

Hello Chairs and committee members. Thank you for listening to me. I am **Linda McKinnis, the legislative person for the Disabled American Vets**, and a certified Veteran Service Officer and a certified Peer to Peer Specialist. Last year I testified before this committee and told you what a VSO does and how Peer to Peer mentoring works at the Posts and within the Courts. We can go over that again but the bottom line is, veterans assist veterans. They counsel anonymously at the Post level as volunteers, and sometimes seek certification as a career path but the most important ingredient is the Veteran to Veteran part.

Dwyer peer to peer is directed at the very important connection of veterans to other veterans at the Post level. This is where mentoring begins. Later as counseling and mentoring progress to more formal settings such as Veteran Treatment Court there is frequently a need for additional accreditation. **The Veterans Council supports the continuation of \$500,000 to encourage the participation of qualified peer to peer mentors assisting Veteran Service Officers in their community, in the Veteran Treatment Courts alternative sentencing program, and finally with the Veterans Defense Program producing effective monitors to oversee and foster a veterans alternative sentencing program with the court.**

(Kirby Hannan) I would like to defer to the testimony before you, submitted separately by Art Cody and the Veterans Defense Program. I see every day what my colleagues are speaking about and have been both the recipient and now the giver of mentoring at many levels. One of the most emotionally stirring situations I face in my life, is the veteran who runs crosswise with the law. You have heard much about Veterans Treatment Court and my experience with Albany County's program has it as one of the best but their principal focus is at the misdemeanor level. What about the felony?

Right now the Veterans Defense Program is the last line of defense for veterans who have got in serious trouble because of service related stressors. Where a veteran has been and what they have seen cannot always be weighed properly by those in the court system. It is not about giving a vet an unwarranted break, it is about understanding what got him or her there. Veterans facing serious charges are learning that there is hope for an informed defense and perhaps light at the end of the tunnel.

The VDP is educating defense attorneys, and those involved in mitigation to know a veterans service history and how to make it relevant in pursuing alternatives to incarceration. For the last three years the Legislature has appropriated \$500,000 to keep this critical program going. The program is a success saving more than 30m in incarceration time. We are asking for an additional \$400,000 to expand it to fund additional capacity on Long Island and the Hudson Valley. Please keep this line item alive in this budget cycle. It is much less expensive than the cost of a jail cell.