

Veterans Fight Back and Win

New graduates work hard to overcome drug abuse and mental health issues

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Veteran Joseph "JoJo" Lupica kissed his mother, Beverly Gardiner, during the graduation ceremony for the Hawaii Veterans Treatment Court on Friday at the Supreme Court building in Honolulu.

Marine Corps veteran Joseph "Jojo" Lupica had the support of his mother, an auntie, two good friends, his parole officer, a Circuit Court judge and an audience of more than 160, who gave him a round of applause Friday for being among the first four former service members to graduate from Veterans Treatment Court.

"I'd like to thank U.S. VETS and the treatment court," Lupica, 52, told the group at the Hawaii State Supreme Court building. "I couldn't have made it (without them). I'd still be under a bridge or in the hospital or dead."

Lupica's mother, Beverly Gardiner, thanked Circuit Judge Ed Kubo, who oversees the program, for "giving Jo a second chance."

State officials piled lei and congratulations on the veterans — two from the Army and one each from the Marines and Air Force. The four had been convicted of individual charges that included burglary, unauthorized entry into a car, theft and the promotion of dangerous drugs, the court said.

But after successfully going through an extensive two-year program of treatment and counseling, urinalysis checks, meetings with probation officers and court appearances, the charges against the veterans will be dismissed.

Veteran Patrick Nobriga said the program was "very hard, and I wanted to quit a few times," but he persevered, and thanked the treatment court team for helping him do so.

The Hawaii Veterans Treatment Court was established in 2013 for former service members whose drug abuse and mental health issues led to their arrest. Kubo said since then the program has taken on about 18 veterans and continues to show success.

"None of them have dropped out," Kubo said. "All of them have shown not only the motivation and desire, but they are making it, they are being successful. And it's so good to see when a veteran can go from homeless to being fully employed with a promise of tomorrow."

Melissa Fitzgerald, senior director of Justice for Vets, a division of the National Association of Drug Court Professionals, said the first Veterans Treatment Court was established in 2008. There are now more than 220 serving more than 11,000 veterans nationwide, she said.

A Veterans Treatment Court was launched on Hawaii island in November.

State Supreme Court Chief Justice Mark Recktenwald said Friday's graduation was a milestone with significance for the four veterans who successfully completed the program, but also for the Judiciary and its partners, including the Department of Veterans Affairs and U.S. VETS, which helps service members in need obtain food, lodging and counseling.

"We had many veterans in our criminal justice system who struggled with the transition to civilian society," Recktenwald told those assembled for the ceremony.

Through their service to the country, troubled veterans earned benefits that could help them meet those challenges, "but we weren't systematically identifying them and bringing those resources to bear," he said.

Into Kubo's courtroom have come veterans with a range of convictions. One former soldier broke into a Frito-Lay facility to steal copper wire. A former Marine had a felony drug conviction and used cocaine and marijuana. A Coast Guardsman had offenses including terroristic threatening involving the use of a knife while intoxicated at home.

"None of this would be possible without the leadership of Judge Kubo and his great Veterans Treatment Court team," Recktenwald said.



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Veteran Alika Valderama, right, embraced Chief Justice Mark Recktenwald after receiving his pin during a ceremony for the first graduating class of the Hawaii Veterans Treatment Court at the Hawaii State Supreme Court building in Honolulu.