



To: Chair Kawasaki, Vice Chair Claman & Senate State Affairs Committee
State Capitol Building, 120 4th Street, Juneau, AK 99801

Fr: Brock Hunter, Founder & President
Veterans Defense Project
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Re: Support for SB 236

Chair Kawasaki, Vice Chair Claman, and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today in support of Senate Bill 236. My name is Brock Hunter. I'm a co-founder and President of Veterans Defense Project (VDP). VDP is a national, nonpartisan organization dedicated to restoring veterans in the criminal justice system to the communities they served.

I am a practicing criminal defense attorney of 26 years based in Minnesota and have focused my practice on defending veterans in the criminal justice system. I am also a former Army Scout. In addition to serving as the Veterans Defense Project's president, I currently serve on the board of directors of All Rise and its subsidiary—Justice for Vets—the nation's leading training and advocacy organization for problem solving courts and Veterans Treatment Courts, respectively.

My cofounder and I served as advisors to the national Veterans Justice Commission, chaired by former US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, advising them on the development of the model legislation that's embodied in SB 236, the Veterans Justice Act.

Overview

We are grateful to Sen. Tobin for introducing Senate Bill 236. This bill and its companion in the House introduced by Rep. Stapp, builds upon the existing interventions in Alaska, efficiently expands access to veterans who face certain charges across the state, reduces recidivism,

protects public safety and creates cost-savings for the state.

The introduction of these bills is the start of a conversation with stakeholders and the legislature, and we look forward to understanding concerns and refining legislation as needed to ensure this is an Alaska-specific solution. There are three things I'd like to share today:

- Firstly, what makes this generation of veterans unique and the challenges they face urgent to address;
- secondly, how this legislation builds upon the current system of interventions;
- and finally, where this policy is currently enacted and already delivering positive outcomes.

A New Generation of Warriors Creates New Urgency

For as long as warriors have returned from battle, most have come back stronger and wiser from their experience – immediate assets to their communities. Some, though, have always brought their war home with them, bearing invisible wounds that, today, we know as post-traumatic stress. Untreated, these echoes of war – manifesting in self-destructive, reckless and violent behavior – reverberate through society, destroying not only the lives of these heroes, but victimizing their families and the communities they fought to protect. In this way, large numbers of veterans in past generations have fallen into and been left behind in the criminal justice system upon their return home.

A new generation of warriors is now returning home and there is good reason to believe more of them will bring their war home with them than ever before, creating the risk of an unprecedented public health and public safety *crisis*. Unlike previous generations, this one is relatively small, yet it has fought the longest wars in our country's history – simultaneously. Without the draft we have relied on in past wars, the burden of the fighting has fallen on fewer shoulders, with many veterans of this generation serving multiple combat tours – translating into higher rates of post-traumatic stress injuries than previous generations.

This generation of returning veterans is also the most lethal in our history. Having honed their modern psychological and combat skill training in the mountains of Afghanistan and the streets of Iraq over multiple tours, they pose a unique public safety risk if their trauma goes untreated and they are not properly reintegrated into their communities.

SB 236 Builds on the Progress Made by Veterans Treatment Courts

Most state and county institutions that house incarcerated veterans are not designed to address service-connected psychological injury plaguing many justice-involved veterans. The rise and growth of Veterans Treatment Courts over the last 18 years has been a welcome response to this crisis. Their approach holds the promise to help seize this opportunity for reintegration.

However, in most states, including Alaska, Veteran Treatment Courts are too few in number, intervening with only a small fraction of the veterans coming through the justice system. Alaska currently has two: in Fairbanks and Anchorage.

This mirrors what we've seen in other states: Access to veteran-specific interventions varies widely by jurisdiction, producing inconsistent outcomes for similarly situated individuals across jurisdictional boundaries.

Challenges we have seen across the country include:

- Veteran status is often identified late in the court process, if at all.
- Veteran Treatment Courts exist in some counties but not others, creating geographic inequities.
- Incarceration frequently results in loss or interruption of VA benefits, shifting healthcare and treatment costs to state and local governments.
- Coordination among courts, probation departments, state behavioral health agencies, and the VA is inconsistent.
- Judges may lack clear statutory authority or guidance to divert eligible veterans into treatment-based alternatives.

These gaps increase recidivism risk, strain state and local budgets, and undermine confidence in equitable justice administration. Veteran Treatment Courts alone can not assist all justice-involved veterans. Many jurisdictions cannot afford to implement a full Veterans Treatment Court. Alaska should be proud of the work it's done so far, and it should now work to ensure the system is utilized, optimized and leveraged to best serve its purpose.

SB 236 Expands Alaska's Ability to Intervene Effectively

SB 236 is an efficient, cost-effective and impactful way to provide every court with the ability to supervise a veteran's rehabilitation even in the absence of a Veterans Treatment Court. The Veterans Justice Act – embodied in the bill before you—creates a **standardized sentencing option for judges in ALL Alaska jurisdictions**, to **maximize the intervention opportunity** presented when a troubled veteran falls into the criminal justice system. This ensures that the justice a veteran receives does not depend on which side of a county line they happen to land in trouble.

This uniform statutory framework would ensure early identification of justice-involved veterans, authorize diversion into treatment when appropriate, and promote consistent, fiscally responsible justice outcomes across jurisdictions. This method uses the justice system to identify veterans in need of assistance and uses the leverage of the criminal case to ensure their successful rehabilitation, restoring them as the great assets to the communities they once served.

This bill is complementary to other existing veteran interventions, like Veterans Treatment Courts and Diversion Programs, providing accountability, supervision and individualized treatment, in jurisdictions that don't have such alternatives—as well as providing an additional intervention option in those that do.

Veterans found eligible for the “Veterans Justice Program” section of the bill receive the opportunity to avoid a criminal conviction – a powerful incentive to:

- take responsibility for their actions,
- to complete challenging treatment programs,
- to bridge the divide they feel between themselves and society,
- to restore their honor and, once again,
- become an assets to their communities, rather than ongoing liabilities

The Veterans Justice Act in Minnesota

We've already seen the Veterans Justice Act at work. In 2021, Veterans Defense Project developed and supported the passage of this landmark legislation in Minnesota, with the support of over a dozen legal and veteran organizations in the state, and bipartisan support from lawmakers. We also worked closely with victims rights organizations. Domestic violence prevention advocates supported the bill primarily because most intimate partners remain in the life of the victim after a case and addressing the underlying conditions that led to the abuse can help ensure safety in the long term.

Efficacy

Early information shows that this intervention is as effective as the impressive Veteran Treatment Court outcomes have been. The Minnesota Sentencing Guidelines Commission found that of the 115 veterans who received a deferred adjudication under the law in the first year the Commission analyzed, 91 successfully completed the program and earned a dismissal of their charges. This is impressive as the Minnesota version of the Veterans Justice Act requires the veteran to demonstrate full rehabilitation at the end of supervision in order to earn dismissal. Anecdotal evidence is also encouraging as the Veterans Defense Project has seen wide expansion of the Veteran Treatment Court dockets since passage of the Veterans Justice Act in Minnesota.

Cost Savings

In Minnesota, they identified significant cost savings in terms of saved prison beds and diverting cases that would otherwise be litigated. The model saved over \$1 million per year. State legislation should support phased implementation, prioritizing jurisdictions with high veteran populations or limited existing resources. Common funding mechanisms include:

- Reallocation of correctional savings from reduced incarceration.
- State appropriations paired with available federal grants.
- Partnerships with veterans service organizations and nonprofit providers.

Refinement & Endorsement by the National Veterans Justice Commission

Following passage in Minnesota, in 2022 and 2023, VDP co-founders were asked to serve as advisors to the Veterans Justice Commission, a three-year project, chaired by former Senator and Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, to explore and make recommendations for how the government, the courts, and corrections can improve approaches to dealing with veterans in the criminal justice system. As part of that effort, we were tasked with helping create and lead a working group of national-level stakeholders and build consensus around key therapeutic intervention and sentencing policies for justice-involved veterans. That effort led to the creation of model legislation, the Veterans Justice Act, that built and improved on the Minnesota policy. In 2024, Nebraska, with the leadership of Sec. Hagel, soon followed Minnesota's lead and passed their own Veterans Justice Act.

In summary, state legislatures are uniquely positioned to address systemic deficiencies. By establishing jurisdictionally consistent Veterans Treatment Courts through statute, Alaska can replace fragmented practices with a coherent, therapy-centric framework grounded in proven models. SB 236 not only honors the service and recognizes the sacrifice of our veterans, it also best protects public safety in the short and long term.

Thank you for your time and consideration.