

## New Framingham court seeks to keep veterans out of jail



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The Trial Court Honor Guard and attendees recite the Pledge of Allegiance at the Middlesex Veterans Treatment Court opening ceremonies at Framingham District Court Monday afternoon. Daily News and Wicked Local Staff Photo/Art Illman

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**By Norman Miller/Daily News Staff**

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FRAMINGHAM – After their military service is done, some veterans are left with post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injuries that might lead to drug or alcohol abuse and, in some cases, crime.

Instead of sending them to jail, the new Middlesex County Veterans Treatment Court is working to keep these men and women out of jail and get them the help they need to be productive members of society.

“There’s a saying that when you join the military, you give a blank check to the government and allow them to use that check for any amount, including your life,” said Judge Michael Fabbri at an opening ceremony for the Veterans Treatment Court on Monday in Framingham District Court.

“There’s also a saying, ‘Leave no one behind,’” continued Fabbri, an Air Force veteran and the presiding justice for the new court. “It’s about providing services and making sure the veterans who came before us get the services they need to fulfill our mission.”

Fabbri told a courtroom of attendees that included local veteran officials, MetroWest police chiefs and legislators from throughout the region, that the mission of the court is to prevent incarceration and a return to jail, get treatment to those in need and to help veterans have successful lives.

After more than a year of planning, Framingham District Court First Justice David Cunis said the Veterans Treatment Court will be available for veterans in the district court system throughout

Middlesex county. Currently, he said, there are three defendants in the court, but they hope to get to 20 or more.

Fabbri said the veterans court is open to any veteran who has a case in any Middlesex County district court, except for those who are facing a sex crime or arson. Cases over which the district court does not have jurisdiction are not eligible.

From there, anyone in the court system – the judge, prosecutor or defense lawyer – can refer the case to the Veterans Treatment Court. A committee that includes Fabbri, court clinicians, representatives from the district attorney’s office, a defense lawyer and others, then reviews the case to decide if the defendant meets the criteria.

Someone is typically involved in the treatment court for a year or more.

State Secretary of Veterans Services Francisco A. Ureña said brain injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder can lead people to commit crimes.

“We can’t afford to leave veterans behind, especially those suffering from these invisible wounds,” he said.

In the veterans court, other veterans act as mentors to those going through the system. Herb Brockert of the Dedham Veterans Treatment Court and a mentor urged others to get involved.

“It’s very satisfying to be a mentor and to watch them go through the treatment program and turn into the people they really are,” he said.

Holliston defense lawyer Daniel Cappetta, a member of the Veterans Treatment Court committee, applauded the implementation of the program.

“I’m thrilled with the prospects of veterans who would otherwise be incarcerated getting the chance for meaningful, personalized treatment instead of being warehoused in jail,” Cappetta said.

Middlesex District Attorney Marian Ryan said the Veterans Treatment Court, and other options, such as drug courts, are examples of agencies working together to make a difference.

“Ten years ago you wouldn’t have seen this happen,” said Ryan. “Now, this is an acknowledgement that these problems are bigger than any one agency.”

*Norman Miller can be reached at 508-626-3823 or nmiller@wickedlocal.com. For up-to-date crime news, follow Norman Miller on Twitter @Norman\_MillerMW.*