



## New Veteran's Court Division

Submitted by Robin I. Bresky

Veteran's Court, a new division of the Fifteenth Judicial Circuit was unveiled when the first session was held at the Gun Club facility, on November 18, 2010 and

presided over by Judge Ted Booras, who himself is a Marine Corps Veteran and began to identify this need over a year ago. Chief Judge Peter Blanc was instrumental in developing this special court session. In Palm Beach, the need for our country's veterans who are charged with a crime to be assessed and provided with appropriate treatment, is now being met. Moreover, neither state nor local funds are being spent for this purpose, all services are being provided by the VA. The veterans are getting help with mental health, substance abuse, and homelessness issues, says Judge Booras.

How do veterans get identified and transferred from the general criminal division to this special session created exclusively for them? Currently, there is a push to identify veterans through educating law enforcement to ask, when making an arrest, if the defendant is a veteran. The Clerk of Court is also working hard to identify the veterans, says Booras. In addition, at the Gun Club facility Judge Krista Marx and Judge Booras both work to identify veterans at first appearance and place them, if appropriate, into this special division. Strategies are in place to have a Public Defender identify veterans that are currently in the system and transfer those cases over from the main courthouse to the veterans division at the Gun Club facility. Defendant veterans who are charged with either a misdemeanor or felony are eligible for the special division, as long as they do not score prison. The score sheet is determined based on previous criminal history. Moreover, defendants that plead not guilty and want to go to trial are not eligible for the special division. Finally, the State Attorney also has to agree to place the defendant into the division.

Often times the victim of the crime is a family member and it is the victim that wants the services for the veteran, says Booras. However, if it is a misdemeanor domestic violence case, there is already a special division in place, and so the veteran would be put into that division instead. A special feature of the veteran division is that services are actually provided to veterans by veterans. A mentoring program currently exists wherein the volunteer veterans go through a training program that will help them assist the defendant veteran work through the process. "Veterans really want to deal with other veterans so having a mentor like this is tremendously helpful to the defendant," says Booras. The Veteran Treatment Court manual states:

"The Veterans Treatment Docket is specifically designated and staffed to supervise felony or misdemeanor combat and non-combat Veteran defendants who have been referred to a comprehensive and judicially monitored program of treatment and rehabilitation services. The Veterans Treatment Docket

represents a very non-traditional approach to criminal offenders who have served both during peace and wartime. Rather than focusing only on the crimes they commit and the punishments they receive, Veterans Treatment Court also attempts to solve some of the participants' underlying health and psychosocial problems."

"One big advantage we have in Palm Beach is the Veterans' Hospital," says Booras, "there exists a Baker Act Facility and beds are therefore available for the veterans if needed. There is a VA coordinator that will be in attendance at every session of Veterans Court in order to help streamline the process."

Several years ago, Broward County had a push to have a Veterans Court, but it is not happening there at this time. In fact, currently there exists only one other special division for veterans in the state, says Booras. In Okaloosa County, located in the north Florida, Judge Patt Maney presides over a special docket for homeless veterans, says Booras. Here in Palm Beach County, Veterans Court will take place twice a month, on the first and third Thursday of the month. Since approximately sixty veterans are being booked into the county jail per month, Booras expects the division to grow rapidly and offer much needed assistance to those who have served our country!



Judge Ted Booras

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