

**Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs**  
**Hearing on "Programs for Justice-Involved Veterans"**

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*Testimony by*

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Chair Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and distinguished members of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, it is an honor to testify today.

It is also an honor to be here with such a distinguished panel of veterans, innovators, and thought leaders in our justice system, and with a veteran who has witnessed our justice system at its best.

As an Army veteran and the son of a 36-year, combat-wounded Army infantryman, no issue is more important to me than serving our veterans who have fought so bravely for our freedom. And no issue is more pressing than ensuring that justice-involved veterans get the services they need to recover, heal, and reintegrate into their community. Along with the efforts to put a veterans treatment court within reach of every veteran in need, today, I believe we have a clearer path forward to improve outcomes for our veterans because of the Congressional support for the National Center on Veterans Justice. Thank you.

When I served as the Army's Deputy Judge Advocate General, I witnessed countless examples of the unparalleled honor, sacrifice, and resilience of our military members. I also came to understand the many ways in which our service members can have difficulty transitioning to civilian life, and how, despite a myriad of local, state, and federal benefits and support, some fall through the cracks and become involved in the justice system. Too many veterans are impacted by substance use, mental health, trauma, and other medical conditions closely associated with their prior military service, and are increasingly at risk for justice involvement.

In 2014, as my retirement after 31 years of service drew closer, I found myself searching for some way to remain involved in supporting our military and veteran communities. Around this time, I was invited by the nonprofit All Rise to attend a training on veterans treatment courts (VTCs). I knew that VTCs were serving justice-involved veterans—those at the greatest risk of reoffending and with the highest need for services—and that VTCs were based on the success of the drug court model. I was not aware of the impact this training would have on my life. The training closed with the swearing-in of over 50 volunteer veterans who had been trained that week to serve as mentors in VTCs. Pride and dedication to the mission of recovery were evident on their faces as they pledged to serve veterans in need. The experience left a profound impact. For the past nine years, I have been honored to have a small hand in these efforts as chief counsel for All Rise.

Our mission at All Rise is to reduce crime and make communities safer and healthier by addressing the intersection of substance use, mental health, and crime at every stage of the justice system, serving civilians and veterans alike. We advance proven, accountability-driven responses that strengthen community safety, target the underlying factors that fuel repeat offending, and support broader public safety priorities. We ground our work in research, collaborate with practitioners in the field, and listen to the people, both civilians and veterans, who have direct experience with the justice system.

With the authorization of the Veterans Treatment Court Program in 2016, the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), Office of Justice Programs, has provided indispensable leadership, clear policy guidance, and targeted funding, enabling courts to establish and strengthen VTCs. BJA's sustained investment in training and capacity building has been critical to equipping all VTC teams, with or without a grant award, with the skills and resources needed to improve outcomes for justice-involved veterans. Because of BJA's commitment to excellence, all VTCs have benefited from federal investment.

The impact of BJA's work has been broad and measurable: improved identification of veterans at arrest and intake, expanded access to court interventions for veterans, more timely linkage to behavioral health and social services, and stronger coordination among courts, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), community partners and providers, and local systems. BJA's support for training and peer-to-peer learning has professionalized VTC teams—judges, probation officers, prosecutors, defense counsel, treatment providers, and VA specialists—raising fidelity to best practices and promoting consistent, accountable program models that are replicable and sustainable. In short, BJA's leadership has been instrumental in transforming how the justice system serves veterans, strengthening public safety while honoring our obligations to those who have served.

For the past 16 years, and with BJA support, All Rise's training division for veterans, Justice for Vets has led training and services for VTCs through strengthening the knowledge, skills, and abilities of all those involved, from the judge to the probation officer, from the treatment provider to the VA Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) specialist. Much like our military "schoolhouses" ensure the highest levels of operational proficiency for our service members, Justice for Vets' "mobile schoolhouse" ensures the same for those serving justice-involved veterans. Independent evaluations show that courts receiving pre-implementation training are twice as cost-effective and achieve up to a 50% greater reduction in recidivism compared with courts that do not receive training.

Additionally, since its establishment in 2009, the VJO Program has been an indispensable partner in VTCs. VJO Specialists at every VA medical center conduct proactive outreach to justice-involved veterans in jails, courts, probation and parole settings, and in the community to identify veterans in need and immediately connect them to VA health care, mental health and substance use treatment, housing assistance, and other benefits. By building and sustaining formal partnerships with prosecutors, defenders, judges, corrections, and community providers, the VJO Program ensures that veterans can access evidence-based services at the earliest possible point, reducing recidivism, improving health outcomes, and supporting long-term reintegration.

By integrating evidence-based approaches with military culture, Justice for Vets has played a significant role in helping jurisdictions reduce recidivism, support lasting recovery, and promote long-term success for those who have served.

## **Whom VTCs Serve**

VTCs produce the greatest benefit for veterans with the most severe challenges. Research shows that VTCs are most effective when they serve veterans who are both high criminogenic risk (greater likelihood of reoffending) and high clinical need (substantial behavioral health or medical needs). Risk and need are determined through validated screening and assessment, a standard practice in VTCs and a foundational component of any system seeking to place veterans in alternative programming. These assessments enable efficient identification of eligible veterans, clarify clinical and criminogenic needs, and inform case supervision, treatment planning, and case trajectory. Critically, these assessments are essential for identifying individuals at heightened risk for overdose or death by suicide and expeditiously referring them to service providers, thus allowing courts and agencies to respond swiftly and save lives.

A veteran assessed as high risk is more likely to experience poor outcomes under standard community supervision or in traditional treatment settings, often because of antisocial behavior, antisocial thinking, and association with antisocial peers. These veterans also typically have high clinical need: multiple medical conditions, severe substance use or mental health disorders, and significant psychosocial challenges such as homelessness, unemployment, social isolation, or family estrangement. Tailored, intensive interventions within the VTC framework are therefore essential to address this confluence of risk and need and to improve public safety and veteran recovery.

## **Why VTCs Are Successful**

These intensive programs pair close supervision and accountability with robust, evidence-based treatment. When VTCs adhere to evidence-based practices, serve the appropriate population, and ensure that team members receive continuous education and training, these courts have been proven to reduce recidivism, enhance individual outcomes, and save taxpayer dollars. They also improve housing stability, employment, and financial security, all strong indicators for lasting rehabilitation and reintegration. Their success lies in their collaborative approach: judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, probation officers, and law enforcement working in concert with VA and community treatment providers, as well as local social and veteran service organizations. Participant progress is closely monitored, and interventions are adjusted in real time based on the individual's response to modification strategies directed by the court, service, or supervision, and treatment adjustments recommended by treatment clinicians.

Additionally, the inclusion of trained volunteer veteran mentors provides essential peer support and camaraderie, reinforcing each participant's sense of identity and connection. These veteran mentors provide social connectedness well beyond program completion. As role models, they

positively influence an individual's sense of purpose, social responsibility, and commitment to a law-abiding lifestyle.

Today, there are approximately 600 court programs specifically designed for veterans who are at high risk of reoffending and who have high clinical and social needs.

The success of VTCs has catalyzed nationwide innovation and partnership. Developments range from the VA's VJO Program to improved arrest and booking procedures that more reliably identify veterans at intake, expanded community-based family services, and local crisis intervention teams. These advances have also strengthened collaboration with policy and research organizations. For example, All Rise has partnered with the Council on Criminal Justice. I participated in the Council's work and am honored to have been a part of the Council's Veterans Justice Commission, which has done vital work educating policymakers and practitioners about the challenges veterans face in the justice system. All Rise was proud to support the Commission's efforts to provide a blueprint for policy work that properly supports VTCs and, in 2024, endorsed the Veterans Justice Act: A Model Policy Framework.

## **Next Steps**

VTCs are not appropriate for every veteran, as risk of reoffense and service needs vary, but they are a critical component of a community's continuum of care for justice-involved veterans. We are committed to partnering with state and local stakeholders to build and sustain coordinated, multidisciplinary systems of accountability at every stage of justice involvement and across the continuum of care.

Historically, VTCs have most often intervened at initial detainment, arraignment, or the pretrial phase. However, veterans can be effectively intercepted at multiple points: in the community through local law enforcement, at reentry from jail or prison, and within community corrections. The structured, evidence-informed approach that All Rise's Justice for Vets has implemented in jurisdictions nationwide can and should be replicated at these additional intercept points to improve outcomes for veterans and public safety.

As we support communities in building a comprehensive continuum of care for justice-involved veterans, we must address a range of nationwide needs: a central, national hub to develop and disseminate practice guidelines; targeted training, follow-up coaching, and hands-on implementation support for jurisdictions; and robust accountability through readiness assessments, performance metrics, and outcome tracking.

A successful national hub should be anchored by strategic partnerships with institutions of higher learning, including law school veterans legal clinics, military-affiliated student centers, and active local VTCs, to create an integrated ecosystem for rigorous research, practical training, student engagement, and real-world implementation. Such partnerships will expand workforce capacity, strengthen evidence generation, and accelerate replication of proven practices.

The broader impact of a national hub would be substantial: standardizing quality across programs, improving veteran access to behavioral health and social supports, reducing recidivism, generating cost savings for criminal justice and health systems, and enhancing public safety while promoting recovery and stability for veterans. Establishing this multidisciplinary, evidence-driven center is a strategic, high-impact investment we cannot afford to delay.

We ask much of those in uniform, and they ask little in return. All too often, they are the last to ask for help. Veterans treatment courts are not only more effective and efficient forms of justice, but they also help us meet our moral obligation to ensure that veterans receive the benefits and treatment they have earned.

Thank you, Chair Moran, Ranking Member Blumenthal, and committee members, for your time and your commitment to our nation's veterans, including those who are justice-involved. We appreciate your work to help us ensure that no veteran is left behind.