

HOUSE BILL 186 – SUPPORT

**House Bill 186 – Court Dog Therapy Program – Veterans Treatment Courts
House Judiciary Committee
January 28, 2021**

My name is Brian Smith. I am a post-9/11 combat Veteran, and I am here today to offer my **support for House Bill 186**.

Appearing before a judge in a criminal case can be a traumatic experience for anyone, but the process can be even more difficult for veterans...many of whom suffer from PTSD.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration estimates that one in six Iraq and Afghanistan veterans are alcohol or drug addicted, or both....and one in five suffers from PTSD or significant mental anguish...

That represents somewhere between 450,000-540,000 of our post-9/11 Veterans.

There are **over 700,000 Veterans of all service periods** currently caught up in the criminal justice system. Tragically, that number is growing at an alarming rate as veterans are being arrested for charges directly related to trauma, substance abuse, or mental illness.

We have seen the impact that Veterans Treatment Courts have in helping veterans caught up in the criminal justice system – standing between the veteran and a felony conviction, incarceration, or worse; ensuring that when returning service members are arrested because of a substance abuse or mental health disorder, they receive the structure, treatment and mentoring they need to get their lives back on track.

How can we improve the Veterans Treatment Courts outcomes for our justice-involved Veterans? Add a dog! A therapy dog or a facility dog!

Senate Bill 7 expands the application of the current court dog program to offer therapy or facility dog support to Veterans appearing in participating county Veterans Treatment Courts.

While not considered service dogs, therapy dogs and facility dogs receive training but have a completely different type of job from service dogs. Their responsibilities are to provide psychological or physiological support to individuals other than their handlers. These dogs have stable temperaments and friendly, easy-going personalities.

Therapy dogs and facility dogs are proven performers in providing a calming influence in stressful situations...

These professionally trained dogs are suitable for providing quiet companionship to vulnerable individuals in legal settings without causing any disruption of the proceedings.

These working dogs are specially chosen because of their calm demeanor and ability to work in a high-stress environment thereby decreasing the risk of creating legal issues.

There is good reason to believe that providing a friendly canine presence during Veterans Treatment Court proceedings would improve the outcomes for our justice-involved Veterans.

Our Veterans were there when our country called, we should similarly be there for them in their times of need.

Give a Veteran a Second Chance and Give a Dog a Job!

I respectfully request a favorable report for House Bill 186.