

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HEALTH

Veterans Justice Outreach Improvement Act

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To Chairwoman Brownley, Ranking Member Bergman, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to have the opportunity to submit my testimony for the Veterans Justice Outreach Improvement Act, and respectfully request my statement be entered into the record.

I have spent the majority of my career as a behavioral health clinician practicing in jail, prison, hospital settings, and various community behavioral health agencies. I am also retired from the U.S. Army; both reserve, and national guard components, and a veteran of Afghanistan. My unique perspective has provided me the expertise needed to lead Justice For Vets. As leaders of the veterans treatment court movement, Justice For Vets helps ensure that the criminal justice system effectively identifies, assesses, and responds to all justice-involved veterans appropriately. Justice For Vets is a division of the National Association of Drug Court Professionals that provides training and technical assistance to existing and planned veterans treatment courts, as well as other treatment courts seeking to serve individuals before the court with substance use and mental health disorders, including veterans, more effectively. Justice For Vets holds hundreds of training events each year, produces fact sheets and other resources on key issues such as service-related trauma, distributes free online training, and leads the training of volunteer veteran mentors through the Justice For Vets National Mentor Corps.

While there are many organizations that provide programs and services to veterans, service duplication and lack of coordination have created wide gaps in access. Often, justice-involved veterans are excluded entirely from accessing this help. Justice For Vets helps communities bring together local, state, and federal resources to directly serve veterans involved in the justice system due to substance abuse, mental illness, or trauma.

Veterans Treatment Courts and Veterans Justice Outreach Program

In 2008, the first veterans treatment court was launched in Buffalo, New York. This veterans-only docket is an alternative to incarceration for veterans whose involvement in the justice system is rooted in a substance use or mental health disorder or trauma. While maintaining the traditional partnerships and practices of our highly successful drug court—such as judge, prosecutor, defense, probation, law enforcement, case manager— the veterans treatment court interdisciplinary team includes representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs. This includes the Veterans Health Administration and the Veterans Benefit Administration, as well as State Department/Commission of Veterans Affairs, Vet Centers, community mental health and substance use treatment providers, veterans service organizations, and volunteer veteran mentors.

Veterans in the program receive structure, supervision, and treatment while they are surrounded by other veterans and being connected to veteran-specific local, state, and federal resources.

Veterans treatment courts demonstrate that veterans can be held accountable for their actions while receiving the treatment and support necessary to change their lives, repair their families, and once again be productive citizens. By economizing resources, veterans treatment courts are not only a more effective approach, they are efficient; saving money and streamlining access to the benefits veterans have earned but may not have accessed.

Key to the success of veterans treatment courts is the critical role of veterans justice outreach specialists from local VA medical centers. Due in large part to referrals from veterans treatment court, the VA's Veterans Justice Outreach program has one of the highest rates of treatment referral and engagement in the VA. A 2014 study of the program states: "Among veterans who had a mental health or substance use disorder, 97% entered mental health or substance use disorder outpatient or residential treatment or received pharmacotherapy for alcohol or opioid use disorders.....The rate of treatment *engagement*, defined as six or more mental health outpatient visits, or six or more substance use disorder outpatient visits, or any mental health or substance use disorder residential treatment, was 79%."

Recommendation

The discussion draft sets out to improve the veterans justice outreach program by conducting outreach, increasing the number of Veterans Justice Outreach specialists, establishing performance goals, and providing training requirements. These elements are important because they increase engagement and effectiveness, and ensure continued growth rooted in research.

We understand the VA is currently developing performance measures, conducting outreach, providing training, and working to increase the number of Veterans Justice Outreach specialist. Thus, the legislation appears to be codifying practices supported by the VA and the field.

Finally, the draft provides for an outcome evaluation of veterans treatment courts to achieve best practices and accessibility to these programs. There is no doubt more research and evaluation are needed on veterans treatment courts. However, as the Department of Justice (DOJ) has the oversight responsibility for veterans treatment courts and both the capacity and history of conducting national outcome evaluation, DOJ is best suited to conduct this research.

The Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) is the subagency that oversees the veterans treatment court grant program. The Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice (NIJ) is the research, development, and evaluation agency within the DOJ. NIJ, in collaboration with BJA, is uniquely positioned to provide research and evaluation. NIJ has completed a national process evaluation on veterans treatment courts. The national process evaluation will assess target population, adherence to best-practices, access, and delivery of services.

In addition, efforts are well underway to launch a national outcome evaluation on veterans treatment courts. We also understand the VA does not have the jurisdiction nor the capacity to conduct an evaluation on a court program. Therefore, we are recommending Section 1(e) to be removed from the bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and I look forward to working with you on this legislation.