

Patt Maney Organizes a Special Docket For Homeless Vets

by Jan Pudlow, *Senior Editor*, The Florida Bar News, *January 2009*

Homeless veterans numbering 135 were drawn to the First Presbyterian Church in Okaloosa County, where they found a remarkable mix of compassion and court business.

Spearheaded by Okaloosa County Judge Patt Maney, the "Stand Down" event recruited Assistant State Attorneys Steven Nixon and Ginger Madden, along with Assistant Public Defender Chris Schumm, and a bailiff and court clerk, to take written pleas and clear criminal cases.

"The homeless veterans seemed relieved to have their cases disposed and to be freed from the pressure that they might be arrested at any moment," said Judge Maney, a brigadier general. in the Army Reserves who almost paid the ultimate price trying to rebuild Afghanistan in 2005 ([see June 15, 2006 Florida Bar News](#)).

Clearing up legal issues was only part of the package. With military precision, Judge Maney ticks off this list of services: All homeless vets, plus 35 non-veteran homeless persons, received two hot meals, clothing, personal care items, and sleeping bags.

Sixteen received dental screenings. Twenty were counseled and received state benefits. Thirtyfour received VA benefit counseling through the Pensacola Vet Center representatives. Flu shots were given to 46. Twenty-five had medical screenings, and 14 had mental health screenings. Two homeless veterans found free temporary housing and social services support. One veteran is receiving free legal counsel regarding child support. And another veteran is receiving assistance in filing a petition with the Board for Correction of Military Records to upgrade a discharge and establish eligibility for benefits.

As for the court business at this unique docket, 29 veterans had voluntary criminal records checks, resulting in 21 pleas to misdemeanors or municipal ordinance violations, involving a total of 50 counts. Two veterans received sentence modifications. One veteran is in the process of filing a petition for expungement. "While some of the homeless at the Stand Down were simply taking advantage of the opportunity to clear their legal slate in a friendly environment, before heading out to pile up more trespass and possession charges, there were others who I think we really did help out," said Nixon, one of the prosecutors. "Especially some of the vets who had just one or two things they needed to deal with, or those with more complex problems that

we were able to work out for them — things like record-sealing and expunging, getting a driver's license back, even determining voting rights or finding a job. "There were those who just walked in and wanted, basically, a freebie withhold on their miscellaneous pending charges, and they got it. But there were others who really did need a hand with things well beyond their own understanding and control, and we were able to solve a lot of problems."

Judge Maney views the Stand Down as both a way to do something positive for homeless vets with unique needs unmet by the system, as well as a way to save money for the county to prevent more homeless people booked in the jail for minor offenses. Community service was substituted for court costs. But the new cost of prosecution requirement created by the 2008 Legislature could not be negotiated down. "They were ordered to pay it, but I was able to take the time and talk to them and find out how much time they needed to come up with the cash,"

Maney said. On the civil side, Shalimar lawyer Lisa Jo Spencer stayed all day doing civil matters and followups on getting folks help with discharge upgrades and child support issues. Judge Maney got the idea last year while going to a Veteran's Administration facility in Biloxi, Mississippi, for continuing treatment for his wartime injuries. They happened to be having a similar Stand Down event in progress. "Being a curious fellow, I said, 'What is going on? What is happening?'" Maney recalled. "I asked them to do one in Okaloosa, and they said it hadn't been scheduled. For all the good, solid bureaucratic reasons there are, like anything else, if it's not on the schedule, it was tough to put it in. I decided we weren't going to wait in Okaloosa County." And so, Judge Maney sent out letters to veteran's groups.

The Disabled American Veterans Post 72 took the lead in pulling it together, supplying monetary resources, surplus clothing and gear, and Vet Center representatives. Other military and veterans groups lined up to help: the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, the AMVETS, the Military Officers Association, the Military Order of the Purple Heart, the Bridgeway Center, the Ft. Walton police, Magnolia Grill, Young Republicans (with an Operation Iraqi Freedom veteran), a University of West Florida School of Social Work class, the Okaloosa Walton Mental Health Association, the Coalition for the Homeless/Opportunity, Inc., and Florida Jobs Plus. Posters went up downtown and news spread through the homeless persons' grapevine. Judge Maney made sure to mention it whenever a homeless person stood before him in court. Even though Pensacola has a similar Stand Down, Maney said, 45 miles is too far to travel for homeless vets without transportation.

Maney and Nixon agree the Stand Down should become a regular event in Okaloosa County. The judge has e-mailed Admiral Leroy Collins, of the Florida Division of Veterans Affairs, expressing his hope that next year the VA and Florida DVA will put Okaloosa on the Stand Down schedule to help expand services. He also hopes Congress and the VA will designate a Vet Center for Okaloosa County's 30,000-plus veterans. "It's been publicly reported there is a rising number of veterans from all wars who have suffered from traumatic brain injury and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder," Judge Maney said. "If we are going to fulfill Lincoln's commitment to care for those who have borne the battle, we need to recognize some veterans have unique needs. Not to justify their offense, but to resolve their situation with compassion."

Prosecutor Nixon gives a broader perspective: "I think it is a valuable project to hold regularly, because a lot of good really can be done. However, simply clearing charges and sending fines and costs owed to collections does nothing to address the real issue of homelessness in our communities. This sort of project is indeed valuable, but we need to stay focused on the bigger picture and ways to keep these typical homelessness-related charges from piling up in the first place."