

Article in the San Diego News...

County Helps Homeless Veterans Find Resolutions



Superior Court Judge Roger Krauel presides over Homeless Court at Stand Down 2013.

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Hundreds of homeless veterans were served at this year's three-day Stand Down event hosted by the Veterans Village of San Diego near Balboa Park -- including those seeking family court or other legal services from the county.



The raquetball court serve as a makeshift court room for the Homeless Court program at Stand Down.

The event held last weekend gave homeless veterans and their families a safe place to seek a hand up. For some, that meant a shower, food, shelter, new clothes, medical or dental attention, or help sorting out a sticky legal situation that might hold them back from getting off the streets and holding a job.

The Homeless Court program saw more than 170 people this year. The program is a chance for homeless veterans to receive an alternative sentence for misdemeanor crimes and infractions. Cases are dismissed and fines are satisfied as the Court credits participation in treatment and other programs instead of meting out punishment. Founded 24 years ago, it was the first court in the nation set up to help homeless veterans with their criminal matters.

Steve Binder with the San Diego County Public Defender's Office, helped start the program at the second Stand Down in 1989. Since 2004, some 2,500 homeless veterans have taken care of 5,000 legal cases, he said.

"There's a tremendous need and response from the homeless veterans, which illustrates their desire and determination to participate in our community more fully," said the deputy public defender.

The vast majority of the cases included public nuisance offenses, but some were batteries, resisting arrest, and being under the influence, Binder said.

On the first day of Stand Down, all participants must undergo counseling on the criminal matter and are directed to programs and services that address the root of their homelessness. Then, they appear for a court hearing held on the racquetball courts of San Diego High School.

"It's a three-day window of opportunity and it helps people rebuild their lives and gets them to a place where they want to be and helps support and successfully resolve even the serious cases," Binder said. "As we all seize this opportunity in the three days, we can make a meaningful difference in the county of San Diego."

Some homeless veterans have unresolved child support matters, and for those, the San Diego County Department of Child Support Services (DCSS) met with 59 veterans on Friday. Of those who met with DCSS staff, 28 cases were heard in court, said Supervising Attorney Shannon Welton. DCSS is the first Child Support agency in the country to participate in a Stand Down event and this is their fifth time there, she said.

Some of the veterans never addressed their child support orders and have accumulated debt. The family court component of Stand Down gives them an opportunity to take responsibility for their children's needs and adjust the orders to match their income level, said Welton.

Pro bono counselors from the Thomas Jefferson School of Law Veteran's Clinic assisted veterans with issues such as modifying their court-ordered payment for cases in arrears and releasing driver's licenses suspended due to nonpayment.

Attending Stand Down can truly transform a homeless veteran's prospects, she said.

Binder lauds the collaborative effort, professionalism and commitment of the court clerks for overcoming budget and resource constraints to offer this service to veterans.. This year, for example, prosecutors reviewed cases in advance to settle cases quickly. By doing this, veterans were able to resolve their cases and take advantage of the other resources.

Binder said San Diego is leading the country by example as far as helping homeless veterans. The American Bar Association Commission on Homelessness and Poverty, and the National Coalitions for Homeless Veterans sponsored training at the weekend event for key people from Maine, Washington D.C., Louisiana and Arizona to learn more about the Homeless Court Program and take it back to their communities.

Binder said they were all "blown away" with the level of response offered in the program.

Among the many County departments that provide services or behind-the-scenes support to help make Stand Down a successful event are the Department of General Services for rigging up temporary electrical power to the tent city, Housing & Community Development and the Health & Human Services Agency.