

The Honorable Jeff Flake
Testimony on the Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act of 2017
“Pending Health Care Legislation Hearing”
U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs
July 11, 2017

- Thank you Chairman Isakson and Ranking Member Tester for allowing me to speak today in support of the *Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act*. I am pleased to have joined with the Ranking Member to introduce this sensible piece of legislation.
- I would also like to take the opportunity now to thank the Veterans Service Organizations that support the bill, including The American Legion, AMVETS, Disabled American Veterans, and Paralyzed Veterans of America, each of which have a member testifying here today.
- Mr. Chairman, with your consent I will submit for the record letters from these four organizations, as well as several others, in support of the bill.
- As you likely know, the state of Arizona is home to more than half a million veterans.
- These brave men and women have served in every conflict from World War II to present day operations in the Middle East.
- I am proud to call them Arizonans.
- But, oftentimes, when these soldiers return home from conflicts abroad, the transition back to civilian life proves to be its own battle.
- With the support of family and friends, and the tireless work of Veterans Service Organizations, most are able to surmount these challenges.
- For those who lack a support system, these issues could lead to run-ins with the law.
- While there is no justification for criminal behavior, it is important to recognize when certain actions may be symptomatic of the harrowing experiences a veteran has endured during years of service.
- By not providing treatment that actually addresses the underlying service-connected issues, our criminal justice system can create a vicious cycle.
- To address the absence of veteran-specific treatment in our criminal justice system, the Department of Veterans Affairs created the Veterans Justice Outreach program in 2009.
- The program established specialty courts that remove veterans from the regular criminal justice process and provide tailored treatments for underlying issues like post-traumatic

stress and substance abuse.

- Veterans treatment courts have a proven track record of preventing initial incarceration and reducing recidivism.
- The lifeblood of the program are the Veterans Justice Outreach specialists who link veterans to available court services.
- These outreach specialists identify veterans in jails and local courts, assess their health status, and help to develop a rehabilitation treatment program specific to each veteran's needs.
- In April, I had the opportunity to observe the veterans docket and meet with some of these dedicated specialists while visiting the Mesa Municipal Court in Arizona.
- Let me tell you, there is just no substitute for seeing this process firsthand.
- Even though it's a courtroom setting, there is a comradery and collaboration that you just don't see in traditional courtroom proceedings.
- That comes from having a judge and hardworking staff who have served in the military themselves.
- They understand that coming home isn't always easy.
- Though the program has experienced remarkable success, the demand for outreach specialists is outpacing the program's ability to serve all eligible veterans.
- This means that future veterans treatment courts cannot be established, existing courts will go understaffed, and veterans will go unserved.
- To ensure that our veterans receive swift and appropriate access to justice, I introduced the *Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act*.
- This legislation will provide 50 additional outreach specialists for veterans treatment courts nationwide.
- By increasing the number of dedicated specialists at these facilities, we will decrease the number of veterans who will end up getting lost in the criminal justice system.
- I am committed to working with the Committee on a commonsense legislative fix that would connect more veterans with the treatments they have already earned with their service.
- Thank you.



VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

www.vfw.org | info@vfw.org

February 2, 2017

The Honorable Jeff Flake
Judiciary Committee
United States Senate
413 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Flake:

On behalf of the nearly 1.7 million members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW) and our Auxiliary, I am writing in support of the *Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017*.

According to the most recent data from the Bureau of Justice statistics, over 130,000 veterans are incarcerated in state and federal prisons, representing approximately eight percent of the total prison population. While the VFW realizes that veterans who are convicted of crimes must suffer the consequences, we also recognize that having veteran advocates or individuals to represent them before sentencing and act in their best interests is invaluable.

Expanding the amount of Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists will help our justice-involved veterans navigate the legal system, and hopefully attain outcomes that are best suited for each individual veteran. The VFW is proud to endorse this bill and we look forward to this helping many veterans facing legal hardships in the future.

Thank you again for your leadership on this issue. The VFW looks forward to working with you and your staff to pass this much needed piece of legislation.

Sincerely,

Raymond C. Kelley, Director
VFW National Legislative Service

NO ONE DOES MORE FOR VETERANS.



**Paralyzed Veterans
of America**

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Washington DC 20006-3517
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Chartered by the Congress of the United States

February 23, 2017

Senator Jeff Flake
Judiciary Committee
413 Senate Russell Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Flake:

On behalf of Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) and its members, I would like to offer our support for the "Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017." PVA firmly believes in the rule of law and that anyone convicted of a crime should be held accountable. Our criminal justice system, though, has long recognized the existence of aggravating and mitigating circumstances that play an important role in influencing the administration of penalties. It is important to note that while advocacy before a sentencing judge following conviction is important, prosecutorial discretion is also vast. Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists can help veterans use their honorable service, as well as mitigating circumstances arising from that service, to ensure both the prosecutor and judge see more than just a rap sheet when making decisions.

If the specialist demonstrates that the veteran is entitled to health care or disability benefits, the judge or prosecutor might be able to fashion a sentence or plea offer that incorporates utilization of these services in lieu of imposing solely punitive sanctions. It could also lead to an outright deferment of prosecution conditioned on the veteran exploring and obtaining all services available to him or her. This scenario is especially enticing to the judicial system given the constant struggle to find resources, particularly for in-patient substance abuse rehabilitation programs and mental health care.

For some veterans, this path might help them avoid being permanently stigmatized with a criminal conviction. For others, it might be the ticket that lifts them out of homelessness and the corresponding criminal recidivism, specifically with petty and/or vagrancy crimes. It is no secret that some veterans go years before realizing they were entitled to certain benefits that might have helped them avoid poverty and dejection. A court order pointing the veteran to the Department of Veterans Affairs can sometimes turn into a life-changing event. At the least, more veterans touched by this program will re-engage productively with society. That is a goal worth pursuing. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Respectfully,

Sherman Gillums, Jr.
Executive Director



MILITARY ORDER OF THE PURPLE HEART

CHARTERED BY CONGRESS

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS
5413-B BACKLICK ROAD
SPRINGFIELD, VA 22151-3960
Phone: (703) 642-5360
Fax: (703) 642-2054

March 15, 2017

The Honorable Jeff Flake
413 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Flake:

On behalf of the Military Order of the Purple Heart (MOPH), whose membership is comprised entirely of combat wounded veterans, I am pleased to offer our support for the Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017.

MOPH strongly believes in the rule of law, and that those who commit crimes should be held accountable. Still, we recognize that veterans who commit minor offenses due to addiction or mental health issues should be given every opportunity for rehabilitation before incarceration.

For this reason, we strongly support the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) initiative to employ Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Specialists to help connect justice-involved veterans with the treatment and resources they need. The Veterans Court Improvement Act would provide funding to hire additional VJO Specialists where they are needed, ensuring that VA is able to provide as many justice-involved veterans as possible with these critical services.

MOPH thanks you for your leadership on this issue and your continued commitment to veterans and their families. We look forward to working with you to ensure the passage of this important legislation.

Respectfully,

Hershel Gober
National Commander



May 2, 2017

The Honorable Jeff Flake
United States Senate
413 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

On behalf of the Association of the United States Navy, we would like to pledge our support for S. 946 the Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act. This bill requires the Department of Veterans Affairs to hire additional Veterans Justice Outreach specialists in order to ensure veterans have greater access to effective and tailored treatment.

The Veterans Justice Outreach program was created by the VA to provide veterans with timely access to VA services and engage justice-involved veterans in specialty treatment courts. The Veteran's treatment court model removes Veterans from the regular criminal justice process and helps to address symptoms that are unique to Veterans, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse. In a Veteran's treatment court, the presiding judge works alongside the Veteran and the VJO specialist to establish a structured rehabilitation program that is tailored to the specific need of that Veteran.

This act would authorize \$5.5 million for each fiscal year from 2017 to 2027 for the VA Secretary to hire additional VJO specialists to work with justice-involved Veterans in Veteran treatment courts. The Secretary must identify cost reductions within the Department to offset the authorized amount. It also requires that the Secretary periodically report on the Department's implementation of the bill and its effect on the VJO program.

Thank you for taking an active role in such an important issue to the Military and Veteran community by working to improve the lives and careers of those who served our great nation. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns at 703-548-5800 or at michael.little@ausn.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Michael Joseph Little" followed by "ABN-2 (Navy)" and "USNR" below it.

Michael J. Little
Director of Legislative Affairs



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PROSECUTING
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March 28, 2017

Senator Jeff Flake
Judiciary Committee
413 Senate Russell Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Flake,

On behalf of the Association of Prosecuting Attorneys (APA), I am writing to express my support of the Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017. APA is a private non-profit whose mission is to support and enhance the effectiveness of prosecutors in their mission to create safer communities. It serves as a forum for collaborating with our criminal justice partners across the globe; and to advocate on behalf of prosecutors on emerging issues related to the administration of justice.

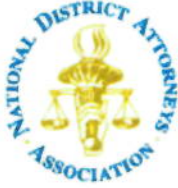
A 2000 Bureau of Justice Statistics report found that prior to incarceration in jail or prison, 81% of veterans report drug use problems. Prior to incarceration in jail, 35% were identified as having current alcohol dependency, 23% were homeless at some point in the prior year, and 25% were identified as mentally ill. The initiation of Veteran Treatment Courts has been instrumental in treating veterans and reducing the recidivism rate among the veteran population.

The Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017 recognizes the importance of Veteran Treatment Courts as well as Veteran Justice Outreach Specialists in providing services and treatment to veterans. By providing sufficient resources to these courts, this unique population will be best served, as will the communities that they live in.

As prosecutors, we are key stakeholders in the criminal justice system. We believe that prosecutors can be advocates and change agents for innovative criminal justice efforts, such as Veteran Treatment Courts. We proudly endorse this bill and its efforts. Thank you for your leadership on this important issue.

Respectfully Submitted,

David LaBahn
President and CEO



National District Attorneys Association
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March 21, 2017

The Honorable Jeff Flake
United States Senator
413 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Flake,

On behalf of the National District Attorneys Association (NDAA), the largest and oldest prosecutor organization representing 2,500 elected and appointed District Attorneys across the United States as well as 40,000 Assistant District Attorneys, I write in support of the Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act of 2017. This legislation would ensure that our nation's veterans that have become involved with the criminal justice system have access to services and resources they need to become productive members of society.

Specifically, the legislation would require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to hire additional Veterans Justice Outreach program specialists to work with veterans involved in the criminal justice system through veterans treatment courts. Veterans treatment courts have been set up across the country to help veterans involved in the criminal justice system get the help that they need and deserve as well as access the benefits they should receive due to their military service. It is well documented that many in our veteran community suffer from mental illness, including PTSD, and other substance use disorders, and veterans treatment courts provide a necessary venue to address those issues.

Congress has highlighted the deficiencies in the resources and care we provide our military veterans through the VA, and this legislation can serve as a small step to help those that are part of the criminal justice system. We look forward to working with you and your staff on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Michael A. Ramos
President



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ELIZABETH ORTIZ
Executive Director

March 1, 2017

The Honorable Jeff Flake
Judiciary Committee
United States Senate
413 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Flake:

On behalf of the Arizona Prosecuting Attorneys' Advisory Council (APAAC), this letter is sent in support of the **Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017**.

The APAAC Council is composed of twenty-three members, including the Arizona attorney general, the fifteen elected county attorneys, five municipal prosecutors, a representative of the supreme court, and the dean of one of the state's law schools. In addition to training and advocacy, APAAC provides a variety of services for the more than 800 prosecutors across the state of Arizona who serve as "Ministers of Justice."

APAAC applauds your efforts on behalf of veterans in Arizona and other states. This important legislation will assist veterans in navigating the criminal justice system and accessing critical benefits that are due them. APAAC proudly endorses this important legislation.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Ortiz
Executive Director

"Empowering Arizona's prosecutors to administer justice and contribute to public safety through training and advocacy."



MARK BRNOVICH
ATTORNEY GENERAL

OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL
STATE OF ARIZONA

March 28, 2017

The Honorable Jeff Flake
United States Senate
2200 East Camelback Road
Suite 120
Phoenix, AZ 85016

Re: Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017

Dear Senator Flake:

As Attorney General for Arizona, and as a former officer with the United States Army Judge Advocate General's Corps, I write to express my support for the Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017. Your legislation draws attention to a growing problem in our nation.

Our country faces an incredible challenge in the coming years to properly care for and protect our veterans, especially the men and women who served the United States during the longest war of its history. At this time, we are not properly prepared to handle the specific physical, mental, and emotional challenges that these soldiers confront. Your legislation is one step toward giving back to those who gave their all.

As you know, our state is home to more than 500,000 veterans. We currently have twelve Veterans Courts operating across Arizona to assist veterans who are involved with the criminal justice system. The Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists play a key role in addressing the needs of these veterans, and we welcome the prospect of having more of them at work in our state.

Thank you again for raising this issue, and for advocating for our veterans.

Sincerely,

Mark Brnovich
Arizona Attorney General



COCONINO COUNTY ARIZONA
OFFICE OF THE COUNTY ATTORNEY

We serve the public by advocating for justice.

WILLIAM P. RING
COUNTY ATTORNEY

JANE NICOLETTI-JONES
CHIEF DEPUTY ATTORNEY

TAMI M. SUCHOWIEJKO
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ROSE WINKELER

The Honorable Senator Jeff Flake
Judiciary Committee, United States Senate
413 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

March 2, 2017

Re: *Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017*

Dear Senator Flake,

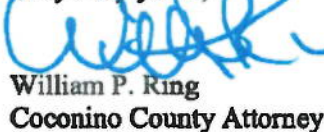
On behalf of the Coconino County Attorney's Office I am writing to offer our strong support for the *Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017*.

Our jurisdiction is an early adopter of alternative resolution courts for justice-involved Veterans. This was done in recognition of two principle facts: (1) Veterans are uniquely situated to understand and appreciate the experience of honor and discipline in service to our Nation; and (2) Through powers of recollection we can utilize that foundation, which was once instilled, to return a sense of honor and to then empower the Veteran to do what is needed, what is right, and what justice requires. Our *Veterans Court* is a diversionary court and an alternative to standard criminal prosecution. We form a Justice Team around the Veteran composed of the judge, prosecutor, public defender and a Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist. *When presented with a menu of coordinated services from the VA and the Veterans Justice Outreach Specialist a successful graduate has seized the opportunity to change their lives.*

Of course, success depends wholly upon the availability of a Veterans Outreach Justice Specialist in our rural area. Your Bill assures continuation of our programming and we strongly endorse it.

Before closing it is important to recognize the work of three individuals in our program who represent the VA or assist our program Veterans. They are VJOS Mark McLaughlin, VRC Mike O'Donnell, and Mr. Terry Couch. I want to thank these gentlemen for their service. If you should need further information on our program or testimony in support of your Bill, please feel free to contact me and I will do all that is necessary to return to Washington, to explain our experience and positively support the programming.

Very truly yours,


William P. Ring
Coconino County Attorney



COCONINO COUNTY ARIZONA
OFFICE OF THE COUNTY ATTORNEY

Cc:

**Raymond C. Kelley, Director
VFW National Legislative Service
VFW Memorial Building
200 Maryland Avenue N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002**

**Commander Robert Noel
Mr. Rex Sturmer
VFW Post 1709 San Francisco Peaks
409 W. Santa Fe Avenue
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001**

**Commander JT Thompson
The American Legion
Mark A. Moore Post #3
204 W. Birch Avenue
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001**

**Northern Arizona Veterans Resource Center
1515 E. Cedar Avenue
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001**



Maricopa County Attorney
BILL MONTGOMERY

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February 22, 2017

The Honorable Jeff Flake
United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary
224 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510-6050

Dear Senator Flake,

As the Chief Prosecutor for Maricopa County, and as a former United States Army officer, I am writing to express my support for the Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017.

Arizona is home to over 600,000 veterans, and celebrates those who have served, are currently serving, and will serve in the United States military. Arizona's large population of veterans led the state, counties, and cities to recognize the need for veterans' treatment courts and establish them at the outset of the national movement.

Today, Arizona has 12 active veterans' treatment courts at the superior and municipal court levels. A primary objective of those courts is to supervise veterans in the criminal justice system and help them obtain the federal benefits that they earned as a result of their military service.

It is well documented that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has failed many veterans in Arizona by delaying the delivery of healthcare. Unfortunately, the VA only employs 8 Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists (VJOs) in Arizona, which is too few and which will likely delay the delivery of benefits to veterans subject to court supervision, and the timely receipt of those benefits is critical to their successful completion of probation or diversion programs.

Your legislation will fix this shortage in Arizona and other states by requiring the VA to hire additional VJOs, who will assist veterans under court supervision in obtaining important benefits in a timely manner. Access to these benefits is critical to their success, and I thank you for sponsoring a bill that will help Arizona veterans succeed in the criminal justice system and beyond by helping them obtain the benefits they earned and need.

Sincerely,


Bill Montgomery
Maricopa County Attorney



Barbara LaWall
Pima County Attorney

Pima County Attorney's Office
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Tucson, AZ 85701

Phone: 520-724-5600
www.pcoa.pima.gov

February 28, 2017

The Honorable Jeff Flake
United States Senate
2200 East Camelback Road
Suite 120
Phoenix, AZ 85016

The Honorable Jeff Flake
United States Senate
Judiciary Committee
413 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Flake:

As the chief prosecutor in Pima County, and on behalf of my constituents, I write to express support for the *Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017*. I welcome Veterans Courts as an intelligent alternative to incarceration that focuses on treating veterans' physical, mental, and behavioral health issues, including post-traumatic stress disorder and drug and alcohol addiction.

Arizona is home to more than 500,000 military veterans, and Arizona's veterans led the state, counties, and cities to recognize the need for veterans' treatment courts and establish them at the outset of the national movement.

Arizona has 12 active veterans' treatment courts at the superior and municipal court levels. A primary objective of veterans' courts is to supervise veterans in the criminal justice system and help them obtain the federal benefits they earned as a result of their military service. In Pima County, the Justice Court operates a Veterans Court, and the City of Tucson also operates a Regional Municipal Veterans Court serving five municipalities. The Regional Municipal Veterans Court currently relies heavily upon temporary grant funding, and both misdemeanor veterans' courts in Pima County are in need of ongoing financial support.

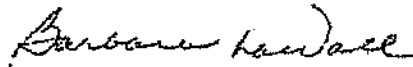
It is well documented that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has failed many veterans in Arizona by delaying the delivery of healthcare. Unfortunately, the VA employs only eight Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists (VJOs) in Arizona. While the VJO in Pima County does an excellent job, he coordinates with both veterans' courts, as well as with our Drug Treatment Alternative to Prison in Superior Court. The demands on his time are ever-increasing. Having too few VJOs in Arizona will likely delay the delivery of benefits to veterans subject to court supervision; yet the timely receipt of benefits is critical to their successful completion of probation or diversion programs.

Your legislation will fix this shortage in Arizona and other states by requiring the VA to hire additional VJOs who will assist veterans under court supervision in obtaining important benefits in a timely manner. Access to these benefits is critical to their success.

The Honorable Jeff Flake
February 28, 2017
Page 2

Thank you for sponsoring a bill that will help veterans succeed in the criminal justice system and beyond by helping them to obtain the benefits they earned and need. It is an honor to support those who have served and are currently serving in the U.S. military.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Barbara LaWall".

Barbara LaWall
Pima County Attorney

**VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES (VFW)
DEPARTMENT OF ARIZONA**

06 February 2017

Jim Ellars
12261 W. Grier Rd.
Marana, AZ 85653
520-904-7755
ignatz4in@aol.com

To: Senator Jeff Flake
SR-413

Subj: VFW, DEPARTMENT OF ARIZONA, LETTER OF ENDORSEMENT TO SUPPORT VETERANS COURT IMPROVEMENT ACT OF 2017

Senator Flake,

My name is Jim Ellars. I am the National Legislative Officer for the over 25,000 members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW), Department of Arizona.

The VFW has been an early and strong supporter of Veterans Courts, sometimes called Veterans Treatment Courts, here in Arizona, whether they are set up and run by the VA or by local municipalities. Military members throughout history have been subjected to and survived some of the most horrible and dangerous experiences any human has ever experienced. When they leave the service, under administrative or medical direction, many of these veterans are or may be suffering from military service connected medical and/or mental health issues. I say 'may', because some of these issues are hidden, suppressed or latent in their affect on the service member and do not manifest until later, sometime quite a while later. However, the symptoms, when they do manifest themselves, can make the veteran react in a highly negative manner, either physically, mentally, or both, often unbeknownst to the veteran. When certain manifests knowingly or unknowingly cause the veteran to do wrong things and break laws, there must be stop-gaps and safeguards in place within our various law enforcement and judiciary systems to recognize when veterans are not displaying criminal intent, but rather suffering the results of an undiagnosed and/or untreated symptom. This is where Veteran Courts are critically needed.

The VFW, as well as other VSOs, welcome Veteran Courts as intelligent alternative systems of intervention that focuses on treating a veterans physical and/or mental health issues, some of which may be undiagnosed, latent or suppressed in nature, instead of criminalizing what is in reality an untreated patient. Giving these veterans a second chance, one where they can optionally choose to enter into a controlled rehabilitating treatment program in lieu of entering the normal court system, is a huge challenge for some veterans. These courts absolutely do provide troubled veterans the best place for a troubled veteran to be with a group of like-experienced people who understand, care, and have the resources available to rehabilitate them utilizing a familiar guise of military jargon and protocols in order for the veteran to take on a different mission, one of self improvement. Our nation must never harm, only to re-harm, those who served as our defenders. We believe, as do the veteran courts, that rehabilitation through treatment is the proper approach to someone who may or may not recognize the problems that got them in trouble with the law.

Some of the stand-out procedures used in the veteran court I observed are:

The court is staffed by personnel who are connected to military service in one capacity or another. The Judge was a retired Marine. The court staff are all former military members or dependents/family member of military members. Some were once attendees of a veterans court themselves. The public defenders are all supervised law students and prior military (great use of GI Bill benefits).

A semi-military atmosphere is maintained in order to give a feeling of familiarity to the proceedings, and to remind the individual that their military service is honored. RESPECT and courtesies are adhered to from both sides of the bench. Each person's personal dignity is regarded foremost by all people in the courtroom. When a defendant's name is called to approach the judge, all activity in the courtroom stops and everyone, even those seated in the audience, stands at attention. The defendant gives the judge their name and branch of service. The judge acknowledges and thanks them for their service and usually has a little something extra nice to say to any Marine.

Those people who run the courtroom were not just court staff or public defender people. There are also representatives from several public, local and state social service agencies and the VA in attendance. If you need a place to live, a job, specialized treatment, etc, the court wants those who accept the treatment program to get the care they need, and the representatives of these agencies are there to help.

All of the stand-out procedures mentioned above are keyed to one vital thing: the right people doing the right jobs. But, that is also where a large problem arises.

The problem is this - we have this wonderful system, run by some great people, but very few veterans know of its existence or how to access it. That is the largest complaint I've heard from the court I observed. Without having the human resources required to outreach into our veteran community about entitled services such as Veterans Court, we are not achieving the proper level of intended service to our most vulnerable veterans.

For this type of program to work as well as it needs to, it does require increased continuity, outreach and education, and that is where the VFW feels the Veterans Justice Outreach (VJO) Program must provide more specifically trained and actively involved specialists in order to better educate veterans of the program and to also help more veterans achieve access to it. The Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017 proposed by Senator Jeff Flake, we feel, will provide both the increased quantity of VJO specialists and funding necessary to do just that. To that end, the VFW, Department of Arizona, is highly pleased to provide this letter of endorsement to support the Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017.

Please contact me for any questions or comments. We thank the Senator and his staff for all they do for veterans and their families.

Yours,

Jim Ellars, VFW, Dept. of Arizona
Nat'l Legislation Officer.



Supreme Court
STATE OF ARIZONA

FROM THE CHAMBERS OF
SCOTT BALES
CHIEF JUSTICE

1501 WEST WASHINGTON STREET
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PHOENIX, ARIZONA 85007-3231
(602) 452-3534
FAX (602) 452-3906
SBales@courts.az.gov

February 22, 2017

The Honorable Jeff Flake
United States Senate
2200 East Camelback Road
Suite 120
Phoenix, AZ 85016

Dear Senator Flake:

I write in support of the Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017. Your timely legislative proposal affords a good opportunity to review Arizona's progress in expanding the number of Veterans Courts and the need for additional federal resources.

As you know, Arizona is home to more than 500,000 veterans. Unfortunately, some veterans find themselves in court facing charges for offenses such as driving under the influence, domestic violence, criminal damage, and drug possession. Often these individuals are suffering from PTSD or otherwise having trouble reintegrating into civilian life. Instead of processing the criminal case in the usual course, Veterans Courts assist the veteran in dealing with any underlying issues and, if successful, resolving the pending charges. These courts also help veterans with obtaining employment, finding safe housing, and applying for VA benefits.

Veterans Courts are now operating in these Arizona courts: Maricopa Superior Court, Chandler Municipal Court, Mesa Municipal Court, Tempe Municipal Court, Phoenix Municipal Court, Scottsdale Municipal Court, Coconino Superior Court, Flagstaff Municipal Court, Tucson Municipal Court, Pima County Consolidated Justice Court, Lake Havasu City Municipal Court, and Kingman Municipal Court. In addition, at least two other Arizona courts are working towards establishing Veterans Courts.

The Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017 would importantly help address the limited number of VA-assigned Veterans Justice Outreach Coordinators (VJO) assigned to qualifying VA medical centers in Arizona and elsewhere. VJOs are critical to the success of Veterans Courts. VJOs are VA staff members who attend court hearings, meet with veterans, and coordinate VA

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services. Without sufficient VJOs, more Veterans Courts cannot be established and existing ones will be limited in their effectiveness. Although the VA has not set a specific guideline for how many courts or veterans a VJO can serve, in our experience one VJO can serve between 50 and 75 eligible veterans.

Within the last two years the VA added four VJOs in Arizona. We believe, however, that six more VJOs are needed over the next two years to accommodate the creation of new courts across the state. If tribal Veterans Courts are created, additional VJOs will be needed.

In 2015, we contacted other states to see if they are encountering a similar roadblock in expending Veterans Courts. We quickly heard that Florida, Guam, Hawaii, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Hampshire, and Texas all similarly need additional VJOs. We understand that in recent years Congress significantly increased the VA's budget. We also understand that the Veterans Court Improvement Act of 2017 does not seek an increase in funding, but instead requires the VA to allocate more resources to VJOs. We fully support the bill and its effort to ensure that more VJOs are available to support veterans and Veterans Courts.

Respectfully,



Scott Baies

SB/mk

cc: Dave Byers, Administrative Director
Arizona Administrative Office of Courts