

**Judge Robert Russell
Acting Erie County Court Judge & Buffalo City Court Judge
Buffalo Veterans Treatment Court**

**2021-2022 Joint Budget Committee – Human Services
Testimony 2/9/2021**

Thank you to Chair Krueger, Chair Weinstein, and members of the Senate Finance Committee and the Assembly Ways and Means Committee for the opportunity to testify today. I am pleased to provide testimony on the importance of Veterans Treatment Courts and ensuring its access to veterans in need, irrespective of where they reside in the 62 counties in New York State.

Veterans Treatment Courts was a concept built around reaching one veteran at a time with the intention to create a safe environment to help justice-involved veterans regain stability, in their sobriety and mental health.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have started our State and Country's first Veterans Treatment Court in Buffalo, New York. I saw firsthand in my own courtroom the number of veterans appearing that were struggling with the invisible wounds of war, addiction and mental health concerns.

When the men and women who serve our country need help, we should be there for them. The stress from multiple tours, readjustment to civilian life, and lack of a support system can exacerbate our veteran's physical and mental trauma. Eligible veterans who suffer from mental health disorders, trauma, and substance abuse should receive treatment as an alternative to jail or prison.

Rather than focusing on punishment, Veterans Treatment Courts present a non-adversarial, interdisciplinary approach in which the judge, prosecutor, defense, probation, law enforcement and case managers work together. In addition, resources from the US Department of Veterans Affairs, Department of Labor, State Department of Veterans Affairs, community Veteran Organizations and volunteer Veteran Mentors, all collaboratively work together to enhance a veteran's potential for successful stability in physical and mental health.

This specialty court offers an alternative to incarceration to eligible justice involved veterans who suffer from mental health or substance abuse disorders. It strikes the proper balance between accountability and compassion. Veterans Treatment Courts has a historic track record, helping over 4,500 of our New York veterans.

This program is a proven way to address the unique needs of justice-involved veterans. It's an effective program with the goal of rehabilitation, lowering recidivism rates, and providing much needed treatment – pillars of true justice reform.

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