



DATE: February 27, 2018
TO: Veterans' Affairs Committee
FROM: Melanie Berzins, Public Policy Intern
RE: S.B. No. 223 AN ACT ESTABLISHING A TRAINING PROGRAM FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER ISSUES IMPACTING VETERANS INVOLVED IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.

Good afternoon Senator Flexer, Senator Martin, Representative Hennessy, Representative Ferraro and distinguished members of the Veterans' Affairs Committee:

My name is Melanie Berzins, Public Policy Intern at the CT Community Nonprofit Alliance. The Alliance is Connecticut's statewide association of community nonprofits. Our members deliver essential services to more than half a million people each year and employ almost 14% of Connecticut's workforce.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of for Senate Bill No. 223 "An Act Establishing a Training Program for Mental Health and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Issues Impacting Veterans Involved in the Criminal Justice System."

The Alliance supports Senate Bill 223 as it will provide judges with the necessary training to adequately identify and address mental health issues affecting justice-involved veterans. Nearly 1 in 4 active duty members showed signs of a mental health condition¹ and military veterans are at great risk of suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), substance use disorders, and depression². While mental health issues themselves are not associated with increased violence nor criminal behavior, untreated mental illness may result in behaviors that increase veterans' likelihood of encountering the criminal justice system. This is why improving access to appropriate care and treatment through the justice system is so important.

Judges who are trained and prepared to address veterans' mental health needs are able to assist, rather than punish, veterans for trauma-related mental health conditions, and to consider mitigating mental health circumstances that have contributing to their presence in the justice system. Even when a veteran's crimes have no relationship to a mental health condition, such training will allow judges to identify veterans with unmet treatment needs and recommend treatment in coordination with their sentencing.

The Alliance recommends the National Council for Behavioral Health's Adult Mental Health First Aid training as a curriculum for training judges in identifying and addressing mental health concerns. Mental Health First Aid is an 8-hour course that teaches participants how to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders, to provide initial assistance in a crisis situation, and to identify early warning signs of mental illness or substance use disorder.

More than a million people in the United States have been trained in Mental Health First Aid. The curriculum has been used to train veterans' services providers and is listed in the Substance Abuse and

¹ <https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/Veterans-and-Active-Duty>

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4671760/>

Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP).

Studies on this internationally-implemented, evidence-based curriculum have found that individuals trained in the program “grow their knowledge of signs, symptoms and risk factors of mental illnesses and addictions; can identify multiple types of professional and self-help resources for individuals with a mental illness or addiction; increase their confidence in and likelihood to help an individual in distress; show increased mental wellness themselves...[and] that the program reduces the social distance created by negative attitudes and perceptions of individuals with mental illnesses.”³

Mental Health First Aid is a thoroughly-researched, evidence-based, well-established training curriculum that would allow judges to assist veterans in need of mental health services.

Thank you for your consideration. Please feel free to contact me with questions or for more information.

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³ <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/about/research/>