

## Formerly incarcerated vets get fresh start at SF court program

Sarah Ravani on Sep 23, 2016

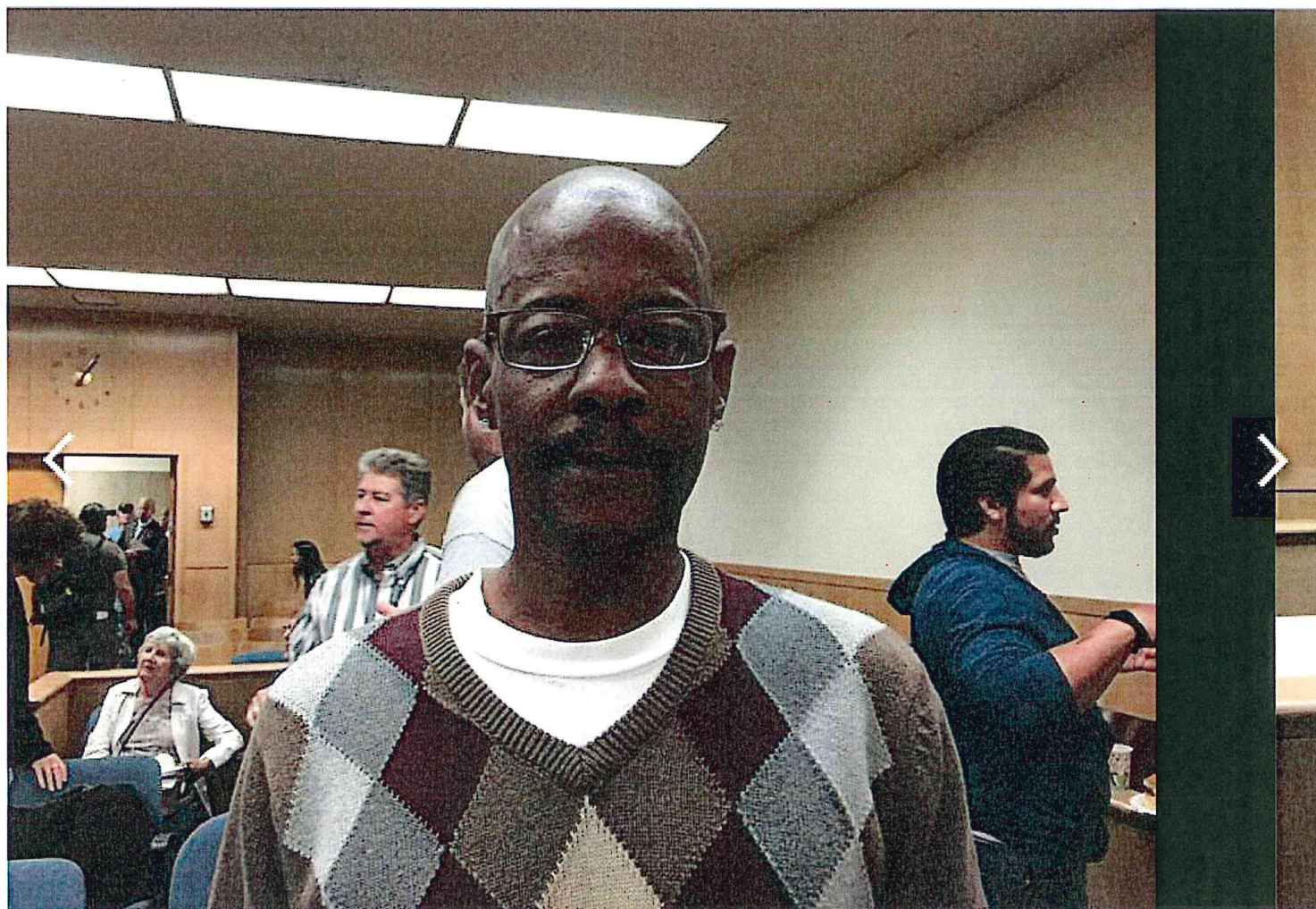


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U.S. Army veteran Kevin White said he's been in and out prison for 20 years, but on Friday he celebrated his completion of the Veterans Justice Court program that has enabled him to stay sober for a year now.

Kevin White joined the U.S. Army in 1980 when he was just 17, and in the two years he served for his country he was forced to grow up fast and stay focused.



“Even though, I was in the Army during a peaceful time, I still had that fear,” White, a resident of San Francisco, said when talking about the possibility of deployment during his military tenure.

Fast forward 36 years and White, now 53, said he’s been in and out of prison for 20 years, and has battled post traumatic stress disorder and a drug addiction.

Through his most recent incarceration for auto burglary, he was introduced to the San Francisco Veterans Justice Court, which helps veterans find housing after they’re released from prison, and gets them treatment for drug addiction and mental illnesses.

On Friday, the Veterans Justice Court held its first celebration for formerly incarcerated veterans who graduated from the program.

“I’ve been clean for almost a year now,” White told a crowd on hand for the ceremony in the Police Commission Hearing Room at the Hall of Justice on Bryant Street. “If you knew me, you’d know that’s really big.”

The Veterans Justice Court is part of the San Francisco Superior Court system and works in collaboration with various organizations, including the San Francisco Public Defender’s office, the district attorney, Veterans Affairs and the San Francisco Sheriff’s Department and the Human Services Agency of San Francisco.

The court works with incarcerated veterans to develop a customized treatment plan to assist them with whatever troubles they may be facing once they are released from prison — whether it’s homelessness or substance abuse, said Jenna Ferrara, a veterans

justice outreach specialist at Veterans Affairs. The average time for veterans to complete the treatment plan is nine to 18 months.

For White, the program not only helped him kick a crack cocaine addiction, it is also assisting him in finding permanent housing. He's currently living with his mother in San Francisco, but hopes to soon have a place of his own.

"Incarceration is not the way to deal with most crimes," said Superior Court Judge Jeffrey S. Ross, who oversees the Veterans Justice Court. "I believe in working with people so they don't come back to incarceration."

Ross said the primary goal of the court is to reduce recidivism, and, in turn, boost public safety.

During Friday's celebration, Ross invited veterans who graduated from the program in the last year to share their stories and rewarded them with a certificate and commemorative coin signifying completion of the course.

About ten veterans were celebrated and about seven of them shared their stories with mentors from the program, representatives of Veterans Affairs and members of the Board of Supervisors who were sitting in the audience.

The Veterans Justice Court was established in 2013 as part of a pilot program at the Community Justice Center in the Tenderloin. The program moved to the Hall of Justice in 2015 as part of an expansion to address the needs of veterans across San Francisco.

Of the 84 veterans who have completed the program, only about seven percent have been rearrested.

"I understand now that I have a choice and I've been making the right choice and I'm going to continue to do that," White said.

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