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A Special Court for Veterans

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Philadelphia

EVERY month Americans come home from military duty in Iraq and Afghanistan having seen intense combat. [Nearly 20 percent of the 1.6 million veterans of those wars](#), researchers say, suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

While trying to recover, these service members sometimes fall into drug and alcohol abuse and crime; too often, they end up in prison. Fortunately for them, an alternative to the regular criminal justice system is being tested in several states: veterans courts.

Post-traumatic stress disorder among returning service members is a particularly difficult malady to deal with. Men and women trained for combat often deny having a problem; their psychological strength becomes their weakness. Many try to handle their pain with alcohol or drugs, and divorce is increasingly likely. [The rate of suicide among combat veterans is remarkably high](#), and homelessness is all too common.

Services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs and veterans' organizations can help some solve their problems. But too many proud veterans resist such assistance and, as a result, find themselves on the wrong side of the law, for reasons related more to their experiences in service to their country than to criminal intent.

Three years ago, the growing number of young veterans facing criminal charges caught the eye of Robert T. Russell Jr., a judge in Buffalo. Often these defendants had serious drug or mental health problems, he noticed. In response, Judge Russell began the Erie County Veterans Treatment Court. The program, the country's first "veterans court," is intended to give former service members with post-traumatic stress disorder a path toward recovery without forcing them to also navigate the penal system.

Here's how it works. Veterans typically charged with nonviolent crimes and suffering from substance dependency, mental health problems or both are placed in a special docket. After

an initial screening and assessment by the court, they are offered a place in a treatment program geared to veterans instead of standing trial.

Compliance is monitored through regularly scheduled court hearings, during which participants can be sanctioned for noncompliance or rewarded for their success.

Because the courts are reserved for veterans, they serve as a recognition of past service and an effective way to reawaken the service members' pride, discipline and courage — critical elements in helping many resolve their problems. It helps, too, that the veterans are in the program with one another, fostering a sense of camaraderie.

Moreover, the courts assign volunteer mentors to support the participants, and both the Department of Veterans Affairs and community-based organizations are available to provide treatment after the assessments.

As a result, 90 percent of participants complete the program, without a single case of recidivism. Judge Russell's initiative has been copied by courts across the country, including in California, Pennsylvania, Oklahoma and Wisconsin.

In Pennsylvania, in fact, we have gone a step further and, in collaboration with the Department of Veterans Affairs, established a statewide task force of department and criminal justice system leaders, service providers and veterans' groups. The group resolves issues between the department and the courts, two complex systems whose practices differ widely.

Repaying America's debt to its veterans means giving them the opportunity to succeed in civilian life. Veterans courts are a pragmatic way we can repay that debt and save veterans from additional suffering.

Ronald D. Castille, a Marine lieutenant in Vietnam, is the chief justice on the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania.