

PROBLEM-SOLVING COURTS

## Sarpy County adding a Veterans Treatment Court: 'It's our turn to serve them'

David Golbitz *The Times*

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**S**arpy County will be adding a new problem-solving court to its expanding roster of alternatives to prison for non-violent felony offenders, a Veterans Treatment Court — or VTC — designed to support military veterans with mental health or substance use disorders who have run afoul of the law.

“I’m probably a little biased on this one, but these are people who have sacrificed so much for our community, and it’s our chance to give back to them, to give them those services for their families and themselves, so they don’t come back through, they get the help they need,” said VTC coordinator Heather Moran, who grew up in a military family, and whose husband is in the military.



The Sarpy County Courthouse, located on the northeast corner of 84th Street and Highway 370, is illuminated green in honor of veterans.

KATY GLOVER, SARPY COUNTY

Moran expects the new VTC to start in November, just in time for Veterans Day. It comes about 18 months after Sarpy County’s Wellness Court got started, and Moran is hopeful that the VTC will provide similar outcomes for participants.

The Sarpy County Wellness Court recently celebrated its third graduation with a ceremony at the Sarpy County Courthouse on Friday, Sept. 22.

Nicholas Saitta, 31, entered the county's wellness court program in April 2021 following an arrest the previous year for possession with intent to distribute a controlled substance, a Class IIA felony punishable by up to 20 years in prison.

"I wouldn't be here if I didn't have the support system that I have," Saitta told the Sarpy County Times. "And I just hope that other people can have success in the same program."

District Court Judge Stefanie Martinez noted in her remarks how much of an inspiration Saitta has been for the other participants in the wellness court program.

"You're such a positive influence on everybody in the program, and you have so much to offer," said Martinez, who has presided over Wellness Court since its inception in 2021. "And you seem very dedicated and invested in the other participants here. You've offered a lot of help and guidance."

The VTC, like Wellness Court and the state's other problem-solving courts, requires participants to pass a competency evaluation, and they must also plead guilty to the charge or charges against them. Upon successful completion of the program, the charge is vacated.

"As a judge, we were seeing more and more defendants that were affected by mental illness and not having the appropriate support services for them within the criminal justice system," Martinez said. "Having these programs here, frankly, it was just a godsend to be able to offer that opportunity to people."

Veterans Treatment Court will be presided over by District Court Judge Nathan Cox.

Moran is currently reviewing applications to the court. She said they want 10 participants when the court opens, "which I don't think is going to be a problem."

Moran and Cox, along with members of the county's district attorney's office and public defender's office, have spent the last several months coming up with the guidelines and policies for the new treatment court.

"We sat down when we were talking, like, who do we want coming in here?" Moran said. "We decided as a group that anyone who served in the military, even if you were in the military for one day up till retirement, we want to look at you as a possible candidate for our program. We're also looking at honorable discharge, dishonorable discharge, we didn't want to limit that."

Eligible candidates for the VTC must be of high risk to reoffend, have committed a felony and have been diagnosed with a substance use or mental health disorder.

The Sarpy County VTC is the state's fourth, joining Douglas and Lancaster counties, and the Central Nebraska VTC, which serves Adams, Buffalo and Hall counties.

For a community with such a large military presence, adding a VTC in Sarpy County was something Moran was eager to help accomplish.

"It's our turn to serve them," Moran said. "This is a community that has this huge Air Force base, Navy base, there are Reserves here, and we need to step up. We need to do better. We need to do better by them, and it's time."

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