



## North Dakota Senate

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Madam Chairman and members of the Senate Judiciary committee, North Dakota is always looking for ways to help address Veteran's issues. Last session, the legislature passed the state income tax exemption on military retirement benefits. Through the help of many in this room and online, this important issue, which had been introduced for decades, finally passed.

Madam Chair, SB 2246 is another important bill to assist our Veterans. SB 2246 is the creation of a Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) docket. Many times our Veterans struggle with issues like traumatic brain injury, military sexual trauma, substance abuse, and/or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Rather than punishing our Veterans, Veterans Treatment Courts are designed to support and provide resources to our Veterans who have found themselves in the criminal justice system. The goal is to assist these men and women, who have done so much for our country, to keep them away from a life of homelessness, substance abuse, and lawlessness and get them back on their feet and contributing to society.

Already approved this fall by the Supreme Court, and spearheaded by an all Veteran team from the Northeast Central Judicial District, the Veteran's Treatment Court is meant to eventually assist communities, both urban and rural, across the state. The past six plus months Judge Don Hager, of the Northeast Central Judicial District, chaired a workgroup that consisted of Veteran Service Officers, the GFAFB JAG office, State's Attorneys, legislators, and Judges from other states that have VTC already implemented. After many meetings, the workgroup created the bill language you have in front of you today.

How we got here: House Resolution 886 – The Veterans Treatment Court Coordination Act - was signed into law by President Trump this August, which directed the DOJ to establish a VTC to provide grants and assistance to state and local governments, to develop and maintain Veterans Treatment Court programs, and to provide assistance to defendants who are military Veterans. Once that passed federally, the NE Central Judicial District applied to the ND

Supreme Court to be considered for establishing a Veteran's Treatment Court, which was approved this past fall. In a letter of interest from the NE Central Judicial District to the ND Supreme Court, Ten Key Components of a Veteran's Treatment Court were included in their initiative. Those components are:

1. Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) integrate alcohol, drug treatment and mental health services with justice system case processing
2. Using a non-adversarial approach, prosecution and defense counsel promote public safety while protecting participants' due process rights
3. Eligible participants are identified early and promptly placed in the VTC program
4. VTC provides access to a continuum of alcohol, drug, mental health and other related treatment and rehabilitative services
5. Abstinence is monitored by frequent alcohol and other drug testing
6. A coordinated strategy governs VTC responses to participant's compliance
7. Ongoing judicial interaction with each Veteran is essential
8. Monitoring and evaluation measure the achievement of program goals and gauge effectiveness
9. Continuing interdisciplinary education promotes effective VTC planning, implementation, and operations
10. Forging partnerships among drug courts, public agencies, and community-based organizations generates local support and enhance drug court effectiveness

Many times our Veterans, who have found themselves in trouble with the law, have a hard time seeking help. Sometimes it their pride, but many times they are ashamed of what they've done. The Veterans Treatment Court is here to provide structure, which they may be lacking, and it's meant to hold them accountable.

Madam Chair, North Dakota offers many benefits to our Veterans, whether it's income tax exemption on military benefits, tuition grant waivers, and property tax deduction for honorable charged Veterans with at least 50%

disability...just to name a few. It's time for us as a state to take a big step forward to address behavioral health issues of our Veterans.

As Lonnie Wangen, Commissioner of the ND Department of Veterans Affairs, stated in one of our workgroup meetings; "We broke them, it's up to us to fix them"

I couldn't agree more.

I ask for a Do Pass recommendation, and I will stand for any questions.