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## A Court for At-Risk and Suffering Vets

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others are just very lonely," he said. Wilbur likens military culture to any other type of culture where an individual may feel shock after transitioning back to an unfamiliar life. When spouses, family, and kids may fail to speak the same language as them, other veterans understand.

"It takes a veteran to help a veteran," said Wilbur, a Vietnam vet.

Hugh Casey, a senior peer

mentor and veteran marine, fills the void for veterans that become tangled in the justice system and hopes that a fellow veteran would do the same for him.

"Young women and men have their world ahead, but they are plagued by various demons—PTSD, combat experience, or substance abuse," said Casey. "Hopefully a mentor can be a guide post that a veteran can turn to."

It can be overwhelming for veterans to stand before the judge and all the various members of the court. Especially when authority figures stress them out, Casey explains. Having a concerned veteran standing by his side, as one would during war-

calmed down. Many people do not realize PTSD is a permanent condition, and veterans with such mental issues can be easily triggered in stressful situations.

Though peer mentors like Casey are neither qualified counselors nor therapists, sometimes it takes just a phone call or a conversation over coffee for a veteran to unload what-ever is on their mind.

"Being a mentor is challenging," said Casey. "It's a learning experience everyday, but in the end, you're just a fellow veteran helping a veteran going through a hard time."

Casey mentors Larry Phelps, who is in treatment for the trauma he witnessed in Vietnam. He is

*Therapeutic courts, like the Clark County Veterans Court, give incarcerated veterans or those at-risk and suffering mental illnesses a second chance at life. For former soldiers, it is often the support of veteran peer mentors that can gear them towards recovery.*

time, is more comforting, he said.

Casey's mission is to help to keep veterans on track so that each individual can successfully walk away from the court on his own. Peer mentors act as a support system, not just in court dealings, but in life too.

They pick up the pieces where mom and dad left off. Young veterans may not know how to fill out a job application or how to conduct themselves in an interview. Veteran mentors try to give them a toolbox of skills to cope with the abrupt change of being a soldier in war to a civilian in peace.

Casey often receives phone calls in the middle of the night, early in the morning, or any other time a veteran may be in crisis and calling him for emotional support.

An Iraq veteran, for example, called Casey as he was suffering an emotional problem. A fellow veteran from his unit had taken his own life, and he said he would be unable to attend the East Coast service. Due to the nature of the death, the victim's family had decided to keep the funeral private and brief.

"I'm stressing out, I want to go, and I need closure," Casey recalls the veteran saying. This individual had lost several men in his unit to suicide because of the 'hells kitchen' they had gone through in Iraq.

After a long talk, the veteran

moving from his secluded home in the mountains closer to the city, where his days are spent following his treatment plan.

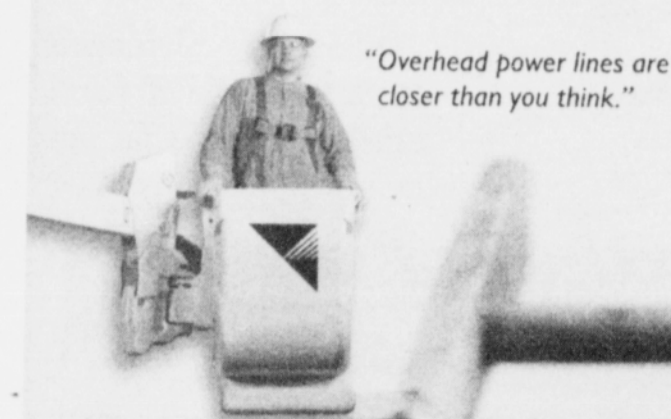
He attends a review service at the court every Wednesday and substance abuse classes throughout the week. He talks with his mentor at least four times a week. He finds the mentor program "very supportive," and has more understanding of PTSD and how to cope with his symptoms.

Phelps believes the times have changed. Veterans today are receiving better attention than he did. He is glad to see people welcoming recent veterans home.

However, as a life-long victim of PTSD, his qualms about war remain unchanged. "What are we doing over there in the first place," said Phelps. "Why has our government chosen to put our people at risk?"

The Clark County Veterans Court is seeking honorably discharged veterans to be peer mentors from each branch of the armed forces, men and women, and vets from all eras.

If you are interested in the veterans mentoring program, contact Mike Wilbur, a U.S. Army Vietnam vet at 360-241-3448 or Shauna McCloskey, Therapeutic Specialty Courts Coordinator at 360-397-2431, [shauna.mccloskey@clark.wa.gov](mailto:shauna.mccloskey@clark.wa.gov).



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