

LATE TESTIMONY

**Testimony to the House Committee on
Economic Revitalization, Business & Military Affairs
Tuesday, March 23, 2010; 8:30 a.m.
Conference Room 312**

RE: HOUSE RESOLUTION 200
HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION 278

Chair McKelvey, Vice Chair Choy and Members of the Committee:

My name is Jim Tollefson and I am the President and CEO of The Chamber of Commerce of Hawaii ("The Chamber"). I am here to state The Chamber's support to House Resolution 200 and House Concurrent Resolution 278, relating to the convening of a Judiciary led committee to evaluate the establishment of targeted Judiciary processes for veterans including the establishment of a Veterans Court.

The Chamber is the largest business organization in Hawaii, representing more than 1,000 businesses. Approximately 80% of our members are small businesses with less than 20 employees. As the "Voice of Business" in Hawaii, the organization works on behalf of its members, which employ more than 200,000 individuals, to improve the state's economic climate and to foster positive action on issues of common concern.

The Chamber believes establishing a Veterans Court will provide economic relief to the State's budget and to employers of National Guard and Reserve soldiers by attracting Federal funding for veterans involved in the Judiciary and redirecting these soldiers to use Federal VA health and benefit services. Additional savings will result from preventing homelessness to saving incarceration costs estimated by the Judiciary to be in excess of \$50,000 per person per year. Furthermore, the Court would result in individual rehabilitation.

For these reasons, we ask you to pass HR200 and HCR278. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.



Hawaii Chapter, MOAA
P.O. Box 1185
Kailua, Hawaii 96734-1185

Testimony of

Thomas Smyth, President

Military Officers Association of America, Hawaii Chapter

Before the

Committee on Economic Revitalization, and Military Affairs

Tuesday, March 23, 2010, 8:30 am, Room 312

HCR 278/HR 200 Requesting the Chief Justice Of The Hawaii Supreme Court To Convene A Committee To Identify At Which Point Veterans And Returning Reservists And National Guard Members Enter The Justice System, And How Best To Address their Needs, Including Developing A Veteran's Court

Chair McKelvey, Vice Chair Choy and Members of the Committee:

Our chapter of 500 retired and currently serving officers supports HCR 278 and HR 200 asking the Chief Justice to identify at which point Veterans and returning Reservists and National Guard Members enter the justice system and how best to address their needs, including developing a "Veteran's Court."

We have strongly supported legislation allowing the Judiciary to establish a "Vet's Court." But at this point these measures are not moving. This resolution goes further in the determination of the overall needs of military personnel facing judicial action and thus is an excellent step in the right direction.

While we speak of "Veteran's Courts" it should be noted that active duty personnel, who are not yet legally "veterans," face many of the same issues as those that have been discharged or return to civilian life after reserve or National Guard service. Many of the criminal or civil actions facing active duty personnel are handled by civilian courts.

I believe it would be helpful to amend the resolutions or their titles to be sure that those currently serving are included in the review.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.



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1124 FORT STREET MALL, SUITE 205. HONOLULU, HI 96813
 ACCESSIBLE ENTRANCE: 67 SOUTH PAUHI OFF BETHEL PH. 808.521.1846
 F: 808.533.6995 E: INFO@MENTALHEALTH-HI.ORG W: WWW.MENTALHEALTH-HI.ORG

DT: 3/22/10
 TO: Economic Revitalization, Business and Military Affairs Committee
 Chair Rep. Angus L.K. McKelvey and Co-Chair Rep. Isaac W. Choy.
 RE: STRONG SUPPORT FOR HR200/HCR278, Veterans Court
 HEARING: Tuesday, Mar 23, 2010 at 8:30 am

Dear Rep. McKelvey and Rep. Choy and members of the Committee:

I am Marya Grambs, writing on behalf of the "Healing the Trauma of War" Executive Board, a project of Mental Health America of Hawaii, of which I am Executive Director. I am writing in **STRONG SUPPORT OF** HR200/HCR278, Relating to Veterans Courts.

The mission of Mental Health America of Hawaii (formerly Mental Health Association), operating in Hawaii for 68 years, is to prevent mental illnesses and substance abuse, promote mental wellness, reduce stigma, and improve the care, treatment, and empowerment of those with mental health problems -- children, adults, elders, and their families.

We have launched our "Healing the Trauma of War" project because of the serious problems facing the 23 million veterans in this country, especially the 1.7 million veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan:

- Homicides by active-duty military personnel and new veterans for the six years before and after the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 increased by 89 percent during the current wartime period, about three-quarters of which involved Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans. About one-third of the victims were family members. (*New York Times*, 1/13/08)
- More than one-third of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans enrolled in the V.A. health system received a diagnosis of a mental health problem, most often post-traumatic stress disorder or depression, and the number of veterans with mental health problems rose steadily the longer they were out of the service. (*New York Times*, 7/17/09)
- As many as one third of the adult homeless population has served in the military and at any given time there are as many as 130,000 homeless veterans. This population mirrors the general homeless population in that:

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45% suffer mental illness and 75% suffer from substance abuse problems (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs)

- The suicide rate among soldiers in 2008 was the highest rate since the Army began tracking suicides three decades ago (CNN, 2/5/09), and this year the numbers are looking even worse.

Veterans are not more likely to be arrested than the general population. But there are significant numbers of veterans involved with the criminal justice system, many of whom struggle with mental health and/or substance abuse illnesses. For example, 60% of returning soldiers said family relationships changed after deployment, i.e., breakdowns in communication (29%), frequent arguments and conflicts (24%), and lack of sexual intimacy (21%). Nearly half experienced an increase in conflicts and arguments (verbal and/or physical) at home after returning. (10/24/08, Congressional Issue Briefing by Witness Justice, Veterans Initiative Center and Research Institute, in collaboration with bipartisan U.S. House Caucuses). This often leads to domestic violence and consequence court filing for temporary restraining orders. Hawaii's Family Court has addressed hundreds of these filings.

A 2000 Bureau of Justice Statistics Report found that:

- 81% of all justice involved veterans had a substance abuse problem prior to incarceration
- 35% were identified as suffering from alcohol dependency
- 23% were homeless at some point in the prior year
- 25% were identified as mentally ill

The Veterans Court model, which has been established in seven states, includes: active Veteran Affairs engagement, peer-to-peer mentors, connections to a broad array of services, from mental health counseling, help with employment, housing, applying for Medicaid for family members, etc.

Federal legislation-H.R. 2138-, "Services, Education, and Rehabilitation for Veterans Act," known as the "SERV Act," is in place to be approved in the next month. In recognition of the success of these courts in rehabilitating veterans and providing alternatives to incarceration, the Act will provide \$25 million for Veteran Courts and will pay 75% of the court costs. It is anticipated that the remainder could be obtained from other Department of Defense- or Justice-related funds.

Thank you for your consideration of this testimony, and I hope you give this measure your full support.

Sincerely yours,

Marya Grambs
Executive Director