

Special court in Hennepin County aims to help veterans

by [Jessica Mador](#), Minnesota Public Radio

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St. Paul, Minn. — In a few weeks, a special court designed to help veterans is set to launch in Hennepin County. The court will be the first of its kind in Minnesota, and aims to help troubled veterans stay out of jail.

Standing before a judge in a wood paneled courtroom near the state capitol, Army veteran Billy Barnes swears to tell the truth.

Two pairs of eyeglasses dangle from the neck of his dark blue t-shirt. The middle-aged former soldier is tall and solidly built like the boxer he used to be.

Judge Robert Rancourt opens Barnes' hearing by swearing him in.

"Will you raise your right hand and be sworn, sir?" the judge asks from the bench. "Do you swear to tell the truth?"

Barnes agrees he will and Judge Rancourt asks him to explain how he ended up in trouble.

Barnes admits to the judge that he was loitering in the park with an open bottle when police approached, saying "and they confronted us with it and they gave us tickets for it."

That's just one of the half dozen misdemeanor charges against Barnes being heard in court on this day. Barnes pleads guilty to them all. The low level offenses are typical for people with a history of living on the streets like Barnes.

Judges from other parts of the state say they're seeing more and more veterans landing in trouble with the law and they'd like to start their own specialty courts.

Before sentencing, Barnes' public defender Erik Sandvick asks the judge to consider that today Barnes is a new man.

"Mr. Barnes would like to point out that he has changed his life around since these events happened last summer. He tells me that he is now living in the veterans home in Hastings, Minnesota. He has received work through the veterans home at the Minnesota VA hospital in Minneapolis," he says. "He works nearly 40 hours a week there and is hoping to transition this summer into housing outside the veterans home."

Those sorts of life changes are what the new veterans court in Hennepin hopes to encourage.

For Barnes, the result is a much lighter sentence than he might have gotten otherwise -- no jail, no fines and no court costs -- as long as he stays out of trouble for the next year.

"Nothing further, thank you, Your Honor," Barnes' defender says. "Thank you for coming in today, Mr. Barnes," the judge says, "Good luck to you in the future, Sir."

What happened in this courtroom was part of an annual two-day event to support troubled veterans.

It's a scaled down version of the year-round Veterans Treatment Court launching next month in Hennepin County, which is similar to drug and other criminal courts designed to address problems, not simply determine guilt and mete out punishment.

The idea is to connect veterans who commit crimes with VA and other social services so they can avoid jail.

Even before the court has started, there are already calls for similar veterans courts in other parts of the state.

"We are getting more and more veterans back and of course many are multi-tour veterans so the people that are being traumatized are being traumatized over and over," Pope County Judge Jon Stafsholt says.

The judge says he's tired of seeing veterans of multiple combat tours with PTSD or traumatic brain injury cycle through his courtroom. So he is working on a plan to set up a veterans court in his 13-county, mostly rural district.

"If we had a veterans treatment court available," he says, "the treatment program people would be there in court or accessible so we wouldn't have to wonder about where somebody is going to go, we would have somebody right there."

Stafsholt is part of a growing chorus from the bench and elsewhere calling for more veterans courts around the nation. While the consensus is that they work, in Minnesota it falls to judges, who are already dealing with cutbacks, to pull together the resources and get the necessary approval from the Minnesota Supreme Court Judicial Council.

State Court of Appeals Judge Renee Worke is among a group of elected officials and people in the private sector leading the charge for more veterans courts in Minnesota. She says they are needed more than ever as veterans continue to return from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with serious issues.

"If we don't get involved and deal with that on the front end," she says, "we are going to have them in the system until they are in their 40s, their 50s or their 60s, much like the Vietnam veterans."

Worke says the courts are inexpensive because they rely on a team of existing criminal justice, social services and veterans advocates who work together on each defendant's case.

"The nice part of all of this, if you will, is that it's going to save us money in the long run," Judge Worke says.

Other veterans courts are in the works. In addition to the new court opening in Hennepin County in July, courts in Pope and Ramsey counties could open before