



WOUNDED WARRIOR PROJECT
STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE

JULY 11, 2017

Chairman Isakson, Ranking Member Tester, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting Wounded Warrior Project (“WWP”) to offer our views today on the legislation being considered by the Committee. WWP brings perspectives based on our first-hand experiences offering comprehensive programs and services to warriors who have sustained wounds, injuries, and illnesses in service since 9/11 and their families. While several bills on the Committee’s agenda may have a meaningful impact on the community we serve, WWP would like to offer our perspective on one item in particular.

S. 946 – Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act of 2017

On behalf of the veterans we serve and the generous members of the American public who help fund our mission to honor and empower wounded warriors, WWP is proud to support the *Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act of 2017*, and we acknowledge and appreciate U.S. Sens. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.), John McCain (R-Ariz.), as well as Ranking Member Tester (D-Mont.) for their leadership in introducing this legislation.

Having registered over 100,000 wounded warriors for our programs and services, WWP is acutely aware of the difficulties veterans face beyond the visible wounds of war. WWP has taken special care to acknowledge and generate awareness of the invisible wounds veterans endure such as TBI, PTSD, and other mental health challenges. These wounds manifest in many ways and sometimes lead veterans into court appearances as defendants.

Since 2008, when the first veterans treatment court (VTC) was established in Buffalo, New York to acknowledge and address the specific needs of justice-involved veterans, VTCs have emerged as an effective alternative to a traditional court system that may not consider both the sacrifices veterans have made and the unique challenges associated with conditions like PTSD and TBI. VTCs have launched in over 400 jurisdictions across the country and continue to reach new veterans and communities as their reach expands¹. These courts

¹ Flatley, B., Clark, S., Rosenthal, J., & Blue-Howells, J. (2017). Veterans Court Inventory 2016 Update: Characteristics of and VA involvement in Veterans Treatment Courts and other Veteran-focused court programs from the Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist Perspective. Washington, DC, US Department of Veterans Affairs, Veterans Health Administration, March 2017.

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have achieved remarkable success that can be quantified by measures like reduced jail time and recidivism, and improved mental health recovery and successful re-entry for veterans into the community.

Existing VTCs have a better understanding of the specific needs of justice-involved veterans and have leveraged resources such as drug and alcohol treatment, mental health therapy, and peer mentorship. Another pivotal resource has been the ability of these courts to connect veterans with education and counseling related to Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) programs and services – a process often facilitated by the participation of Veteran Justice Outreach (VJO) Specialists.

As VTCs have grown, so too has the demand for VJOs. Current resources are limiting VA’s ability to use the VJO program to reach all potentially eligible veterans, and as a result, fewer veterans are benefitting from their assistance and being connected to VA resources by those best-able to navigate the system. By laying the groundwork for VA to hire more VJOs, the *Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act of 2017* will help improve the efficacy of existing VTCs and encourage expansion into new jurisdictions.

Over the past year and a half, WWP has served as an official observer to the Uniform Law Commission’s (ULC) Model Veterans Court Act Drafting Committee, offering our perspective and counsel as drafters built a template for states and court jurisdictions to follow when launching or improving VTCs in their communities. The ULC’s work reflects the success that existing courts are having and continuing interest to make more VTCs available to justice-involved veterans. As more VTCs are established, the need for a sufficient number of VJOs will only be enhanced.

For these reasons, WWP is proud to endorse the *Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act of 2017* and looks forward to helping expand the impact of VTCs around the country and improve outcomes for justice-involved veterans. Thank you for the opportunity to offer our views on this legislation, and we look forward to working with you to move this bill and others through the legislative process.

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