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VETERANS GET SECOND CHANCE

A retired general turned judge metes out self-improvement and rehabilitation assistance instead of punishment. **COURTS**, Page 3

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Judge Pro Tem Gregg Maxon talks to a repeat offender during a Veterans Court session. Maxon followed both attorneys' recommendations and gave the defendant one last chance.

Courts give veterans second chance

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Responding to orders from a retired general who now wears a judge's robe instead of stars, the 11 defendants scheduled to appear in Mesa's new Veterans Court stood at attention and announced their branch of military service and their rank.

The Army, Air Force, Marine Corps and Coast Guard all were represented, along with armed conflicts including World War II, Korea, Iraq and Afghanistan. It was clear right away that Judge Pro Tem Gregg Maxon had pushed a button and the defendants had responded just as anticipated, displaying pride in their military service.

It is that pride and camaraderie that Maxon hopes to tap in trying to turn around the lives of these veterans.

Appearing as a judge in the Mesa, Tempe and Phoenix veterans courts is Maxon's mission, a way of helping men and women like the ones he served with and even commanded but have since struggled with transitioning to a less-structured civilian life.

Referred to as "therapeutic courts" or "problem-solving courts," veterans courts focus on rehabilitation and self-improvement of defendants, rather than punishment.

Veterans courts have become popular nationally since the first one opened in Buffalo, New York, in 2008. Arizona now has nine veterans courts scattered throughout the state, in Phoenix, Tucson, Flagstaff and in the southeast Valley's three largest cities: Mesa, Tempe and Chandler. An eleventh court is in the planning stages in La Paz County.

In veterans courts, judges suspend prosecution of a range of misdemeanors and give defendants time to complete a series of measures to improve their lives.

On this day in Mesa, Maxon ordered defendants to undergo substance-abuse and domestic-violence counseling, which are available free of charge from the Veterans Administration.

He also suggested an Army veteran with four children seek out a vocational program available through the Veterans Administration to help him find a career. The veteran received a 100-percent disability from the Army for post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of combat in Afghanistan.

"These guys are national treasures. They raised their hands to do something that most people were not willing to do,"



Judge Pro Tem Gregg Maxon, right, congratulates Jeffrey O'Hara, an Army veteran, after he graduated from the Tempe Veterans Court, where the focus is rehabilitation, not punishment.

CHERYL EVANS/THE REPUBLIC

Maxon said. "I think it's up to us to reach down and pick them back up."

Maxon said he once sent men and women like the defendants he sees in Veterans Court into battle during his military career. He realizes some of them came back broken, having difficulty coping with their military experience.

"They used to be part of a team," he said. "They (were) part of something people could admire."

But after many setbacks following their return, "their sense of self-esteem is very low," Maxon said. "It's getting them to believe in themselves again."

In a courtroom full of veterans suspected of various misdemeanors and representatives from several agencies available to help, "this is the first time they can look around and see, 'It's not just me.'"

The veterans face mostly lesser charges, but some of them can be serious, such as driving under the influence or domestic violence. The hope is that the court can link the veteran with services that will reduce the odds of them re-offending, possibly on a much more serious offense, said Paul Thomas, Mesa Municipal Court administrator.

"There's a lot of work done here before you see a disposition. It is connecting a person with the right services they

need to get back on track," Thomas said. "Hopefully, you will not have a felony later."

Mesa City Council member Alex Finter said the courts are necessary to help the growing numbers of veterans leaving the military as it continues to be downsized. Finter said he witnessed the problems encountered by veterans returning to civilian life as a Mesa firefighter.

"It's catching it early so that there's not a SWAT standoff later," he said.

While Mesa Municipal Court launched its Veterans Court in January and has only 22 defendants, Tempe Municipal Court started its court in September has more than 100 defendants who spend months in the program. Chandler is in the early stages of establishing a Veterans Court with Maxon serving as a pro tem there as well, Presiding Magistrate Michael Traynor said.

Tempe Presiding Judge MaryAnne Majestic said charges in the Tempe Veterans Court caseload are composed of about one-third driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs and another third assault cases, including domestic violence. The rest represent a wide variety of offenses.

"I would say the end result will be positive for them. I feel horrified that some-

one would have to go through the justice system to get the services they deserve," she said.

Majestic said she has been most touched by helping an angry veteran who became isolated from society after suffering debilitating injuries in Operation Desert Storm and needing to use a wheelchair.

"His life has changed. He had a very angry attitude toward everybody," Majestic said.

She said she is working to find an inpatient facility to help a female veteran, who suffers from personality disorders because of her injuries.

"What I worry about is her welfare and her safety," Majestic said.

The Tempe court celebrated an important victory when two veterans became the first to "graduate," completing the program by pleading guilty to lesser charges.

Maxon presented them with a commemorative coin and a certificate, praising them for setting an example for others to emulate.

Jeffrey O'Hara, an Army veteran who served in Iraq, was one of Tempe's first Veterans Court graduates. He pleaded responsible for being involved in a traffic accident caused by speeding, a reduced charge from hit-and-run, and was fined \$221. More importantly, O'Hara attended anger-management classes and now realizes he was impatient.

O'Hara said he was riding his motorcycle and clipped a car he passed while turning into a parking lot. O'Hara fled and was served with a citation by a police officer who came to his home.

"It's very intensive, but in the end, it was very beneficial," O'Hara said, adding that he is selling his motorcycle. "The anger-management program was good. I had my issues."

O'Hara said he also realized he did not want to go down the path of other veterans charged with more serious crimes.

On a recent morning, the first court proceeding involved a veteran appearing before Maxon in chains. He admitted to "falling off the wagon" after a long period of sobriety and getting involved in a domestic dispute with his wife.

Maxon allowed the defendant to stay in the program but warned him that re-offending is not acceptable and that he would not get another chance. Authorities said such setbacks are rare in Veterans Court.

"Seeing what everyone else was going through made me want to avoid it in the future," O'Hara said.