Shelby County Forms Veterans Court

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From [*Memphis ABC 24*](http://www.abc24.com/news/local/story/Shelby-County-Forms-Veterans-Court/U9fbGLSiKU-PZM6YzKOtww.cspx)Randy Wimbley

MEMPHIS, TN - They leave to fight for our freedom, but many come home only to lose it. There are more veterans committing crimes than many care to admit.

Trauma experienced during service leads some down that path. Shelby County has taken notice and created a program to get veterans the help they need.

Veterans who qualify are enrolled in a treatment program for problems like substance abuse or post traumatic stress disorder.

Volunteer mentors play a key role in getting veterans on the straight and narrow.

“First of all, being shot at repeatedly by guns, tanks, missiles, whatever, is a little stressful,” said Vietnam Veteran Claude Barnhart.

Couple that with multiple deployments, losing friends, and coming back home to where few people can relate, it's no wonder some veterans wind up in a tailspin.

“Most of the guys drink too much, they do drugs, and under the influence of the stress they become violent and they do crimes that they wouldn't have done in a million years before,” Barnhart said.

Claude Barnhart is on the front lines helping veterans who find themselves on the wrong side of the law. He's a mentor with the Veterans Court program, a new initiative that looks to get vets the help they need instead of jail time.

“They'll be on probation through this court, a type of probation for a year under criminal charges, with the ultimate outcome being the charges can be dismissed or probably will be dismissed if they successfully complete whatever treatment it is that they felt like they needed,” Judge Bill Anderson said.

Anderson will preside over the Veterans Court. Not all criminal cases will be assigned to it; DUI's and certain weapons charges will be excluded.

Veterans Affairs is footing most of the bill. Shelby County is contributing $60,000. Anderson says it won't pay a dime next year.

“This program is going to work. This program is going to be 100 percent successful,” Anderson said. "Interestingly enough, the court in Buffalo, New York has been going since 2006. This is nearly impossible to believe: the people who successfully complete the program there's a hundred percent non-recidivism rate. Nobody goes out and commits a crime or they haven't so far."

The Veterans Court program needs more mentors, preferably Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans. For more information, visit [vetcourtmentors.org](http://vetcourtmentors.org/).