



Statement of Ryan Britch
Government Affairs Associate
of
Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America
before the
Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Public Protection

February 10th, 2021

Chairwoman Krueger, Chairwoman Weinstein, and members of the joint committee, on behalf of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) and our more than 425,000 members and supporters, we thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony regarding Veteran Treatment Courts (VTCs).

While our members are spread across the country, we are proud to say that our national headquarters is located in New York City. Since its beginning, IAVA has been successful in fighting and advocating for policies to meet the needs of our nation's veterans and first responders, including the Post-9/11 GI Bill, filling gaps in care for women veterans, the *James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Reauthorization Act*, and legislation to permanently extend the 9/11 Victims Compensation Fund. Additionally, we are proud that IAVA was an initial proponent for the creation, proper funding, and oversight of New York City's Department of Veteran Services.

According to a report from the U.S. Department of Justice, an estimated 181,500 veterans were incarcerated in 2018. This report also found that veterans behind bars were more likely to have a mental health injury, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), than non-veterans. Fortunately, the number of veterans incarcerated in our country has declined in recent years. This reduction can largely be attributed to the success of VTCs. VTCs are a proven and effective alternative to traditional criminal sentences for justice-involved veterans whose actions were characteristic of a mental health injury rather than criminality.

IAVA has long been a strong supporter of these effective, innovative courts, and has advocated for judges to order treatment, instead of prison, for eligible veterans suffering from combat-related mental health injuries. This provides veterans with a second chance, but also lowers recidivism rates and saves taxpayers' money. As more is understood about these programs, state and local governments should now seek to adopt best practices and expand the use of VTCs.



New York State is on the forefront of rehabilitating eligible veterans charged with low-level, misdemeanor offenses linked to a mental health or substance abuse disorder connected to their service. New York led the country in improving the justice system by establishing the first VTC in Buffalo in 2008. Since then, the state has dramatically grown the number of functioning VTCs and has served over 4,500 New York veterans. Prioritizing rehabilitation ensures that veterans receive the care and services they need rather than having their mental health injuries compounded by exposure to the many negative psychological impacts of incarceration.

Despite this expansion, only one third of New York veterans currently have access to these life changing courts. In order to improve accessibility, IAVA recommends that New York grant universal access to VTCs by enacting a transfer policy. This would allow for a veteran residing in a jurisdiction without a VTC to be transferred to a nearby county that offers these services with the approval of the prosecutor.

Transfer policies have been successfully implemented in multiple states across the country including Michigan, Missouri, and Illinois. Additionally, VTCs have garnered support from members in both the New York Senate and Assembly, the New York State Unified Court System, and a cross section of stakeholders including district attorneys, law enforcement, and veteran service organizations. Enacting this policy change would ensure equitable access to VTCs for all veterans in New York and considerably improve our justice system.

IAVA thanks the committee for its dedication to helping to strengthen, fund, provide oversight, and increase access to VTCs. Thank you for the opportunity to share IAVA's views on these important issues today.



Ryan Britch Biography:

Ryan Britch serves as IAVA's Associate of Government Affairs and specializes in veterans' housing and health policy issues. Ryan spent eight years as an infantryman in the Vermont Army National Guard and deployed to Paktia, Afghanistan from 2009-2010. After leaving the military, he joined the Peace Corps and spent over two years in the Kingdom of Swaziland working on agricultural, youth, and HIV-AIDS prevention programs. Ryan is a graduate of the University of Vermont with a B.A. in Sociology and is currently a Master of Public Administration candidate at American University.