

Clark Pennington – In-favor of SB0887

I want to start by thanking the state assembly for the opportunity to share these remarks, even though I cannot be with you all today, I'm grateful for your time and effort spent in helping us fulfill the First Responders Action Group's mission of supporting our Veterans and First Responders.

Through this legislation, we hope that our hallmark program, The Veterans Justice Initiative, can bring the same success in Maryland as it has in other areas of the country. The Veterans Justice Initiative aims to empower first responders and community partners in their interactions with Veterans through a three-pillar approach.

The first pillar is the Veterans Crisis Intervention Training. Our experienced police professionals, Veterans, and trainers guide our first responders and law enforcement officers through an extensive training program that allows them to build rapport with a Veteran in crisis. This is done through the understanding of military culture, deployment affects, common mental health issues facing many of the post 9-11 Veterans like Post Traumatic Stress Disorders, Traumatic Brain Injuries, and self-medication resulting in substance abuse. After de-escalating the Veteran out of crisis, our staff further shares and provides critical resources available to the Veteran population, thus reducing repeated calls for service and reduces further escalation of the crisis past the initial call. The partnerships the First Responders Action Agency brings to bear on this topic are like no other experienced in police de-escalation training. So far, we have trained 3,265 officers in the appropriate response to Veterans in crisis so that the situation does not escalate, thus saving lives and taxpayer money.

The second is casework assistance. Alongside our partners at the Independence Fund, a national Veteran Service Organization, our casework team can support first responders in finding appropriate resources for Veterans they are interacting with who are not only in crisis, but may be experiencing food insecurity, substance abuse issues, and homelessness. Our team works as a case management service that propels and supports individuals in accessing and achieving their individual goals while also developing and cultivating strong community relationships to bring added resources to the forefront of Veteran care.

Lastly, we aim to support counties in establishing Veterans Treatment Courts. By utilizing these systems, we aim to help Veterans struggling with substance abuse that may lead to criminality, thus seeking solutions rather than punishment to the underlying problems producing criminality.

According to recent data, there are almost 200,000 Veterans currently incarcerated and one in three Veterans report having been arrested. We know that Veterans, especially ones that have served in combat, come back with Post-Traumatic Stress, Traumatic Brain Injuries and other risk factors that can lead them to substance abuse or worse. We know the warning signs and we owe it to our nation's heroes to implement systems to help them avoid criminality and utilize the resources available to them.

We've seen great success with the Veterans Justice Initiative and hope to continue our mission with the support of the great state of Maryland.