

Senate Judiciary Committee  
January 25, 2021  
Mr. Chris Martens  
Office of the Adjutant General  
SB 2246

Madam Chairman, members of the Committee, my name is Christopher Martens. I am an attorney with the Office of the Adjutant General. I am submitting testimony in support of SB 2246.

This hearing comes at an opportune time. The North Dakota National Guard recently concluded a forty-five day campaign that focused on the behavioral health and mental resilience of our Soldiers and Airmen. We designed our "Because We Care" Campaign to educate our service members about the warning signs of compromised behavioral health, and to promote the many resources we have that can help reduce the risk associated with this compromise. Over the course of the campaign, our service members heard from leaders and subject matters experts who shared best practices, tips, and guidelines to help our National Guard family maneuver the struggles of mental wellness and to heal from invisible wounds. Although the campaign only lasted forty-five days, the message is enduring.

Ensuring the behavioral wellness and mental resilience of our service members is not just about maintaining mission readiness. It is about caring for our Soldiers, Airmen, and their families. Because we care, we cannot just focus on programs designed to support our current men and women in uniform. We must also advocate for programs that will aid our veterans, particularly when they are at their lowest.

According to the 2020 North Dakota Veterans Data book, North Dakota is home to approximately 53,608 veterans. Of that number, 5,374 are reported as having some form of mental health disorder, with 5,074 having co-disorders involving mental health and substance abuse disorders. Often times service members deny issues related to post traumatic stress disorder due to a perception that they will appear weak or not combat ready. When that member returns to civilian life, they continue to hide their problems. Without assistance, many of these service members begin to self-medicate with alcohol or drugs.

In 2010, a North Dakota Iraqi war Veteran took law enforcement on a high speed chase down Highway 85 with a truck full of weapons. He wanted to die and he asked officers to shoot him. Through the combined efforts of the Court, State's Attorney, defense council, VA, and others, this Veteran went to treatment instead of prison. But with out such dedication from the parties involved, this man would have gone through the criminal justice system without the root cause of his problems being addressed, and he very well could have repeated this type of incident. This new docket ensures a system that works to identify these root causes, and that help avoid the unnecessary criminalization of mental health disorders.

The veteran's treatment docket will provide veterans with the opportunity to undergo licensed treatment programs targeted towards mental and behavioral health conditions, traumatic brain injury, and military sexual trauma, all while under the supervision of our judiciary. Under this program, veterans can take accountability for their actions, while simultaneously receiving the treatment and support they need. After successful completion, these veterans will still have to pay their debt to society, but they will be on a path to being productive citizens who can once again take pride in the honorable service they provided to their country.

I urge this committee to continue the Legislature's support for our North Dakota veterans by voting do pass for SB 2246. Thank you for considering this testimony. Please contact me if I can be of any assistance in this matter.