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by Staff Sgt. Erica Picariello
50th Space Wing Public Affairs

7/13/2011 - **SCHRIEVER AIR FORCE BASE, Colo** -- For some servicemembers, stepping out of their uniform and into civilian clothes...permanently... might be the happiest time in their lives. With their commitment complete, hundreds of thousands of hours logged serving their country and the American people, they can now put deployments behind them, relax and settle into a civilian life.

This life may be just a dream for some veterans, a distant dream. According to a United States Department of Veteran's Affairs study in 2006, approximately 76,309 veterans live in the Colorado Springs Metro Area. According to El Paso county officials, felony El Paso County jail bookings for servicemembers jumped from 295 in 2005 to 471 in 2007, indicating a steady rise.

Schriever Judge Advocate members learned about another avenue for local veteran offenders facing felony charges July 1, after listening to a briefing on the Veteran's Trauma Court sponsored by Carrie Bailey of Colorado Springs' 4th Judicial District.

"The primary benefit of the VTC is the focus on treatment for the military offender," Bailey said. "Eligible participants must attend regular court proceedings and receive counseling or treatment to successfully complete the program's requirements."

But first, the veteran offender must admit what they've done wrong.

"We are a treatment court, we are not a litigation division and we are not a litigation court," Bailey said. "If you decide to come into the VTC you have to take responsibility, you have to be held accountable. We expect you to plead guilty and by pleading guilty we can begin to treat you."

After the veteran has been referred to the VTC program, the VTC program members check to see if the member meets their criteria.

"The veteran has to have been charged with a lower level, nonviolent felony and be facing prosecution in the 4th Judicial District; experienced trauma related to service in the U.S. military which has been previously documented or can be documented; have been diagnosed with a trauma spectrum disorder; have evidence that supports the existence of a connection between the military service trauma and the criminal conduct committed; must exhibit a willingness to actively participate in his or her treatment and recovery and cooperate fully with the court; agree to authorize the release of information related to treatment to VTC members according to Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 Privacy Rule and agree to waive their right to a speedy trial during the Veteran Trauma Court," Bailey said.

If the criterion is met and the veteran enters the program, they have the opportunity to heal while repairing their reputation.

"We noticed with multiple deployments that trauma builds on trauma," Bailey said. "We are trying to get involved shortly after their first arrest to treat them and stop them from picking up multiple cases. The offender is mandated to do group and individual treatment, come to court every week and work through three phases. The offender also puts in a guilty suspended plea under the condition that if the VTC is successfully completed, they can withdrawal their guilty plea and the case is dismissed with no charges against them."

Schriever JAG officials believe this is a good program to know about to help future trauma-stricken veterans.

"There are many benefits for individuals enrolled in the program," said Capt. Sarah Dingivan, Schriever Judge Advocate office. "The VTC briefing provided information to educate and advise commanders about the impact of a case moving from a 'regular' civilian felony court to VTC. Upon completion of the program, the individual is eligible to have the conviction removed completely from their record, ensuring that the negative implications associated with a felony conviction do not follow them and impact potential benefits and employment opportunities."

For more information on the VTC program, call 637-8957.

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