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2020-21 VFW Legislative Chair & Veteran Advocate

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Thank you to Chair Krueger, Chair Weinstein, and members of the Senate Finance Committee and the Assembly Ways and Means Committee for this hearing on Public Protection. I am pleased to provide testimony on the importance of Veterans Treatment Courts (VTCs) and ensuring a Veteran has access to a VTC in all 62 counties in New York State.

This is a pivotal moment in our state and country when conversations around criminal justice reform is at an all-time high. Veterans Treatment Courts are a type of problem-solving court that provide treatment to justice involved veterans for low-level, misdemeanor offenses who suffer from mental health or substance abuse disorders. Expanding VTCs and enacting the transfer policy are needed steps to ensure it's accessible to all veterans in the state, not just a fraction.

VTCs focus on veteran's rehabilitation and restoration to a productive member of the community. The outcome for the community is far more beneficial than incarceration — and, given the extremely low rate of recidivism among VTC graduates, this cost-saving measure takes place without impacting the community's safety and security. By simply establishing and utilizing this transfer mechanism, the bill focuses on VTC structures, processes, and resources that are already in place. A VTC utilizes resources that already exist within the county's justice system. The presiding judge, court clerk, and other court personnel are typically shared with another court, most commonly, the county's Drug Treatment Court.

One-third of New York's veterans still do not have access to these lifesaving courts. This leaves veterans who live in counties without one to get lost in a system ill-equipped to deal with their underlying issues. It is an effective program with the goal of rehabilitation, lowering recidivism rates, and providing much needed treatment – pillars of true justice reform. To date, VTCs have helped over 4,500 New York veterans get their lives back on track for success.

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