

Fairbanks' Veterans Court celebrates progress

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Court officers, defense and prosecuting attorneys and members of Alaska Veterans for Justice pose at the Rabinowitz Courthouse on Nov. 10, 2022. (Robyne/KUAC)

A program launched in Fairbanks offers former military service members who commit crimes an alternative to the standard legal system.

A small group of activists gathered Thursday in front of the Rabinowitz Courthouse in the cold to celebrate the progress of the Fairbanks Veterans Court. Starting this year, vets with misdemeanors and felonies can divert away from normal criminal court to this special therapeutic court.

Hank Bartos, president of Alaska Veterans for Justice, laid out a mission statement for the court.

“In order that no veteran is left behind, we think they deserve a little special consideration since they have been through combat, the horrors of war, and come back into society,” Bartos said. “We want to see a smooth transition. Sometimes some of them suffer from PTSD and other issues and to get in a little trouble.”

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Alaska has the highest per-capita population of military veterans of all the states. Fairbanks is home to almost 3,000 veterans. Sometimes struggles with trauma, mental illness such as post-traumatic stress disorder and substance-use disorders put a service member in criminal court.

The court serves criminal defendants with behavioral health issues who served in the armed forces, using judicial monitoring joined with mental health and addiction treatment.

Tammie Wilson with Alaska Veterans for Justice said the goal of the new veterans court is to keep military veterans out of jail, so they don't lose their jobs or benefits.

"It's not about the crime any more," Wilson said. "It's about the therapy and getting the help that they probably needed once they came back from combat, that may not have been available, but being able to, you know, keep their family, keep their house, and get the mental health treatment that they needed."

Amy Bollaert, the Fairbanks court's project coordinator, said the process takes time.

"There are a lot of steps. It is an 18-month program. It's got five phases in the program," she said.

According to Bollaert, each phase is a milestone to success in veterans' behavioral health.

"You know, showing up and showing up on time for meetings and appointments, coming to court and doing well, showing up for probation officer meetings, actively participating in their treatment," she said.

The Fairbanks court is based on a model that has proved successful for veterans in Anchorage.

"When it gets time to graduate, it's just going back and just saying, 'You've completed these things. We see success in you. You've integrated back into society well and successfully. Congratulations,'" she said.

Right now, there are only two active cases in the Veterans Court. But Bollaert is getting applications at a steady pace.

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Bartos and Wilson note that the defendants are rehabilitated at the cost of the federal government, not the state of Alaska.

“When a person is incarcerated, it costs the state of Alaska a lot of money,” Bartos said. “But when a person goes through the Veterans Court, the state does not pay the rehabilitation cost. That cost is paid by the Veteran's Administration, so it saves the state of Alaska a lot of money in the long run.”

“Because we'll be able to go through a lot of the veteran help (from the VA),” Wilson said. “There's a lot of extra help. There's, transportation help, there's some housing, there's other things that are already in place for veterans. And so, using those wraparound services, depending upon what that veteran needs.”

Randolph Wagener, with Alaska Veterans for Justice, said the program works.

“The solution to addiction is connection,” Wagener said.

The court is collaborative. There are regular meetings with Judge Thomas Temple, a veteran himself, as well as the local district attorney's and public defenders' offices.

Veteran Steven Hovenden said that's what makes the therapeutic court work.

“You have to have a judge that will volunteer to do it – we have that in Judge Temple,” Hovenden said. “You have to have a district attorney that is willing to examine this through different eyes. You have to have a group of people like us that are that advocate for it.”

Hovenden credits Hank Bartos and Tammie Wilson for founding Alaska Veterans for Justice.

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