

**United States Senate
Judiciary Committee**

Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism

Hearing on

*Drug and Veterans Treatment Courts:
Seeking Cost-Effective Solutions for Protecting Public Safety and
Reducing Recidivism*

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**Testimony of
Martin Sheen**

Chairman Whitehouse, Ranking Member Kyl, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee, it is my great honor to be with you today to speak about an issue that is not only close to my heart, but critical to the well being of the United States. As our country's fiscal crisis forces us to take a closer look at spending, we are witnessing a renewed interest in criminal justice reform and reevaluating the \$70 billion spent annually on America's correctional system. Understandably, state and national leaders are calling for an end to America's costly overreliance on incarceration. Calls for reform intensified recently with the Supreme Court's ruling on the release of thousands of inmates from California prisons and with last month's 40th anniversary of the War on Drugs. Despite the difficult times with which we are now faced, there is a tremendous opportunity to invest in a proven budget solution that cuts crime, saves money and serves our veterans in need of treatment and restoration.

My first exposure to Drug Courts opened my eyes to the incredible capacity of human beings to change. I have seen individuals mired in the deepest depths of addiction transformed by Drug Courts. I have seen families reunited after years of estrangement due to a loved one's substance abuse. These miracles occur every day in Drug Court. This country's greatest untapped resource is the addicted population. Every year, Drug Courts save over 120,000 chronically addicted people, bringing them from darkness to light and setting them on a course toward fulfillment, joy, freedom and service. Imagine for a moment the impact we could have if Drug Courts were available to all 1.2 million addicted individuals who would be best served by a Drug Court if one were available. Imagine the impact of 1.2 million people making up for lost time by committing themselves to recovery, serving their families, communities and country. This is the promise of Drug Courts. This is why it is critical that Congress fund Drug Courts at a minimum of \$88.7 million.

From saving money to saving lives, from eliminating racial disparities to protecting public safety, from cutting crime to restoring families, from coming to the aid of our veterans to stopping impaired drivers, this is a budget solution that we cannot afford to cut. There are hundreds of reasons why but I will give you just four reasons why Drug Courts must be at the center of any criminal justice reform.

First, and most importantly, Drug Courts are the nation's most effective strategy in reducing recidivism - especially among drug-addicted, nonviolent offenders with long criminal histories. No other strategy comes close to matching the long-term results of Drug Courts. By closely supervising participants and keeping them in treatment long enough to find permanent recovery, Drug Courts are a stabilizing force on our criminal justice system and society at-large. Everyone benefits when an addicted person gets clean and sober, pays taxes and re-engages with their community. This unparalleled success directly results in reduced use of jails and prisons, improved employment and family functioning, and saved money by reduced crime, health care utilization and victim compensation.

Second, the data backing up the Drug Courts is no longer up for debate. The rapid growth of Drug Courts in the past two decades has inspired researchers to pay close attention. More research has been published on the effects of the courts than on virtually all other criminal justice programs combined. The facts are now known: Drug Courts reduce crime by up to 50 percent and have been found to save up to \$13,000 for every individual they serve. We also now know that 75 percent of those who complete Drug Court are never arrested again, an impressive track record for the courts.

Third, Drug Courts have stepped up to serve the growing number of veterans who face charges stemming from substance abuse to mental health issues. George Washington once said, "The willingness

with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the Veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation." We ask so much of our men and women in uniform and they ask little in return. Often they are the last to ask for help. It is our duty to care for our veterans when they suffer as a result of their service to this nation. Drug Courts and now Veterans Treatment Courts are on the front lines of ensuring that when our veterans suffer from substance abuse or mental health disorders and get in trouble with the law, they have the opportunity for treatment and restoration. By restoring their honor we give honor to the service of all who serve.

Fourth, Drug Courts are being successfully rolled out across the country. In my home state of California, for example, the courts are courageously combating the scourge of methamphetamine and prescription-drug abuse. This same success is being replicated across the country, from rural towns to our largest cities. Drug Courts now number more than 2,500 and are located in every U.S. state. They represent truly nonpartisan drug policy.

In sum, Drug Courts focus on high-value offenders, those who have the highest need for treatment and wraparound services, and those who have the highest risk of failing out of those services without support and structure. These are the individuals who drain the system of resources and perpetuate generational crime and substance abuse. Drug Courts serve more than 120,000 such individuals every year, but this is only 10 percent of the eligible offender population. The Department of Justice recently identified 1.2 million individuals in the criminal justice system who would be eligible for Drug Court but are unable to gain access because one is simply not available.

This is precisely the reason why we need more Drug Courts, not fewer. As Congress looks to cut spending and reduce the federal deficit, it is critical that we do so judiciously and with an eye to the future. We must not make cuts to programs that will cost us more in the long run, particularly at the expense of our public safety. There is no greater example of such a program than Drug Courts.

If the objective of Congress is to lower our exorbitant criminal justice costs, then we should not cut a program that returns up to \$27 for every \$1 invested and which has the support of Democrats and Republicans. We should, instead, hold the line on Drug Courts funding so they can continue to treat our most seriously addicted offenders each year and meet the growing needs of our veterans in the criminal justice system.

Respectfully submitted,

Martin Sheen