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**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 would also like to thank our local delegation who work tirelessly on Veterans issues, Assembly Member Sarah Clarke, Assembly Member Harry Bronson, and Senator Robert Ort. I am pleased to provide testimony on the importance of Veterans Treatment Courts and ensuring access to these courts in all of New York's 62 counties.

Veterans Treatment Courts saved my life. My story is not unique, in fact there are thousands of other combat Veterans like myself who struggle with the same issues surrounding our return from war. The parameters of these specialty courts fit with what is required to facilitate what can only be called truly "coming home." I had a great childhood, raised by great parents yet found myself in 2007 addicted to heroin. There were dozens of attempts to pull myself out of this spiral of destruction to no avail. I got a second chance at life because an informed and dedicated Judge was innovative enough to recognize these courts were needed and then agreed to preside over them. Judge Patty Marks saved my life when despite dozens of efforts before her, nobody else could. It changed my life for the better and I know there are more veterans who lost their way that can be rescued by this program.

"Those who see war, never stop seeing war." My return was no different. The court provided the guidance, purpose, and structure needed to address my problems. I thrived within the structure of the court, graduating in the minimum time frame with a flawless record. It is because of this program; I can provide this testimony today. It is also because of this program that I have a wife and children, a great career, a Master's Degree, purpose, stability, and the motivation to remain a contributing member of society for the rest of my life. The alternative would have been serving out a prison sentence. Without Veterans Treatment Courts, a staggering number of justice-involved veterans remain stuck in a system that acts like a revolving door eventually leading to long term prison sentences or death. It is always popular to stand at a podium and thank veterans or talk about how important they are. It is not always popular to act on their behalf. These courts save taxpayer money, improve public safety, and save the lives of those men and women who agreed to risk theirs for our country.

This program can help thousands more if access is expanded throughout New York State. It is unacceptable that one-third of New York's veterans still do not have access to these lifesaving courts.

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