



OFFICE OF THE RAMSEY COUNTY ATTORNEY

John J. Choi

March 3, 2021

RE: Support for HF 478/SF 116 Veterans Restorative Justice Act

Dear Chair and Members,

In my capacity as the elected Ramsey County Attorney, I write in strong support of the Veterans Restorative Justice Act. I join the Minnesota County Attorneys Association in supporting this bill because rehabilitating, rather than punishing, our justice-involved veterans is not only the right thing to do morally, it is in the best interest of public safety. It is morally imperative because our government must recognize the collateral consequences of military service on veterans and how unresolved trauma too often leads to justice system involvement. It is in the best interest of public safety because veterans with unresolved service-related conditions who become a threat to the community they were once willing to die to protect deserve a restorative approach that will bring them back into the community and restore them to law-abiding citizens.

In 2017, I was asked to join a working group hosted by the Veterans Defense Project to research how to best standardize and expand Minnesota's veterans treatment courts (VTCs). Within this working group, it quickly became clear that treatment courts were falling short because of a disposition issue - the legal benefit the veteran receives in return for their successful participation in the court.

Veterans' participation in a VTC is no small sacrifice. They give up their constitutional rights to challenge the case and agree to complete a course of treatment to address the conditions that lead to the offense. In the case of combat-related or other severe trauma treatment, which is common, they agree to relive the trauma repeatedly until it loses power over them. Veterans were not willing to enter into this process when the offer to them was:

- 1) plead guilty, have a record of conviction, go on standard probation with no more than an obligation to remain law-abiding and pass random urine tests; or
 - 2) plead guilty, have a record of conviction, go into veterans court where you will miss work and family time for court appearances once a week, have to complete treatment which will consume another day per week, and relieve the most painful moments of your life over and over.
- Veterans were choosing the first option, not participate in the VTCs.

In addition, the Chief Public Defender pulled all the State's public defenders out of the VTCs because of this same problem. In a system where public defenders are underfunded, overworked, and facing staffing shortages, they could not justify dedicating their defenders to busy dockets that provided no legal benefit to their clients. Without defense attorneys referring their clients to the VTCs, veterans were not entering the courts. (Fortunately, the Chief Public Defender has assured the working group that public defenders will rejoin the courts if this bill passes and solves the disposition issue discussed above.

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The working group decided unanimously that the best solution is a statewide model that provides all Minnesota's courts the essential elements of a VTC and resolves the disposition issue. The Veterans Restorative Justice Act accomplishes just that. It will provide all existing VTCs, hopeful VTCs, and courts that can't dream of a VTC due to resource constraints the same model for legal outcomes and supervision procedures, ending the disparities in veteran outcomes across the state. It is the product of years of hard work by the justice professionals closest to the problem and will greatly improve our legal system's ability to rehabilitate justice-involved veterans.

I ask you to join me in supporting HF 614/SF 116 to support veterans across Minnesota and ensure a compassionate response that acknowledges the effects of their service-related trauma, heals them and restores them to productive members of our community. As veterans of our great country, they deserve nothing less.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Choi". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "J" and a trailing flourish.

John Choi
Ramsey County Attorney