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Sheriff's Office supports returning veterans

By: Katrina Segers, staff writer



Ben McCall/Sun Photo. Housekeeping: While an inmate is in court, veteran and Deputy Tyrone Hudgins, Gardner, left, watches as Deputy Ryan Schweiger demonstrate use a handcuff key, fashioned out of a paper clip, that they found while searching the inmate's cell Thursday, May 15, at the Olathe Adult Detention Center, 107 Ave., Olathe.

Returning home from deployment can be a rough transition for some veterans.

Psychologist **Daniel Claiborn** said many returning veterans do not ask for help, which is why the Johnson County Sheriff Office's Post Incident Assistance Program i

The program helps officers who have experienced any situation that could be traumatic, such as use of force.

Sgt. **Erin O'Donnell** said she referred a deputy to the assistance program. She said he later told her he had no idea he had been experiencing post traumatic stress symptoms until he took advantage of the program. She said she then started wondering what more the office could do for employees returning from deployment.

She said after gaining approval from Sheriff **Frank Denning** and action team worked to develop the idea.

"We care in law enforcement so much about everyone's physical abilities, but your mental health is just as important as your physical health and they, in fact, go hand in hand," O'Donnell said.

Claiborn said returning veterans meet with him for an assessment prior to returning to work.

He said the assessment session offers a chance to discuss how the veteran is doing since his or her return and look for stress-related symptoms.

Claiborn said some common issues veterans deal with include difficulty being in crowds, driving, the effect of sudden noises and trouble sleeping. He also talks to them about the possibility of developing symptoms in the future and how to deal with those.

Claiborn said the best way to gauge a veteran's readiness to return to work is by asking.

"By the time they are ready to go to work they've been back for a while and have had some programs of disengagement through the military," he said. "So, they've adjustment time and for most people, men in particular, getting back to work is part of the therapy and part of what does help them adjust."

Deputy **Tyron Hudgins**, 24, Gardner has been deployed to Iraq twice; he returned most recently in February. He said he would not have sought assistance if it had offered to him.

"It's a personal issue for most soldiers," he said. "It's just a mental thing."

Hudgins said he chose to return to work the day after his March 30 assessment with Claiborn because he did not experience many problems transitioning.

"It was an open conversation. He was there to listen to make sure I was OK mentally," Hudgins said. "He didn't pressure or anything, he was definitely there for the

Hudgins said he had problems adjusting his sleep schedule but for the most part felt relieved just to be home and be able to stop thinking about Iraq.

"There for the first couple of weeks you're still in tune to a high sense, so just driving down the regular highway here in the states you still think you're in Iraq some you're looking for bombs or gunfire, so you're still watching, but that fades away," he said.

Hudgins said he will return for a 90-day checkup with Claiborn on July 1.

"I think it's a great thing," he said. "The biggest benefit is just to get things out in the open; it's all behind closed doors. So anything you have questions about, ope

The program "is a major step forward because it makes it normal," said Claiborn, with Forensic Psychology Associates, 10801 W. 87th St., Overland Park.

"There's still somewhat of a culture among police officers of being strong and being self-sufficient, so I think any program like this that lays it out and recognizes th everyone, we're expecting everyone to use it to benefit from it, it sends a healthy message," he said.

O'Donnell said mentors from the office keep in touch with soldiers while they are deployed and work with them for up to 12 months after they return.

"It lets you know that you're still part of the Sheriff's Office and it's nice to talk to someone back here and see what's going on," Hudgins said. "It's just comforting."

O'Donnell said the mentors are individuals who have been in the military.

"It's a way for someone who comes back from deployment to connect with someone who's military and they can help them through. ... The mentors are a good con home. Say someone who's deployed they're talking to their mentor and say, 'Well, our lawn mower broke, so my wife can't get the lawn mowed.' Well, we've got 5C deputies here that we can pull from to take care of those things, so it's a nice contact between them."

"Unlike other professions, people coming back to be police officers are really coming back to situations where they're going to be likely experiencing new semi-stress a fairly regular basis," Claiborn said.

The Sheriff's Office currently has six officers deployed.

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