

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

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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 famillar 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.