, the District Attorney's office reviews the case against the individual and decides whether it can be handled by the El Paso Veterans Court Program. The first step occurs in El Paso jails, where staff flag veterans and active duty members as potentials for the EVCP as soon as they are booked. This flagging



Staff Sgt. Alejandro Briceno  
Silvia Serna, Veterans Program Director for the El Paso Veterans Court Program poses for a photo at El Paso, Texas, District Court House, Nov. 7. The El Paso Veterans Court Program handles misdemeanor and felony cases. These cases can be transferred from the various Courts to the El Paso Veterans Court. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Alejandro Briceno, 16th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

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process has never been done in El Paso before, according to Silva Serna, veteran's program director.

The deciding factors for the district attorney's office include evaluations for either substance abuse or mental health issues. These evaluations are to determine whether or not drug or alcohol dependency exists or if mental health issues are discovered that might have been suffered in combat, such as post traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, mental disease or mental disorder.

Once the district attorney's office has done their evaluation and approved the case to be handled by the veteran's program, the individual can plead guilty to the charges in order to be sentenced to immediate probation and begin treatment.

"Our primary goal is restoration," said Serna, "a restoration process for the men and women coming back from having served [overseas]."

The EVCP provides veterans and active-duty service members with support, opportunity, assistance and referrals necessary to help make changes in their lives. Enrollees begin their treatment with a participant agreement and performance contract establishing their path toward resiliency and a second chance. They are given help through the Department of Veterans Affairs and the William Beaumont Army Medical Center here.

"We set up a memorandum of understanding with the court system, Maj. Gen. Dana Pittard, [Fort Bliss commanding general], and with the Department of Veterans Affairs," said Barill.

The program doesn't offer an easy way out of a criminal offense, but an opportunity to restore oneself through commitment, self-control and hard work. Once an individual has completed the necessary probation time period and treatment their case is brought back to the district court judge and, if all requirements are met, the case is dismissed.

This program and others like it around the country have proven that rehabilitation can be a better option than incarceration.

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