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Court program offers a more rehabilitative way of handling veterans

L.A. County joins surge of courts offering veterans convicted of drug offenses or nonviolent crimes counseling and treatment instead of jail. But it's not a free pass, the judge warns.

By Jack Leonard, Los Angeles Times

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Michael Baldwin, a veteran of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps, sat in a downtown Los Angeles courtroom dressed in a very different uniform from the ones he wore serving his country in Guam, Japan and Germany.

Clad in blue jail scrubs, the 44-year-old faced the possibility of prison for stealing perfume and cologne from department stores.

But Baldwin was one of four former servicemen offered the chance to avoid jail and turn their lives around as part of a Los Angeles County court initiative launched Monday that aims to help veterans in trouble with the law.

The program is one of a growing number around the country to offer veterans an alternative to jail by providing substance abuse counseling as well as mental health and medical treatment.

Those who make it through the program, which can last up to two years, will earn the chance to have their cases dismissed or their charges reduced.

Many participants are expected to stumble along the way. Those who repeatedly fail or flout the program's rules can wind up back behind bars.

"This is not a get-out-of-jail-free card," Superior Court Judge Michael A. Tynan warned participants at the program's first court hearing. "Your issues may or may not be your fault, but your recovery is totally your responsibility."

Tynan, a former Army medic, said he expects that many of the defendants will have drug or alcohol addictions.

At Monday's hearing, he talked briefly with Baldwin about his time in the military, including their shared experience of being stationed at the Army base at Ft. Riley, Kan.

Baldwin told the judge he had been sober for 90 days — about as long as he had been in jail —

following eight years of addiction.

Next to Baldwin sat Ricky Grisom, a 52-year-old former Marine who was convicted of drug possession last month.

"How long have you been using drugs?" Tynan asked him.

Grisom sighed. "A few years. I'm finding it very, very difficult to stop."

Cocaine was his drug of choice, the veteran explained.

"We're here to help you," Tynan responded.

The judge ordered that both men be released from jail to a representative of the Department of Veterans Affairs so that the agency could assess their needs and find them a treatment facility.

Defendants who qualify for VA benefits and are charged with relatively minor, nonviolent felonies are eligible for the program. Tynan said he would also consider cases in which veterans were accused of fighting or other violence, as long as no weapons were used and no one was seriously hurt.

The new program marks the nation's 42nd veterans court since the first one opened in January 2008 in Buffalo, N.Y., according to the National Assn. of Drug Court Professionals, which provides help in setting up veterans courts.

"That's pretty incredible progress," said Chris Deutsch, a spokesman for the association.

Underlying the growth is concern over the large number of veterans returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan and the toll their combat service might take.

Studies have shown that many troops suffer from post-traumatic stress and other disorders. And while the vast majority of veterans never wind up in legal trouble, psychiatrists and law enforcement officials agree that traumas caused by combat can lead to substance abuse and criminality.

"In the past, we haven't always risen to the occasion to give them they help they need," Deutsch said. "There is a recognition of that and a desire to make sure that doesn't happen again."