Good morning. I am Steve Todd, the vice-chair of the Military and Veterans Affairs Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to briefly talk to you in support of the committee’s recommendation concerning Veterans Treatment Courts.

The first Veterans Treatment Court was established by Judge Robert Russell of Buffalo, NY in 2008. Lackawanna County established the first court in PA in 2009. The number of courts in PA has grown to 25 in the intervening years. In addition, a number of counties have diversionary programs for veterans at the magisterial court level.

Veterans Treatment Courts offer veterans who have been charged with a crime the opportunity to obtain treatment for their drug or alcohol addiction and mental health problems, including PTSD and traumatic brain injury, and to again become productive members of their communities. These courts do not offer a “get out of jail quick card” to veterans. Each court creates its own program that requires veterans to complete assigned requirements and participate in community service projects over a minimum one-year period. During that time, they are under strict probation supervision, are subject to scheduled and random drug tests and home visits, and must comply with their specific treatment program. After completing the one-year program, they serve another year of probation.

Each county must decide whether to establish a court. The decision generally comes down to getting the approval of the president judge of the county and the local district attorney. Each county creates its own program and decides the types of offenses that will be handled. Counties too small to have their own court are encouraged to partner with another county. AOPC personnel will work with and assist counties in establishing and operating their court.

I have been involved with the Butler County Veterans Treatment Court since it was established in 2012, serving as the mentor coordinator and an individual mentor. I have seen the drastic positive changes Veteran Treatment Courts can make in the lives of veterans. I have seen veterans go from being homeless to becoming employed, productive members of their communities. I have seen veterans go from having no contact with their families to being reunited with their families. These are changes in the lives of veterans that would not have occurred if the veterans were processed through the traditional criminal justice system.

The goal of our recommendation is to encourage the creation of more Veterans Treatment Courts across the Commonwealth to provide maximum access to those PA veterans who will benefit from participating in a Veterans Treatment Court program.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this recommendation.