26b. The National District Attorneys Association endorses the establishment and funding of Veterans Courts and programs. This Nation owes an incalculable debt to those who have served in the defense of our freedoms. When veterans go astray they deserve every reasonable effort to get them back where they began: clean, sober and on the right the side of the law.

The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that 1.16 million of all adults arrested last year — or nearly 10% — served in the military. State criminal courts devoted to U.S. war veterans are emerging across the country, from New York to Oklahoma to California, as increasing numbers of soldiers returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are showing up as criminal defendants with a special set of problems.

All veterans have gone through training that prepared them for combat and for the disciplined culture of the military. For some, just that alone made their return to civilian life difficult. And what veterans who go through combat witness and experience can make them even more susceptible to difficulties.

Studies have shown that as many as half of the troops returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer post-traumatic stress and other disorders, and mental health is the second-most treated ailment for returning veterans in the Department of Veterans Affairs system. Judges across the country say they're seeing recently returned soldiers in their courtrooms more often. They are concerned that PTSD and brain injuries underlie drug and alcohol abuse that leads to arrests for everything from domestic violence to driving while under the influence.

State court judges are joining with local prosecutors, public defenders, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs officials and local lawyer volunteers to create courts with veterans-only case proceedings. The few Veterans Courts in the nation are modeled on Drug Courts that allow defendants to avoid prison in exchange for strict monitoring.

Veterans Court is a recent addition to the criminal justice system. It is too early for extensive analysis of its effectiveness but the results from the first court, which opened in Buffalo, N.Y. under the guidance of Presiding Judge Robert Russell, are striking. Of the more than 100 veterans who have passed through, only two had to be returned to the traditional criminal court system because they could not shake narcotics or criminal behavior. .

Like most Drug Courts Veterans Court admits only nonviolent felony offenders. Defendants are required to plead guilty to their crimes. In exchange for a suspended sentence that can include prison time, they must consent to regular court visits, counseling and random drug testing. Should they waver from the straight and narrow, their sentence goes into effect.

Veterans Court also puts the bonds of military service to good use. It enlists other veterans as volunteer mentors to help overcome participants' resistance to treatment and to point them in the right direction. Volunteer veteran mentors and Veterans Affairs staff are often present during court proceedings to support the defendants and guide them in accessing military benefits that might help solve substance abuse, health, marriage, employment and financial problems.

For soldiers, mental trauma and debilitating stress are part of the job description. When veterans go astray, they deserve every reasonable effort to get them back where they began: clean, sober and on the right the side of the law.