CCJ Veterans Justice Commission Director to outline recommendations to prevent justice system involvement and improve outcomes for veterans

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WASHINGTON — Lack of adequate support for struggling veterans undermines the health and safety of our veterans, their families, their communities, and, ultimately, national security, the director of the Council on Criminal Justice (CCJ) Veterans Justice Commission said in advance of a bipartisan Senate hearing scheduled for 3:30pm ET today.

Commission Director and retired U.S. Army Brigadier General David MacEwen will testify this afternoon at a U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs hearing on veterans justice issues. MacEwen will present findings and recommendations produced by the Commission to help prevent veterans from falling into the criminal justice system and better support those who do.

Read MacEwen's Submitted Testimony Here

The 15-member Commission was chaired by former U.S. Defense Secretary and U.S. Sen. Chuck Hagel and included former Defense Secretary and White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta and other top military, veterans, and criminal justice leaders. The group produced three sets of recommendations aiming to reduce risk factors that drive veterans' justice-system involvement, strengthen transitional assistance for military service members as they reenter civilian life, and improve the effectiveness of the justice system response when veterans break the law.

"Veterans who break the law should be held accountable. But America also has a responsibility to support veterans by honoring their service and helping them address the visible and not-so-visible wounds that service can inflict," said Hagel. "We must help veterans who come in contact with our criminal justice system receive the support, care, and supervision they've earned so they can heal and return to productive lives."

“When our energy is focused on red versus blue, we fail to recognize our shared mission as leaders under the banner of red, white, and blue,” said Panetta. “The American people deserve better, and our veterans who give everything to protect this great nation especially deserve better. Partisan lines must never become barriers to delivering meaningful support for those most honorable among us.”

Roughly 200,000 active-duty service members leave the armed forces each year. While most transition successfully, many struggle with mental health and substance use disorders, the effects of traumatic brain injury and PTSD, homelessness, and criminality. One in three veterans report having been arrested and booked into jail at least once, compared to one in five non-veterans.

Incarcerated veterans lose access to health care from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which prevents them from receiving specialized treatment. The suicide rate for veterans is approximately 1.5 times higher than the rate among the general population, and it’s especially high for veterans leaving incarceration.

“Most veterans return stronger from their service, but too many still need our help. It is nothing short of tragic that those who once wore the cloth of our nation now wear the cloth of incarceration,” said MacEwen. “We need less cheerleading and more leading. When the parades end and the applause fades, we must uphold our military’s commitment that no man or woman who served our nation be left behind. Veterans who run afoul of the law must receive more than punishment—they need opportunities for restoration.”

Veterans Justice Commission Recommendations

The Council on Criminal Justice created the Veterans Justice Commission in 2022 to examine the extent and nature of veterans’ involvement in the criminal justice system and develop recommendations for evidence-based policy changes that enhance safety, health, and justice.

The commission produced a wide range of research and issued three reports that made 11 core findings and recommendations:

- From Duty to Dignity: Supporting Service Members in Their Transition to Civilian Life. This report makes three recommendations to ensure more service members transition successfully and avoid contact with the criminal justice system, calling for the creation of a lead transition office within the Department of Defense, adoption of evidence-based interventions for at-risk service members, and expanded access to VA health benefits.

- Honoring Service, Advancing Safety: Supporting Veterans From Arrest Through Sentencing. This report makes three recommendations focused on the "front end" of the justice system, from arrest through sentencing, to improve and expand support for veterans in the early stages of the criminal justice process. It calls for improved identification of justice-involved veterans and outlines an expanded system of alternatives to prosecution and incarceration for veterans. It also recommends the establishment of a national center on veterans justice to improve outcomes by identifying and promoting best practices, an initiative Congress funded in the Department of Justice budget earlier this year.

- From Confinement to Community: Supporting Successful Veteran Reentry and Employment. This report makes five recommendations to strengthen resources for veterans during incarceration, reentry, and community supervision, including prioritizing hiring of justice-involved veterans, providing VA health care for those behind bars, and removing barriers that make it harder for veterans to access housing and benefits after release.

The Commission thanks U.S. Senator and Committee Chairman Jerry Moran, U.S. Senator and Committee Ranking Member Richard Blumenthal, and members of the Committee for holding the hearing and inviting the Commission to present its findings and recommendations.

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The Council does not take policy positions. As part of its array of activities, the Council conducts research and convenes independent commissions composed of Council members who produce reports with findings and policy recommendations on matters of concern. Commission findings and conclusions are not subject to approval of the Council's Board of

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