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November 8, 2019

Senator Lindsey Graham
Chairman

Senate Committee on the Judiciary
290 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Senator Dianne Feinstein
Ranking Member

Senate Committee on the Judiciary
331 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Graham and Ranking Member Feinstein:

As state attorneys general, we encourage the Senate to pass House Resolution 886, the Veteran Treatment Court Coordination Act of 2019. Most Americans who serve in the Armed Forces are strengthened by their military service. Skills like attention to detail, self-discipline, problem solving, teamwork and decision-making in stressful situations are valuable tools that help veterans excel in the American workforce.

Since September 11, 2001, over 3.3 million Americans have voluntarily served in uniform.¹ When our veterans protect our freedom at home or abroad, many have experiences that scar them both inside and out. Veterans are more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and mental illness and to engage in substance abuse. Over 16 veterans a day commit suicide, and in 2017, the suicide rate for veterans was 1.5 times the rate for non-veteran adults.²

We have seen too many cases in our courts where veterans commit a criminal offense, often minor or non-violent, which can be attributed in part to a service or combat related injury, mental health problem or substance abuse. Over half of veterans involved with the criminal justice system have substance abuse problems.³ Sadly, in many cases, veterans are not properly identified, and they become lost in the criminal justice system without the necessary help, medical treatment, and therapy they are entitled to or deserve. This encourages a cycle of recidivism, hopelessness, non-recovery, and sometimes, serious injury or death.

Throughout the country, Veterans Treatment Courts have emerged as a vital tool to break this cycle. There are currently over 450 Veterans Treatment Courts in over 40 states and territories. The Veterans Treatment Court is a hybrid court, blending aspects of the traditional drug court and mental health court diversionary processes. Its primary focus is on the effective identification, treatment, and successful reintegration of every enrolled veteran

¹ <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2018/04/post-9-11-veterans.html> (Last Visited October 17, 2019).

² Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs, available at, https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2019/2019_National_Veteran_Suicide_Prevention_Annual_Report_508.pdf (Last Visited October 17, 2019).

³ Finlay, A., et l., Sex Differences in Mental Health and Substance Use Disorders and Treatment Entry Among Justice-Involved Veterans in the Veterans Health Administration, available at, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5764085/pdf/nihms931064.pdf> (Last Visited October 17, 2019).

back into his or her local community. Most of these courts employ a mentor program, where veteran volunteers are matched with defendants as peer mentors to help veterans stay on track, comply with the court's mandates that they obtain treatment, and appear with them in court. Veterans Treatment Courts link veterans to VA benefits to which they are entitled which can help the veteran pursue an education and obtain substance abuse treatment. Most courts are staffed with a representative from the Veterans Justice Outreach Program in the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Research has shown Veterans Treatment Court programs to produce positive outcomes.⁴ Participants are significantly less likely to experience a new incarceration and are more likely to be in their own housing and receiving necessary VA benefits and services. Congress recognized the effectiveness of Veterans Treatment Courts just last year in passing the *Veterans Treatment Court Improvement Act of 2018*, Pub. L. 115-240, 132 Stat. 2888 (2018), which increased the number of Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists to serve in Veterans Treatment Courts through local VA medical centers.

The federal government has long supported state, local and tribal drug court programs through the Drug Court Discretionary Grant Program administered jointly by the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs and Bureau of Justice Assistance. 34 U.S.C. §§ 10611-10619. This program has also provided funding for Veterans Treatment Courts.⁵

We urge the Senate to further support this important court program. H.R. 886 would establish a Veteran Treatment Court Program in the Department of Justice to provide grants and technical assistance to state, local and tribal courts that implement Veterans Treatment Courts. As Attorneys General, we strongly support this important program in our courts and encourage the continued support of the Congress for our nation's veterans.

Sincerely,



Ashley Moody
Florida Attorney General



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Steve Marshall
Alabama Attorney General



Kevin G. Clarkson
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⁴ Tsai, Finlay, et al., A National Study of Veterans Treatment Court Participants: Who Benefits and Who Recidivates, *Adm. Policy Mental Health* (Mar. 2018), available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5776060/> (Last Visited October 17, 2019).

⁵ See <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44467> (Last Visited October 17, 2019).

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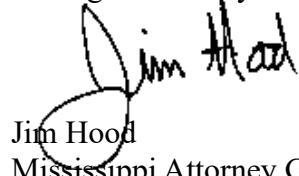
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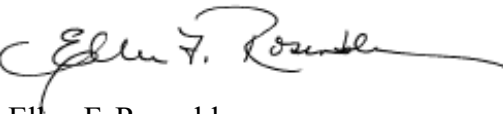
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