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DENVER — While the state's court system is closed today to remember veterans, one division of district court in Colorado Springs remembers members of the military every day.

Next month will mark one year since the gavel first fell in Veteran Trauma Court. Fifty cases have passed through its docket, most of them involving veterans as well as some active-duty members of the military accused of nonviolent felonies.

"We are primarily a treatment-court program," said Carrie Bailey, program manager of the Veteran Trauma Court. "We encounter a variety of mental health issues."

State Rep. Mark Waller, R-Colorado Springs, is a former Pueblo prosecutor and a military veteran. He spent eight years in the Air Force and six more in the reserves as a member of the Judge Advocate General's corps. In 2006 he was deployed to Iraq, where he prosecuted insurgents.

Waller said there is value in treating veterans early when they make missteps after coming home.

"We need to focus in the veterans' courts on addressing their issues before their criminal behavior escalates," he said.

Driving under the influence of alcohol, domestic violence or bar fights can be harbingers of even more dangerous behavior, particularly when service members' support systems erode, Waller said.

"Those kinds of things can prevent them from deploying with their buddies in their unit, even get them dishonorably discharged from the military," he said. "Then the treatment options available to them become much more limited."

Waller said an important component of the veterans' court in Colorado Springs is its understanding of the military mindset.

"From the time I was a little kid, I was taught you don't resolve conflicts with

violence, you resolve them with words," he said. "When you go to a war zone, you're taught to resolve conflicts with violence, and your life is under constant threat. Then they come back home, and we say let's resolve our conflicts with words again. You can't just flip the switch."

Within the past decade almost 10 former military members were arrested for homicides in Southern Colorado, including one in Pueblo. Waller said he is optimistic that the intervention military courts provide can prevent future tragedies.

"It's never appropriate to commit a violent crime, but my heart breaks for some of those guys," Waller said. "I know before they deployed they weren't these people. They were just normal kids."

Bailey said the conditions imposed on defendants in the veterans' court program are often more stringent than those that come with standard probation sentences.

"This program is not a get out of jail free card," she said.

And certain standards must be met before a veteran or member of the military is eligible for the program. Their case must be referred there by the district attorney's office, and sex offenses, crimes involving children, stalking, strangulation, crimes that cause serious injuries or death and those involving guns disqualify defendants from participating.

State and federal grants sustain the Veteran Trauma Court and about 30 others like it nationwide.

This year, the Colorado General Assembly passed a bill sponsored by state Rep. Marsha Looper, R-Calhan, that gives the program better footing to receive federal funds in the future. Bailey said that will be key to ensuring its existence beyond the next three years.

"What we're looking for now is how to sustain the program when the grants expire in 2013," Bailey said.

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