

Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs and Military Installations

For Immediate Release

March 30, 2010

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Legislators Host Veterans Court Forum

(AUSTIN) — Senator Leticia Van de Putte (D-San Antonio), Chair of the Senate Committee on Veteran Affairs and Military Installations, Senator Rodney Ellis (D-Houston), and Representative Allen Vaught (D-Dallas), Vice Chair of the House Committee on Defense and Veterans Affairs, in partnership with the Texas Veterans Commission hosted a forum to educate and inform county officials, legislators, judges, and their staff about the need for and function of veterans courts.

During the 81st Legislative Session, Rep. Vaught and Sen. Ellis authored SB 112, which passed as part of SB 1940, authored by Sen. Van de Putte. SB 1940 took effect on September 1, 2009, and authorizes the county commissioners' courts to establish a veterans' court program for persons arrested for or charged with any misdemeanor or felony offense. The legislation requires prosecutors to agree to the defendant's participation in the pre-trial program, a medical diagnosis of combat-related mental illness, and the veteran to agree to a treatment plan.

"After hearing about veterans courts in other parts of the country, I was determined to get legislation passed in Texas so we could have a similar program here. The great thing about veterans courts is that they combine two public policy issues that are near and dear to my heart: helping veterans and making our criminal justice system more fair and balanced," said Senator Rodney Ellis.

According to a report by the RAND Corporation, it is estimated that 300,000 American soldiers who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq (nearly 20 percent of the troops deployed in those operations) now suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or major depression. However, only 53 percent of those affected have sought treatment. Veterans courts provide veterans suffering from combat-related mental illness an avenue to make retribution for their actions and receive the mental health services they need rather than simply casting them into the criminal justice system.

"When our veterans return home, it's our duty to ensure they receive the treatment they need, especially if they are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder or have a service-related disability. Veterans' Courts allow our local governments and counties to address veterans' mental-health care needs by establishing a pathway that provides for individualized treatment," said Representative Allen Vaught.

So far, Harris County has been the only jurisdiction to establish a veterans' court, while several other counties such as Bexar, El Paso, Tarrant, Travis, and Dallas are also looking to establish programs. The veterans' court forum provided the opportunity for county officials, legislators, and their staff to ask questions of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, the Texas Veterans Association, and Harris County officials regarding the implementation and design of veterans' courts in their jurisdictions.

"I'm excited that Harris County -- in my Senate district -- was the first jurisdiction to establish a veterans court in Texas. I look forward to the day when every eligible veteran in Texas has access to veterans court treatment for mental illness and post-traumatic stress disorder and an opportunity to have their criminal record expunged," said Senator Rodney Ellis.

"Our warriors are under tremendous strain as they fight two foreign wars and the global war on terrorism. The physical scars are the easiest to see, but it is often the invisible scars that are the hardest to heal. The establishment of veterans courts will ensure that our veterans receive the mental health services they need to put their lives back together, rather than a jail cell. We want to send a message to our men and women in uniform that in Texas no one stands alone and no scar goes untreated," said Senator Van de Putte.