



SB 236 Veterans Justice Act Sponsor Statement

This bill provides for the creation of a veteran justice program in Alaska.

Studies show that service-related trauma exposure, combined with increased incidence of mental health and substance use disorders, elevates armed services veterans' risk of involvement with the criminal justice system. Veterans who have served in the military since September 11, 2001, may be especially at risk, in part because they have seen more combat deployments—and redeployments—than any previous cohort of service members.

Alaska is home to approximately 60,000 veterans, and we have a responsibility to create public policy that honors their service and helps them address the challenges their military service can create, including involvement in the justice system.

SB 236 seeks to improve support for veterans at the “front end” of the criminal justice system, from arrest through sentencing. Veterans encountering the criminal justice system today confront a patchwork of interventions designed to assist them. These programs vary considerably across jurisdictions and are often inaccessible to veterans or undesirable because of location, strict eligibility criteria, and insufficient incentives.

This bill broadens eligibility and creates a uniform set of alternatives to prosecution and incarceration based on best practices used in analogous problem-solving courts and community supervision. In so doing, it sets the stage for more effective and appropriate interventions for veterans, and ultimately for better safety, health, and justice outcomes for veterans and their families and communities.

This bill is designed to ensure all veterans who become justice-involved in Alaska can access appropriate alternatives to incarceration/conviction. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that Veterans Treatment Courts can help only 10-15% of justice-involved veterans due to the courts' high risk-high need model. SB 236 is designed to address the needs of the 85% of veterans who end up incarcerated or convicted, often preventing them from obtaining critical treatment for invisible injuries such as mental health conditions including post-traumatic stress disorder.

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