



Testimony of Jeffrey D. Roth,
Deputy Commissioner of the New York City Department of Veterans' Services
New York City Council Committee on Veterans
Hearing on Intro. 828-A
Committee Room, City Hall
1:00 pm, Friday, September 30, 2016

Good afternoon, Chair Ulrich and members of the Committee on Veterans. My name is Jeff Roth and I am honored to serve as the first Deputy Commissioner of the New York City Department of Veterans Services (DVS). Thank you for the opportunity to meet and hear our testimony on Intro. 828-A, which would require the Department to create and periodically update a veteran resource guide made available on our website and in-print.

I want to start by updating you on how far this agency has come. Not even one year ago, historic legislation was passed by this City Council -- and signed by Mayor de Blasio in a bold statement to NYC veterans, and their families -- of this City's tireless commitment to their well-being. As an Agency in transition, we are currently focused on growing our team, with top talent, to establish the strongest foundation possible for supporting this Agency's mission.

Since the signing of Local Law 113, the Department of Veterans Services has diligently worked to onboard a talented and diverse group of professionals to staff the new agency. Since April 2016, we have grown this Agency to over 20 people and will reach maximum staffing capacity in our three lines of action by the end of the calendar year when we will have 34 DVS staff members. We have on-boarded the leadership of the remaining two lines of action: Education, Employment and Entrepreneurship (or E3) Jamal Othman; and Integrative Health and Community Resilience Darlene Brown-Williams. They have joined Nicole Branca, who heads our existing line of action, Housing & Support Services. We have hired our Chief Information Officer Venkat Motupalli, Senior Advisor of Communications and press secretary Alexis Wichowski; Senior Advisor of Public and Private Partnerships Jason Mangone, and are pending hire of our Director of Intergovernmental Affairs and Director of Administration. We have also identified candidates for key positions within each of our lines of action, and look forward to reaching full operating capacity by the end of Calendar Year 2016.

Also, since April, the Veteran Advisory Board has met twice, once in Staten Island in June and in the Bronx on September 21st.

We continue to raise awareness of the veteran designator on the IDNYC, which has seen 5,650 IDs issued to veterans to date.

Already we have come a long way towards realizing our vision to honor and serve veterans and their families.

And to fulfill our mission which is: The Department of Veterans' Services is dedicated to improving the lives of all New York City veterans and their families. Marshaling the collective resources of the City of New York, the Department will achieve the following objectives:

- Ensure that all veterans have permanent affordable housing and access to the support services needed to find and maintain their home.
- Implement the VetsThriveNYC integrative health program to foster the physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing of veterans and their families.
- Expand education and career opportunities for veterans through a rapidly growing network of City, public, private, and non-profit partners.
- Provide the human and technological infrastructure for veterans and their families to gain City-wide access to benefits, resources and care through a leading coordinated service network.

As we build our capacity to establish a strong and diverse foundation of professionals to best enable our programs and initiatives, let me provide a brief summary of the key elements that we are continuing to address.

Effectively ending veteran homelessness in New York City and sustaining the gains through developing systems and applying resources to ensure that all veterans who become homeless are rapidly rehoused in permanent, affordable housing with the services they have earned and deserve. Specifically, DVS will continue to work with its City, state, federal and community partners, focusing on:

- Meeting “Functional Zero”: ending homelessness for veterans currently in shelter and developing a rapid rehousing system for housing new veterans within 90 days of entry.
- Mitigating recidivism by bolstering ‘aftercare’ services through a dedicated coordinator who will drive assessment priorities and fully leverage the vital veteran peer coordinator role. This coordinator, Angela Guyton-Cyril, is now on staff.

- Leading efforts to systematize the assessment and housing placement of homeless veterans across systems and resources and scale this system to benefit all homeless New Yorkers.

Working with the First Lady’s *ThriveNYC* mental health roadmap through implementing the *CoreFour* integrative health model to address the full impact of war – mind, body and spirit – for our veterans and their families by applying a peer-based community approach that increases engagement and lowers stigma and cost. This work includes:

- Working with service providers to participate in implementing the *CoreFour Integrative Health Model*, which leads with trained peer intervention and integrates education, culture & the arts with holistic services and clinical care for veterans and their families.
- Conducting city-wide outreach and family engagement to better connect veterans and family members with a comprehensive range of resources specifically tailored to their needs and strengths.
- Enhancing access to holistic services in non-clinical settings.
- Engaging in the *ThriveNYC* education campaign to erode stigma and foster engagement.

Executing DVS’ strategy for recruiting and connecting Veterans and their Families to City Careers, Services and Resources through a phased action plan aimed at:

- Upgrading the DVS website for direct access to City job opportunities.
- Collaborating with DCAS City-wide Recruitment/*WorkForce 1* and the public/private sectors to identify HR best practices for City-wide Agency dissemination and application.
- Standardizing City-wide intake forms to foster self-identification of veterans & families.
- Establishing *NYC Veteran Business Leadership Consortium* (VBLC), designed to enhance business and procurement opportunities for veteran business owners.

Launching *VetConnectNYC*, a digital platform/portal and coordinated service network connecting veterans and their families with comprehensive referrals, counseling, and benefit support, across a growing constellation of service providers. Currently, we are drafting a scope of work, and we look forward to presenting a draft contract for a negotiated acquisition in the coming months.

Building upon the *Task Force on Behavioral Health and the Criminal Justice System* and its progress to date through applying a systems lens to fully assess veteran needs in the criminal justice system, including coordinated access to housing, employment, legal and health services.

Improving access to veteran benefits by training a team of outreach workers and establishing a satellite office in each of the boroughs to provide assistance direct to veterans in the community.

Collaborating with the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York to establish and maintain strategic partnerships with private entities, non-profit organizations and foundations to generate support and foster bold investment designed to: plug gaps in service; test, pilot, and scale innovative new programs; and leverage the flexibility of the private sector to support our public initiatives—all aimed at empowering NYC veterans and families of all generations.

Developing and implementing a digital trans-media plan, including:

- Launching new website platform to facilitate interaction and access to resources.
- Engaging strategic media outlets to amplify DVS key messages and activities.
- Expanding the interactive universe of veterans connecting with DVS by setting and meeting social media targets for maximal awareness, engagement, and activity.

Continuing DVS collaboration with the Mayor's Office of Special Projects and Community Events, the Mayor's Office of Citywide Event Coordination, and Management & Veteran Service Organization partners to assist and organize major veterans' commemorative ceremonies and special events that honor service.

Working as a team, we have achieved so much and, yet, I know you will agree that our most important work is still in front of us.

In regard to Introduction 828-A, which would add a section to the administrative code to require the Department of Veterans Services to maintain and periodically update a resource guide for veterans, we concur that finding ways of connecting NYC veterans to the resources and benefits they have earned is a chief aim of DVS. Indeed, it is a main reason for the creation of this very agency.

However, DVS is opposed to this bill for the simple reason that a guide is not more effective for supporting our veterans and helping them navigate the many resources and benefits available to them than methods we currently employ. In fact, a resource guide would be a less innovative approach than those we have already implemented, and plan to implement, as we transition to an agency, to reach veterans.

To this end, in addition to the projects I've mentioned, we intend to leverage many other methods for sharing resources with veterans and their families beyond a simple list of resources. Currently, we are upgrading our new DVS website. The first phase, which we expect to go live any day now, will be the structure by which we make multiple more significant content upgrades occurring between now and the end of the calendar year. These upgrades to our website will include a comprehensive list of local, state and federal resources that are available to veterans and their families. It is something that we will maintain and upgrade on a regular and recurring basis. And as we learn of new resources and benefits, we will use this forum to share those updates.

We will also leverage social media to include Facebook, Twitter, Linked-In, and other digital media platforms to highlight new and changing resources to ensure that as many veterans and their families are made aware as quickly as possible. We will also continue to leverage the networks of our partner veteran service organizations, not for profits, and other organizations to further push the information to as many veterans as possible.

Additionally, we have *NYServes-NYC*, which is currently available by phone and which connects veterans and their families to services through a coordination center of trained staff. This staff is familiar with the various service providers in the network of public, private and not for profit partners who provide services to veterans and can readily assist veterans in accessing the many benefits they have earned. As I mentioned previously, this service, which will be rebranded as *VetConnectNYC*, is currently available and has served nearly 2,000 veterans during its pilot phase, a number that we will actively work to increase in the coming calendar year.

For the veterans who do not have ready access to a computer or social media for accessing this, can also call 311, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year and receive information on accessing benefits.

And even better, we are placing community outreach specialists to serve as a direct link between the community in each borough and DVS by providing the human element of one-on-one support. Community outreach specialists are trained to connect veterans and their families to trusted resources available to them from the city, state, and federal governments including employment resources through the federal and state Department of Labor, City Workforce Centers, and employment opportunities with the City in partnership with the Department of Citywide Administrative Services. These employment resources include communication of available positions, job placement, resume building, and developing interview skills to name a few. Additionally, our outreach specialists are trained to identify and guide veterans and their families with education and vocational services through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and New York State including the post 9/11 GI Bill, vocational rehabilitation, and NYS Tuition Assistance Program. Likewise, our specialists work closely with our veteran peer coordinators who assist with access to housing and homelessness programs.

Deployed to the five boroughs, our specialists are creating a citywide presence, and taking information on programs and services to veterans in their community through collaborative partnerships with host sites. These host sites, or satellite offices, are particularly critical for veterans who have difficulty traveling outside their borough or are reluctant to visit the offices of a larger institution such as the VA or our own offices here in lower Manhattan. To date, we have active offices and collaborations with the Queens Borough President's Office and CUNY's College of Staten Island (CSI). We are actively discussing with host sites in the Bronx, northern Manhattan, and Brooklyn to follow as we bring on board the staff to work in those communities.

Additionally, our specialists receive professional training in specific areas and we are working on developing cross-trainings with Human Resources Administration staff on SNAP benefits and Department of Finance on their benefits for veterans as examples. Lastly, our specialists have undergone classroom and practical trainings with the New York State Department of Veterans

Affairs, under whose sponsorship our staff are pursuing their VA Accreditation as service officers, which will allow them to assist veterans and their families with applying for disability and compensation benefits through the VA.

Finally, with our upgraded website we will be releasing a resource guide that our outreach coordinators have used internally for supporting veterans. We are currently updating this guide and will release it on our website for veterans. We will also send this to veterans and support organizations, and are happy to provide a hardcopy anytime requested.

Regarding the proposed amendment to Section 1 Title 31, we know that connecting New York City veterans and their families to timely resources and services is central to the purpose for which the New York City Department of Veterans' Services was established. Ensuring such is one of our top priorities. To this end, DVS requires maximum flexibility for determining the best methods for achieving our mission, because, as we say, we will stop at nothing to do as much as we can for the veterans we serve.

At this time, I am pleased to address your comments and questions. Thank you very much.

NYC Veterans Alliance
www.nycveteransalliance.org

Testimony by Kristen L. Rouse
NYC Veterans Alliance

Hearing on Int. 828-A
Creation of Veterans Resource Guide

NYC Council Committee on Veterans

September 30, 2016

My name is Kristen L. Rouse, and I am a veteran of the United States Army, I served three tours of duty in Afghanistan. I am testifying on behalf of the Board and more than 200 dues-paying members of the NYC Veterans Alliance.

We agree that a key role of DVS is maintaining an up-to-date listing of resources in NYC and beyond that can assist veterans, military members, and their families—this was, in fact, one of the recommendations that our team of veterans, service providers, and experts made in the policy paper we released last year.

We further agree that it is the role of government to ensure that veterans, military members, and their families are able to access the services, benefits, resources, and opportunities afforded to them through city, state, federal, and nonprofit programs. We also agree that access must be made available to all members of the veterans community, regardless of their age or ability to use the internet or electronic devices.

For these reasons, we support amending the City's administrative code to spell out what resources veterans should be able to learn about and access through DVS. **But we also strongly advise that this Committee revise this bill to ensure that it is a long-term benefit to our community rather than a costly duplication of what community-based organizations have already created, or worse—a source of dead-end referrals to overburdened social service organizations that cannot always help.**

Resource guides for veterans are not at all hard to come by. The VA gives out printed guides and maintains an online and localized National Resource Directory. The New York State Division of Veterans Affairs has an app anyone with a smartphone can download. It isn't hard to find phone numbers or facilities or any number of job and resource fairs handing out pamphlets and flyers promoting resources to veterans. Yet far too many veterans and families in our community still need help.

Last year a veteran told me she went in person to the then-Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs for help, and all anyone there could give her was a printed resource guide that gave her a list of agency names and phone numbers to call for help. MOVA was even included in the listing. It was like a bad joke, she said, and she never went back.

We hear frequently from veterans who call and email government and nonprofit agencies, but they get inaccurate or confusing information, or they can't get appointments for weeks or months, or they get what feels to them like a runaround. We don't hear veterans saying, "I

couldn't find a resource guide" or "I couldn't get a referral." What we do hear is "I can't get a lawyer" or "I can't get a decent job" or "I can't get help with paying rent." New York City veterans don't really need more phone numbers to call, web addresses to email, or offices to visit. What we do need is **accurate, accessible information; high quality, coordinated, and available resources;** and **meaningful follow-up from people who care.**

DVS has made tremendous progress in building a trained and resourced team of veteran outreach coordinators, and this, we believe, is more important and beneficial than any online or printed resource guide. The more experienced and skilled this team becomes with providing clear and accurate information, connecting veterans with available resources, and following up to ensure success—the more our community will grow to trust DVS as worthwhile resource.

Meanwhile, community-based organizations and innovators have already moved beyond resource guides. NYServes has developed as a digital hub, connecting veterans, online and by phone, with resources based on eligibility and needs. IAVA operates a helpline where licensed social workers connect veterans of all eras with benefits and resources. Numerous VSOs and direct-service organizations likewise provide individualized referrals—because the web of resources for veterans is often too complex and confusing without the help of an experienced professional who knows the ropes. Moving on even from referrals, Pathfinder has created an extensive online listing of resources that uses reviews to show where veterans are actually getting help.

A resource guide can be a good thing—but it will be a wasted effort and expense if it fails to keep abreast of what community-based organizations are already doing, or even harmful if it only leads to confusion, runaround, and dead-end referrals to resources that can't actually help veterans and their families.

We strongly recommend that this Committee revise this bill to ensure that a resource listing maintained by DVS works in conjunction with what's already been built by community-based organizations, and that no NYC veteran, military member, or family member finds more dead ends or bad information as a result.

On behalf of the NYC Veterans Alliance, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Pending your questions, this concludes my testimony.

**New York City Council Hearing
Friday, September 30, 2014, 1:00 p.m.**

Testimony RE: Proposed Int. No. 828A - in relation to the creation of a veterans resource guide.

Good afternoon. My name is Peter Kempner. I am the Director of the Veterans Justice Project (VJP) at Brooklyn Legal Services, a part of Legal Services NYC. Legal Services NYC is the largest provider of free civil legal services in the nation with offices in all five boroughs where we serve over 70,000 New Yorkers annually. The Veterans Justice Project represents low-income veterans, active duty service members and their families who are in need of civil legal services in the areas of housing law, public benefit eligibility, family law and other essential needs. Our attorneys and paralegals answer calls on our city wide legal hotline for veterans and staff multiple legal clinics at VA and other facilities throughout the city. We provide free legal services to well over a thousand of New York City's veterans, active duty service members and their families every year.

We are delighted that the New York City Council's Veterans Committee is holding this hearing and invited us to testify regarding Proposed Int. 828A which would mandate the creation and maintenance of a resource guide for New York City's veterans.

With the creation of the New York City Division of Veterans Services ("DVS"), our city is in the midst of transforming how services are delivered to our veterans. There are dozens if not hundreds of organizations responding to the needs of New York City's veteran population and we must ensure that the City effectively provides veterans with information on where they can receive services. Now that DVS is an independent agency and has greatly expanded in scale and scope, it is the proper agency for hosting a centralized clearinghouse with information on the various veterans' service providers throughout the City and providing referrals to these providers.

While it is true that other resource guides for veterans exist in one form or another, the mandates of this bill would result in the creation of a comprehensive living document that is maintained and updated regularly by DVS. As part of its mission, DVS should be the main resource for veteran related information in New York City. Centralization of veteran related information will

streamline the services that we all provide to veterans and make it easier for veterans to navigate where they can find help.

If this bill is enacted, I urge the city and DVS to be as specific as possible in drafting the Resource Guide. For example, New York City has many free legal service providers for veterans. However, each of these legal service providers have different criteria for accepting cases and may handle only criminal or civil matters or both. It is important, therefore, that veterans are not forced to call multiple providers to find the appropriate legal services provider/proper place that can assist them. . Our office often receives calls from veterans seeking legal assistance in areas of law that we do not handle. Fortunately, we are able to refer veterans to other agencies where they can be helped. It is disconcerting, though to make a veteran call elsewhere, which leads to further delays in obtaining legal services. I urge the city to work with providers in drafting the descriptions of resources and have regular contact with providers to make sure that information in the Resource Guide is current and comprehensive.

Beyond listing the services available to New York City veterans, this bill also ambitiously calls for creating a guide of veterans' benefits and preferences available on the federal, state and local levels. The proposed New York City Administrative Code §31-106 (b)(1)-(2) is a monumental undertaking which would greatly benefit our city's veterans. Benefits for veterans are complicated, they hinge on numerous factors including but not limited to discharge status, period of service, length of service, active duty versus reservist service, disability type, cause of that disability and many other factors.

We recommend a guide that provides the basic eligibility criteria for the various benefits and information on where and how to apply for benefits. Such a guide would greatly serve the community since state and local benefits and preferences are more obscure and less well known than benefits provided under federal law. I have provided legal services to veterans for years and I am still grappling with which state and local laws benefit veterans. Again, I would urge the drafters of the guide to work closely with the agencies who administer veterans' benefits and preferences and with the advocates who assist veterans in obtaining benefits and preferences when drafting the Resource Guide.

Legal Services NYC thanks the Committee and the Council for holding this important hearing, introducing this important piece of legislation and we look forward to working with you and the administration to ensure that New York City is able to provide the best services to our veterans in need.

Peter Kempner
Veterans Justice Project Director
Brooklyn Legal Services

Good afternoon. As an Army combat Veteran, please allow me to first say thank you for your continued service.

My name is Elana Duffy. I served in the US Army from 2003 to 2012 and was medically retired after a roadside bomb attack in Iraq. I am one of only approximately 300 female Purple Heart recipients, so I use many Veteran resources. I know what it is like to search for services, have good and bad fits with those resources, and refer others based on my experience. I since created www.pathfinder.vet, an online platform of verified and reviewed Veteran and family support resources. We use customer impact data to better understand interactions between the greater Veteran community and their surrounding populations, as well as provide a tool for Veterans to find and connect with local resources. We have already built the database proposed in Introduction 828-A using input from the Veteran community on what would be most useful to them, and have made a dynamic tool instead of a static database. We therefore recommend revisions to the proposed motion.

There are approximately 22 million living Veterans, with 216,000 living in New York City. 250 thousand Servicemembers exit the service each year. With this continuous population, new resources are created often. Nationwide, there are over 1 million organizations and programs offering assistance applicable to Veterans. A static, city database simply cannot stay current; our system allows Veterans to tell others about even the smallest effective service.

The Veteran community has additional challenges:

- 1) For years we could not quit nor choose assignments, so many select where to transition based upon a single factor such as family or school, not combined resources as it feels too complex.
- 2) For our time on active duty, we are taken care of. We received "three hots and a cot," plus were monitored on healthcare, finances, and dentist appointments. We do not have to make many choices, not even what to wear each day. We have a built-in support network that we lose upon transition.

These are critical when considering the tools offered, and where other tools already fail. Department of Defense transition assistance programs provide resource information, but it is incomplete and local to the base while a significant number of Veterans relocate. Veterans in need of support do not know where to look in a new location. A locality-based resource platform deployed nationally can assist in planning a smooth transition.

Our research also suggests that with the ability to choose between so many resources, overwhelmed Veterans and families may rush selection leading to a poor fit. Many Veterans who have a poor experience with a resource are reluctant to try another option. For instance, a poor experience with one mental health professional may result in discontinuing care. A tool cannot simply give Veterans options; it must empower better choices. The database proposed is not enough.

Long term, a dynamic platform inclusive of reviews and working in tandem with other resources – as we are – can also move our community forward. For example, services Veterans need are similar to those for reducing prison recidivism and reintegrating those recovering after long-term illness. City resources

can provide verified referrals. Donors and investors can gain perspective on the impact of their dollar when used for social good. NYC can lead in the Smart Cities movement, increasing the connectivity between city resources and those at state and national levels. The proposed database cannot do such things, not without reinventing what our community has already created.

As the CEO of Pathfinder Labs and a member of the New York City Veteran Alliance, we support the concepts of Introduction 828-A, but recommend a revision that the city partner with existing platforms to create a more dynamic and relevant tool. Using the platforms already in the community would support Veteran small businesses and initiatives, be more cost-effective for the city, and be a far more versatile option than the database proposed.

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Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

in favor in opposition

Date: 9/30/16

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Name: Peter Kempner
Address: 105 COURT ST. 4th FL Brooklyn NY
I represent: LEGAL SERVICES NYC
Address: 40 Worth, 6th FL NYC

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in favor in opposition

Date: 30 SEP 2016

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: ELANA DUFFY
Address: 203 E 27 ST Apt 3 NY NY 10016
I represent: PATHFINDER LABS INC NYC VETERANS AWARE
Address: _____

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I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 128A Res. No. _____

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Date: 9/50

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: JOE BELLO
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I represent: _____
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Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms