

# Bill calls for enhanced support in Veterans Treatment Court

A new bill aims to provide more support for military veterans involved with Veterans Treatment Court system, which serves as a treatment option and alternative to jail for offenders accused of low-level crimes.

The bill—the Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act (S. 946)—calls for authorization of \$5.5 million for each fiscal year from 2017 through 2027 to hire 50 additional Veterans Affairs outreach specialists to ensure veterans have greater access to effective and personalized treatment throughout their time in the system. Funding priority would be given to VA facilities that work with newly established or understaffed treatment courts.

DAV has long been a proponent of Veterans Treatment Courts and the Veterans Justice Outreach program, and backs the new proposal.

“DAV Resolution 105 calls for the continued growth of Veterans Treatment Courts,” said DAV National Legislative Director Joy Ilem. “DAV’s commitment to this program is demonstrated by the many members who have volunteered to serve as mentors in courts across the country.”

Alternative treatment courts remove veterans from the regular criminal justice process and help them address symptoms that are prevalent among veterans, such as post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse, which is often a form of self-medication. In a treatment court, the presiding judge works with the veteran to establish a structured rehabilitation program tailored to his or her specific needs.

Many DAV members have proudly served as mentors in related initiatives nationwide for nearly a decade, some having successfully completed the program themselves.

For veterans who do not live in an area with a Veterans Treatment Court, the Department of Veterans Affairs created the Veterans Justice Outreach program, where each VA medical center has named a justice outreach specialist. Outreach specialists serve as a link between veterans, the VA and the local justice system.

Studies show mental illness often plays a role in crimes committed by veterans, and according to the National Institute of Corrections, veterans account for nine of every 100 individuals in U.S. jails and prisons.

There are currently 334 Veterans Treatment Courts throughout the U.S. serving 15,000 individuals. According to a 2016 study published by the Community Mental Health Journal, veterans who participated in a treatment program have shown significant improvement in a number of areas, including mental and emotional health, substance abuse problems, housing challenges, relationships and overall well-being and functionality.

“The goal of treatment courts isn’t about alleviating accountability; it’s about recognizing the unique and extenuating circumstances that draw some veterans into the system in the first place,” said DAV National Commander Delphine Metcalf-Foster. “The vast majority of veterans, regardless of the mistakes they may have made at a difficult time in their lives, have a unique capacity to contribute to society.

“We should support any effort that will connect them with the care they need to lead productive lives with honor and dignity.”