



**Paralyzed Veterans
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Chartered by the Congress of the United States

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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