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Thank you to Chair Krueger, Chair Weinstein, and members of the Senate Finance Committee and Assembly Ways and Means and Committee for the opportunity to speak today. 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.

We have a choice as a nation. Military service strengthens--and has an impact upon--all those who serve. But for some, it does so at a high cost. What is society's obligation to those veterans adversely impacted by their service, and who then engage in behavior that ultimately intersects with law enforcement and the criminal justice system? Do we place them in a justice system that may or may not have the capacity or capability to consider their unique challenges and experiences...and therefore may see them time and again...or place them in a system that understands those unique veteran experiences, melds treatment with intensive supervision and brings the right partners to the table leading to better outcomes? Historically, there has been no comprehensive effort to ensure the justice system responds sufficiently to the unique clinical needs some veterans face, and justice-involved veterans are scattered throughout the justice system, making it difficult to coordinate effective treatment interventions.

Veterans treatment courts maintain the traditional partnerships and practices of highly successful drug courts. Rather than focusing on punishment, veterans treatment courts present a non-adversarial approach in which the judge, prosecutor, defense team, probation officers, law enforcement and case managers work together with representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs – including the Veterans Health Administration and the Veterans Benefit Administration. As well as the state's department or commission of veterans affairs, Vet Centers, community mental health and substance use treatment providers, veterans service organizations and volunteer veteran mentors.

Because of the myriad of resources brought to bear in veterans treatment courts, the team also works to identify and meet individual needs beyond clinical treatment, from education, employment, and housing assistance. to family reunification, restitution, and healthcare.

Today there are nearly 400 operational VTCs nationwide, serving approximately 15,000 justice-involved veterans each year. In New York, the program has helped over 4,500 veterans. The Governor and the New York State Legislature have now set the stage to become the first state in the country to provide state-wide access to Veterans Treatment Courts. In 2008, New York was the first state to implement a Veterans Treatment Court. It is only fitting New York is the first to adopt a legislative solution that creates a pathway to state-wide access.

This is a pivotal moment where conversations around criminal justice are at an all-time high here in New York and across the country. We must remember all our veterans in these conversations; Veterans Treatment Courts and the transfer legislation are needed in the budget to ensure this life changing—and lifesaving—program is accessible to all veterans in our state. Otherwise, we miss the chance to put in place a system that demonstrates New York will make the right choice in how it cares for its Veterans.

New York's 700,000 military veterans strengthen every neighborhood, city and county. Expanding Veterans Treatment Courts will reach more veterans in crisis and create a path toward returning them to their families and communities where they belong. Veterans fought for our freedom and now, through state-wide access to Veterans Treatment Court, New York is fighting for theirs.

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