

ARIZONA

Arizona courts, prisons work to help veterans who land in legal system

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All it took was a car crash for a Phoenix man to face a series of charges, including endangerment and driving under the influence.

This is when Ray Perez's journey began to change. Perez, an Army veteran, was struggling with substance abuse and homelessness after getting out of the military.

On the day of the crash in 2012, he blacked out while driving his car. But he was given a second chance. His case qualified for the Maricopa County Superior Court's Veterans Court, one of many similar courts across the county dedicated to those who served.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics released a report in 2015 stating an estimated 181,500 veterans were incarcerated in prisons and jails across the country between 2011 and 2012.

According to the report, more than three-quarters of incarcerated veterans were honorably discharged or discharged under honorable conditions. The report found that nearly half of the veterans incarcerated in correctional facilities had a mental health issue.

Perez has been sober for seven years and is helping other veterans in Arizona's courts and prisons as a peer support specialist with Veterans Affairs.

"Once you choose hope, anything is possible," Perez said.

Arizona's courts working to help

Cities and counties in Arizona are working to help veterans through a variety of specialty court formats. The courts partner with agencies to provide services to veterans while also addressing charges.

The Maricopa County Justice Court is launching a new program this month to help veterans. The Veterans Therapy Court is led by Donald Watts, Manistee district justice of the peace. Watts is also a veteran of the U.S. Air Force and National Guard.

Scott Davis, a spokesperson for justice courts, said the Veterans Therapy Court will provide a personalized program to hold a person accountable while helping them overcome challenges they are facing. It will be a collaborative effort with family, other veterans, volunteers, community partners and the court.

Any judge or community partner is able to refer a veteran to the justice court program. Veterans Affairs will determine a person's eligibility and inform the court.

Multiple cities in the Valley have veterans courts. The East Valley Regional Veterans' Court was created in 2016 to serve those with cases in the cities of Chandler, Carefree, Cave Creek, Fountain Hills, Gilbert, Paradise Valley, Scottsdale and Tempe.

Participants receive individualized services. Some may undergo counseling, while others attend an educational or inpatient treatment program. However, they are still held accountable for their actions.

In Maricopa County Superior Court, multiple departments and agencies come together to address a veteran's actions and needs.

A public defender, probation officer and a representative from Veterans Affairs work on each case. Depending on a veteran's needs, a representative from

UnitedHealthcare may also help.

"We basically see where a veteran is and try to meet them where they are," Tameka Loyd said.

Loyd, an adult probation supervisor for the Veterans Court, said the court is more fluid than others across the country.

Many veterans courts place participants in stages when addressing their needs. However, Maricopa County doesn't place veterans in one category at a time.

After veterans signs a plea agreement that places them on probation, an assessment is made to determine their needs.

Loyd said the department works to build trust with participants. Some veterans have fought in combat and may have post-traumatic stress disorder; others are dealing with substance abuse.

Perez said pride shouldn't get in the way of asking for help.

"It takes a real warrior to ask for help," he said.

Graduates of the court are a part of an alumni association. They help current participants as mentors by providing guidance.

For Loyd, the transformation veterans make in the court is the reason she loves her job.

"Especially when they are going out to be productive citizens," Loyd said. "They come back and share their story and try to help someone else. That is the most awarding thing that I get out of this work."

Perez was one of those transformations. He was ordered to participate in rehab programs for substance abuse and to visit a mental health clinic.

He was able to get a job with Veterans Affairs. Perez participated in the agency's compensated work therapy vocational rehabilitation program and is now a peer

support specialist.

"I've been blessed to be in the situation that I'm in, to help veterans that I've met at their rock bottom and to see where they're at now in life," Perez said. "They're continuing the mission. It is awesome."

Perez has dedicated his life to serving veterans. Outside of working for Veterans Affairs, he runs a nonprofit organization called Operation Restoring Veteran Hope. It provides recreational therapy like kayaking and horseback riding.

Many participants from area veterans courts attend the organization's events. Perez said he hopes to inspire them and show that change is possible.

Incarcerated veterans in Arizona

Not all veterans qualify for treatment courts. There are 2,117 veterans incarcerated inside Arizona's prisons, according to an October report by the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation and Reentry.

Arizona's prisons started a program to help veterans in 2015, called Regaining Honor. Minimum-custody inmates who received an honorable, general or medical discharge from a branch of the armed forces are able to participate. The program has helped 422 inmates, and 82 are currently enrolled.

Judy Keane, a Department of Corrections spokesperson, said the program connects incarcerated veterans with services and organizations to prepare them to return to the community.

"This program also provides the opportunity for incarcerated veterans to 'regain' the pride found among those who have had the common experience of serving in the U.S. military while also experiencing the ongoing support and camaraderie of other veterans," she said.

The program provides support through groups, classes, workshops and release planning. Bill Lamoreaux, another spokesperson for the department, said veterans

are able to address issues that contributed to their incarceration through specialized services.

The program works with the Arizona Department of Veterans' Services, the Department of Economic Security's Disabled Veterans Outreach Program, Vietnam Veterans of America Tucson chapter, the University of Arizona and 12-step program volunteers.

The Department of Corrections also works with Veterans Affairs for release planning for veterans who do not participate in the program, according to Lamoreaux.

As a peer support specialist for Veterans Affairs, Perez is able to talk to incarcerated veterans in jails and state and federal prisons. He tells them about his journey and guides them with the reentry process.

"I share my testimony everywhere I go," Perez told The Republic. "It's authentic, it's real."

Veterans Affairs also provides resources for families of incarcerated veterans.

Depending on an individual's case, an incarcerated veteran can receive a certain amount of service-connected compensation. If veterans' families are able to show they are struggling financially, a portion of the compensation can be used to help them.

Veterans Affairs' Health Care for Re-entry Veterans program provides assessments and referrals for veterans needing medical, mental health and social services once they are released from jail or prison.

Legal resources for veterans

The Arizona Supreme Court and the Arizona State Bar Foundation created a website to provide information to veterans. Law for Veterans gives locations of specialty

courts in the state, a calendar of legal clinics and information on several legal topics.

LawForVeterans.org

The American Bar Association's Home Front has a list of resources for those serving in the military and their families, including information on finding a lawyer and an online directory of military legal assistance offices and pro bono organizations.

https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_services/milvets/aba_home_front

There is a crisis hotline available for veterans and family members who need to talk to someone. Support is able every day, every hour on VeteransCrisisLine.Net by online chat, text or calling.

Call: 1-800-273-8255 (Press 1) or Text: 838255.

Have thoughts about Arizona's legal system? Reach criminal justice reporter Lauren Castle at Lauren.Castle@gannett.com. Follow her on Twitter @Lauren_Castle.

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