



Testimony of James Hendon

Commissioner for New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS)

New York City Council Committee on Veterans

Budget Hearing

March 23, 2021, 1:00 pm

Introduction

Good afternoon Chairman Deutsch, committee members, and advocates. As New York City appears to enter the tail end of this pandemic, I urge our constituency to stay safe, wear a mask, and get vaccinated if you are eligible and have not yet done so.

My name is James Hendon, and I am proud to serve as the Commissioner for the New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS). I am joined today by Quamid Francis, our Chief of Staff, and Cassandra Alvarez, our Associate Commissioner for Policy and Strategic Partnerships. I welcome this opportunity to testify about our budget, VetConnectNYC, housing, and agency pandemic-related programs. Following my testimony, I welcome any questions that you may have.

Budget Overall

Each new fiscal year presents the opportunity to take stock of how far we have come, examine the City's resources, and make decisions that ensure that we can continue delivering the support that our approximately 200,000 Veterans and their families have come to rely on. We are confident that the upcoming budget discussions will translate into a sound financial plan that will enable DVS and the City of New York to provide our Veterans with the necessary services they require; further cementing our position as a national model for how best to locally serve those who have defended our country and protected the freedoms that we enjoy.

Since our last budget hearing, much has changed. Despite this, our agency, like the people we serve, persevere. Last year, DVS was actively working to fill our nine remaining vacancies, reaching an authorized strength of forty-nine (49) employees with a projected budget of **\$6.0M**. Now, our agency is allocated for a lesser headcount, but an increase in our budget by \$240,000. Regardless of these changes, DVS stands committed to improving on the success of our unique programs and services while increasing our outreach to more Veterans in the city to better inform them of who we are and how best to access our services and benefits. As I said last year during this time, we commit ourselves to work smarter by effectively managing resources, staff, and time to deliver verifiable, evidence-based outcomes. The updates I intend to provide within this hearing stand as a testament to that.

VetConnectNYC

During our last hearing, we spoke about the VetConnectNYC transition into an in-house platform. In transitioning into this platform, we carefully weighed the concerns and issues raised

by non-profit partners, the Council, and constituents; while maintaining the quality of services Veterans became familiar with.

In September 2019, DVS began to track, annotate, and evaluate the growing concerns identified by our constituency. While constituents were overwhelmingly happy with the services provided, similar themes continued to emerge regarding room for improvement.

One common theme was accessibility. While constituents were grateful for the platform and its wide range of services, we found that some service providers were no longer taking on additional clients, which resulted in service delays. In some circumstances, providers, due to various reasons, were unable to take on additional clients for an undisclosed time thereby confusing our constituents and delaying services. Despite this, DVS continued to triage the platform, ensuring that a reasonable and satisfactory alternative was available to our constituency's benefit. Since transitioning this program in-house, DVS has expanded the number of unique service providers and can more greatly monitor active providers' status.

Also, while the number of service requests continues to improve, the price was a growing concern. First highlighted by a non-profit partner in 2019 and later amplified by other groups, the VetConnectNYC price of \$514,000 seemed disproportionate to the number of service requests resolved within a given year. This message throughout the years only resonated more as our city entered a pandemic. Moving forward, DVS can maintain the platform at a fraction of the cost.

Lastly, a concern raised by the Council was DVS's accessibility and maintenance of the data. Now, DVS can better maintain constituent data, highlight applicable services, and most importantly, gather the insight necessary as we move into our new chapter as an agency. As I

stated when I first came into this role, a goal of mine is to get “hands-on with our people.”

Through this transition, we are closer to that goal.

Moving into this new chapter, DVS has trained, equipped, and empowered several staff members to independently and efficiently manage the Care Coordination Center (CCC). In a few short months, DVS hit the ground running. Since October 1st, 2020, we’ve resolved over 524 individual service episodes in areas such as housing & shelter, benefit navigation, mental health, and education. Further, through this transition, we’ve significantly increased our number of service providers to 115; 14 of which are mental health and support organizations.

As we continue this journey, we look forward to maintaining the care and attentiveness Veterans have come to expect when using the VetConnectNYC platform.

Veteran Housing

Housing homeless Veterans is one of the foundational pillars of this agency. Even during the pandemic, which DVS understands has created greater housing insecurity, DVS continues to actively house homeless Veterans to ensure that they are in safe, secure housing. While our Veteran Peer Coordinators (VPCs) are no longer working in City shelters, they continue their important work to house Veterans, albeit under different circumstances. For example, house viewings and interviews were shifted to virtual modes; videos of available units were shared, and management companies opted to complete phone or video-call interviews with potential Veteran applicants. If virtual options were not sufficient, our VPCs would safely conduct physical inspections of units, pick up/drop off documentation, and assist with the Veteran’s move.

Through these efforts, DVS has found notable success. Since the start of this fiscal year, we've housed over 100 Veterans. This past November, DVS staff housed 29 individuals, our second-highest monthly amount in the past three years. To achieve this goal, we've utilized existing programs such as CityFHEPS, HUD-VASH, and VASH Continuum, providing our constituency with various housing options. Further, we've engaged and communicated with landlords to expand the pool of housing options for our Veterans.

Take for example, the story of Veteran J. Veteran J was a Navy Veteran referred to DVS' HSS team in August 2020 for assistance. Veteran J was chronically and street homeless, having been on the street from June 2019 until he entered a Safe Haven location in July of 2020. Veteran J also had a history of substance abuse in recent remission. Due to the Veteran's needs and history of being in and out of homelessness, an application was submitted for a supportive housing unit in the Bronx to support his transition from homelessness to housing. Veteran J completed the interviews virtually via Zoom and eventually was able to move out in November to his own, newly furnished studio apartment. The DVS VPC who assisted Veteran J, visited him a few days after to see how he was adjusting to his move, and he was happy to chat about his apartment while he went about cooking in his own space. He was one of 23 Veterans able to move to a unit set aside for disabled, homeless Veterans through the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative in a brand new building in the Bronx.

Or, take for example the story of Veteran T. Veteran T is a United States Navy Veteran that was residing in shelter in Brooklyn, facing a diagnosis of a terminal illness when referred to DVS. Since he was eligible for VA medical services, the Veteran was encouraged by his assigned VPC to seek enrollment into the HUD VASH program which DVS assisted in getting him an

appointment. Following the screening, the VPC found out the Veteran was denied by the program stating he did not have a high enough need for additional support or case management. After asking the Veteran some questions, the VPC realized the Veteran did not see the challenges he faced and refused to admit he needed help, denying needing any support- which is exactly what the Veteran told the interviewers leading to his denial. The Veteran's medical condition was debilitating for him, which impacted many aspects of his life. Through support and advocacy, the VPC guided the Veteran into recognizing his needs and counseled him to seek help. The Veteran was re-screened for the voucher and in light of his new insight he was accepted for the voucher program in July 2020. The VPC referred him to a studio apartment that offers onsite services and Veteran support, which he successfully moved into in October 2020.

As we look towards our next chapter, DVS will continue to work smarter, utilizing the number of resources available to New York City Veterans such as CityFHEPs, HUD-VASH, and VASH-Continuum. Also, DVS will continue to engage and communicate with potential landlords to more effectively house our Veterans.

DVS Activities (masks, home depot gift cards, microgrant initiative)

There's no question that Covid-19 has impacted both the health and economic well-being of New Yorkers and the community organizations they belong to. Organizations such as the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and so many others throughout the years have served as meeting places for Veterans, a home away from home, and a shared space to reflect on what it means to serve. To help alleviate some of the financial burden faced by these organizations, DVS launched the VSO Microgrant Initiative last Fall.

Through the generous donations of philanthropic funders, 22 different Veteran Service Organizations (“VSOs”) that had lost rental revenue due to being closed, were each awarded a grant of \$1,136. While no amount can cover the economic toll this pandemic has had, we are grateful to our partners and the Mayor’s Fund for enabling us to provide a source of support. We were also able to connect 35 more VSOs to Home Depot gift cards to help pay for sanitizing and general improvement expenses thanks to the generosity of the Home Depot Foundation.

We were happy to hear that these efforts made a small, positive difference for our VSOs. Take for example, Post Commander Leon Yeserski of the SSG Michael Ollis Post in Staten Island, who expressed his gratitude in receiving these funds in a time of need. He wrote, “Thank you very much for your help and assistance with getting this grant for our post in this time of need.” The Ollis Post is named after Staff Sgt. Michael Ollis, a 10th Mountain Soldier who gave his life shielding a fellow service member from a suicide bomber while deployed in Afghanistan.

Another organization expressed their gratitude by sharing that they purchased a tool box with the gift card. A tool box that will help them maintain a place they call home. As I often say, our goal as an agency is to make $1+1=3$. By assisting this organization with their recent purchase, we did just that.

Another important effort has been our face mask distribution. DVS met the need for masks head on by distributing 38,000 face masks to more than 50 different Veteran-serving organizations, including VA Hospitals and Vet Centers, supportive housing residences and shelters, and VSOs. We’ve even fulfilled requests for masks from individual members of the community who were in need—there’s no task too small when it comes to providing help to those who have served.

All of this work can be attributed to the power of partnerships. During a time of need and scarce resources, DVS was able to make a difference for our VSOs and members of the community through like-minded partners that share our core values of service.

Mission: VetCheck

I am also proud to share that our Mission:VetCheck outreach initiative is still ongoing. Although the height of the pandemic is thankfully behind us, its impacts will be felt for months and years to come. That's why we firmly believe in continuing the effort to make direct contact with our constituents. It's imperative that they know they are not alone and that there are resources available to help. To date, Mission: VetCheck has made approximately 28,000 calls to Veterans and their families with a 13% engagement rate. The initiative has also connected 869 Veterans to information, resources, and services. Mission: VetCheck has also recently served as a conduit for vaccine information as our volunteers are equipped with helpful information from both the city and VA.

Thanks to the help of the New York National Guard, more than 12,000 calls were placed during the darkest months of April, May, and June 2020. Starting in July 2020, New York Cares volunteers began supporting the project, and to date, more than 400 of their volunteers have supported Mission: VetCheck.

The New York Cares volunteers who support this initiative have been truly incredible—some have been making calls to our community every week since our partnership launched in July because they realize how much of a difference a simple, supportive phone call can make in someone's life. Over the course of two focus group sessions we recently held, one volunteer expressed how grateful the Veteran was to hear from someone who was just looking to help. "I

was praying that someone would reach out to me, and your call came just when I needed it,” expressed Kai, who has volunteered for the project for the last few months.

Another volunteer shared the following with us,

“Veterans have a unique voice and they need to be heard during this pandemic. I thank New York Cares for creating this opportunity for volunteers to connect Veterans with Veterans Services especially now with much uncertainty about our public health, our economy and our determination to achieve racial, social and economic justice. They have sacrificed and served, and we must do everything we can to give them the support they deserve.”

We are fortunate to partner with New York Cares, and thank their volunteers for enabling us to establish meaningful connections with our Veterans. These trusting relationships position us to deliver services that address vital needs such as food, employment, financial, and VA benefits support. We are grateful for the impact they’ve helped us make to date.

Food Initiatives

One of the most significant concerns facing New Yorkers during the pandemic is food insecurity. To address this need, DVS has partnered with GetFoodNYC to ensure that our Veteran populations can access all of the avenues through which the City provides food assistance to New Yorkers.

To support these efforts, DVS coordinators received training and certification as GetFood authorized enrollers and are assisting Veterans in navigating this program's requirements to get food. Veterans can independently, or through one of our DVS coordinators, submit a food

request once every three days or two weeks of recurring orders. Since the start of this program, DVS has assisted 547 individual Veterans with gaining access to food.

Our work to address food insecurity goes well beyond GetFoodNYC. Since the start of the pandemic, DVS has collaborated with Hello Fresh to support the State's Nourish New York Initiative. Through this collaboration, DVS works with various organizations to distribute 350-400 Hello Fresh food kits to Veteran households per week. Since this program's launch, DVS has delivered 59,533 meal kits have to Veteran households; 18,000 in this year alone. Further, in addition to the Hello Fresh initiative, DVS has also actively engaged with the Bronx Food Initiative to deliver meals to hungry constituents. Through this collaboration, DVS has distributed 22,068 meal boxes to hungry New York Veterans and over 4,500 meal boxes this year alone.

As we continue developing internal programs and initiatives, DVS looks forward to collaborating with outside organizations to combat food insecurity facing our constituency.

Conclusion

As we navigate the challenges presented by the pandemic and beyond, DVS will continue to build out and provide quality services and information to the New York City Veteran community. We thank you for the opportunity to testify on this matter and look forward to any questions you or other Committee members may have.

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Testimony Submitted for Record by

James Fitzgerald
Deputy Director, NYC Veterans Alliance

New York City Council
Committee on Veterans

Hearing on

Budget and Oversight Hearings on The Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2022

March 23, 2021

This testimony is submitted for record as we were not provided the opportunity to testify today, despite multiple requests to do so. My name is James Fitzgerald and I am the Deputy Director of the NYC Veterans Alliance, a member-driven, grassroots policy advocacy and community-building organization that advances veterans and families as civic leaders. We work with more than 150 community organizations across the NYC Metro area to promote events for veterans and families posted online at OurVeterans.NYC, our year-round online resource hub visited by more than 4,000 users each month. We also remain the only organization dedicated to local-level advocacy for veterans and families here in NYC. The NYC Veterans Alliance was a key advocate for the creation of the Department of Veterans' Services to support our city's population of 210,000 veterans, plus an estimated 250,000 caregivers and family members connected with those veterans. We also remain an independent, impartial voice for our community as an organization that does not receive funds from the Council. Our membership strongly supports our continuous efforts to set high expectations for the role of DVS in NYC and beyond.

On March 13th, 2020, Mayor de Blasio issued a state of emergency for NYC in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The following week, NYC Veterans Alliance mobilized a Veteran Mutual Aid program to address the direct needs of the NYC-metro veteran community. Empowering a volunteer team of NYC veterans, we successfully provided assistance and information to over 200 veteran families throughout the five boroughs encompassing a series of request types including: food assistance, housing support, financial assistance, VA benefits help, and check-in calls. All assistance was funded by NYC Veterans Alliance member donors and grant funding through NYS Health Foundation. Our organization is proud to continue providing direct support to the veteran community through our Veteran Mutual Aid program. Additionally, our weekly e-newsletter became an even more vital resource for veteran families, ensuring all pertinent and relevant pandemic information was easily available to them. The beginning months of the pandemic brought high levels of disinformation from a variety of sources which made our communications central to informing veteran families of the latest news and resources as the pandemic shifted all of our lives. NYC Veterans Alliance continues to be a necessary resource for the veteran community as local government has lagged in providing services and relevant information.

The needs of the NYC veteran community were vast before the COVID-19 pandemic and have only been exacerbated during this distressing time. Veteran families were left in dire need of food resources and housing support to ensure they could safely shelter in place while providing food to their loved ones. Our homeless veterans have been at a higher risk for exposure to coronavirus as they were not able to shelter in secure locations without the threat of being in a close-quarter environment within a veteran shelter, and the program to house them in

hotels took critical months to implement. Veteran families faced urgent needs and extremely limited government services to help them. Government agencies, including DVS, even called on our Veterans Mutual Aid program to help veterans in need. We are proud of the work our staff and volunteers have done to serve the NYC veterans community, and we are grateful to the donors who made our work possible. Our work over the last year has also made clear that gaps remain in the needs of our community that are not being addressed appropriately by DVS.

We offer the following urgent recommendations on the 2022 DVS budget as the COVID-19 pandemic reaches the one-year mark:

- 1. DVS should fund food delivery & distribution efforts to empower local community organizations who are serving veteran families in need.** Over the last year we have worked with DVS staff who have worked diligently to address food insecurity in the veteran's community with resources available to them, and to connect organizations with donated food—yet a major gap was in packaging, handling, and transporting bulk donations to those who needed it across the city. Meanwhile, many mutual aid programs across the city, including ours, sought to source food and delivery volunteers nearest to their clients to minimize the logistical requirements in getting nutritious food to people in need as quickly as possible. Community organizations have improvised and developed robust, effective networks to get food and supplies to their constituents; what they most urgently need is funding to accomplish more deliveries. As food insecurity will remain a top need of veteran families in the months and possibly years ahead, we recommend that DVS support existing efforts with grant opportunities and incentives to empower community organizations to do what they do best within their respective areas of operations. Local government should be supporting the existing programs of nonprofits and community organizations, not creating new systems for them to expend time, resources, and staffing to adapt to.
- 2. DVS must offer greater transparency in data reported on efforts to mitigate veteran homelessness in order for legislators and stakeholders to assess their effectiveness.** We are grateful for dedicated staff at DVS who work diligently to help veterans with housing, but it has been difficult to ascertain the effectiveness of the city's work to address housing instability and homelessness to determine whether current or proposed funding levels have been sufficient. The recently released U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Point-in-Time (PIT) count showed that veteran homelessness in NY increased from January 2019 to January 2021 by 167 veterans. This increase took place *before* the pandemic devastated our city and community. However, the 2020 Mayor's Management Report (MMR), which reports data on activities between July 1, 2019, to June 30, 2020, states that

DVS's peer coordinators secured 184 veterans with housing, but does not specify whether the housing is transitional or permanent, nor does it indicate how long it took those veterans to be housed. The MMR additionally reports that DVS provided homelessness prevention services to 455 veterans, without further specificity of what services are funded through city, state, or federal voucher, supportive services, or other services. A more detailed report of services provided to our homeless veterans is imperative for community stakeholders to understand where resources need to be allocated. Producing relevant data points and detailed information on how we are supporting our homeless veterans is key to eradicating veteran homelessness in our city. For example, our Veterans Mutual Aid program funded 39 nights of emergency hotel stays for homeless veterans when we were told by DVS and other service providers that no safe housing was available for these veterans; these expenses strained financial resources we had budgeted for food deliveries, but we did all that we could to take care of veterans during a terrible and tragic time. We and other stakeholders certainly should be able to better understand from DVS what the true availability of services has been in order to advocate for legislators to ensure adequate resources are there when needed.

- 3. DVS should report data on community needs and service requests currently housed in its VetConnect / Unite NYC digital platform.** Now more than ever, stakeholders need to understand our community's needs—yet it has been difficult to ascertain a comprehensive view of this information outside of reading annual and program reports from nonprofit after nonprofit. The Unite NYC platform being operated by DVS staff provides the opportunity to gain a real-time view into the service requests of veterans and how those services are being rendered. This information being made public to veteran serving organizations is paramount to informing stakeholders on where we are needed most, which is especially important as we seek grants and plan for future needs. Clear reporting of data is needed—either by adding detail, definitions, and more comprehensive data to the annual MMR, or in a separate report produced by DVS. Legislators and veteran-serving organizations alike cannot determine whether DVS is sufficiently staffed and resourced to address the veteran communities needs without comprehensive data.

- 4. DVS needs more dedicated, accredited staff to process Veterans Affairs (VA) claims.** In FY 2020, NYC DVS accredited staff members began helping NYC veterans and their families process Veterans Affairs (VA) claims, which brings vital federal funds to veterans and family members, especially helping those who are impaired in their ability to work and assisting those in need with these earned and awarded benefits. The claims process can be very difficult to navigate and involve many forms, filings, exams, hearings, and other

responses—necessitating knowledgeable, dedicated staff to walk veterans and families step by step. There is currently no ability for DVS to hire dedicated Service Officers due to budget constraints. The ability to connect veterans to eligible benefits is the most efficient way to provide long-lasting support to a veteran family. In the preliminary FY 2022 budget, DVS staffing is reduced by 5 positions within the agency, reducing DVS's ability to offer help with VA claims. Now is the time to expand this essential government service for veterans families, not contract it.

- 5. DVS must have a dedicated Contracting Officer to provide the required oversight and ensure all taxpayer funds are utilized towards the betterment of the veteran community.** DVS requires a dedicated Contracting Officer that can utilize specialized expertise in the city's contracting and procurement processes to provide meaningful oversight of discretionary funding from the Council to organizations serving veterans based on their expertise and knowledge of the veteran community. We have advocated for this position for several budget cycles and the urgency has only grown as each tax dollar must be used in the most meaningful way as we face budget shortfalls on local levels. Even as NYC Veterans Alliance does not receive Council discretionary funding, we want to ensure those organizations that do partake in this funding are worthy of receiving this taxpayer funded support dedicated to helping veterans. As this responsibility is currently outsourced to other NYC agencies, DVS, as an independent agency, must have the ability to provide adequate oversight to Council discretionary funding. This would also allow DVS to provide assistance to veteran serving organizations that encounter issues with the contract procurement process. This position must at last be funded and DVS must be allowed to hire and onboard this vital staff member.

This concludes our testimony. We would be glad to discuss this further with the Committee.



Thank you for holding today's hearing and advocating for veterans funding. My name is Charlotte Martin, and I am the senior manager of access initiatives at the Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum. In this capacity, I have the privilege of overseeing the Museum's veterans' access initiative that includes a range of programs and resources for current and former service members and their families. I do want to take a moment to acknowledge the generous financial and advisory support of the City Council Committee on Veterans. I want to thank Chair Deutsch and the Committee members and staff for your ongoing efforts to connect veterans with one another and with cultural resources like the Intrepid Museum.

At the Intrepid Museum, our mission is to promote the awareness and understanding of history, science and service in order to honor our heroes, educate the public and inspire our youth. Centered on a former Navy aircraft carrier, we have long engaged veterans through Veterans Day and Memorial Day events, Fleet Week activities, a robust volunteer program and free admission for veterans. In fall of 2015, we also launched free Military Family Programs that welcome active military families looking for an opportunity to explore the city, recently returned veterans seeking a way to spend time and reconnect with family, older veterans sharing their military experience with grandchildren for the first time, and Gold Star Families looking for positive experiences after loss. At the same time, we started offering free tours to a PTS peer support group at the Bronx VA, and we now offer free tours to any veterans' organization. We soon expanded to offering Intrepid After Hours, evening programs exclusively for current and former service members, with behind-the-scenes opportunities, veteran-led creative workshops, catered dinner and plenty of bonding across branches, service eras and post-service experiences.

Thanks to City Council funding, we were able to schedule these programs more regularly, guarantee high quality catering for the all-important bonding over meals, and bring in veteran artists, performers and others.

With funding, we also began to offer special Veterans Plus programs, including film screenings, performances, a Pride event, special partnerships and now a book club (with books provided), for veterans and their loved ones. And we offer Vet Video Chats -- interactive, live tours over video chat -- for veterans (local and far away) otherwise unable to visit the Museum. We've benefited from staff trainings led by experts at the NYU Langone's Cohen Military Family Center and the NY-Presbyterian Military Family Wellness Center, and from the advice and feedback of our standing Council of Veteran Advisers. Other recipients of city funding, including the Department of Veteran Services, SAGEVets, and others, have been crucial partners and advocates for their constituents.

When the Museum closed due to the pandemic just over a year ago, we quickly pivoted to online programming in order to maintain a space for and connection with veterans. We collaborated with Waterwell on new Memorial Day programming and converted our planned Intrepid After Hours to a Zoom program. Recognizing the toll of isolation, we have since continued our online programming, maintaining connection with veterans through a difficult time. For Intrepid Book Club, we mailed books directly to participants, and even brought in one author (Phil Klay) and special guests, thanks to the online format. We've also partnered with museums across the country for a special series of monthly "On Liberty: Zooming into Museums Across the Country" programs to create some semblance of travel meeting new people.

Our goal in all of this work is to foster community and connection among veterans, including those who are not connected with or may feel excluded from other veteran spaces. The Veterans Community Development Initiative has been crucial to the growth and impact of the Intrepid Museum's programs for veterans and their loved ones, and we respectfully ask that the Committee advocates for the continuation of funds for this initiative.

As we look ahead to reopening, in just a couple of days, and to gradually returning to in-person programming, as it is safe to do so, the Veterans Community Development Initiative is more important than ever. We look forward to continuing providing a space, connection and outlet for creative expression for veterans, and we encourage the city to invest in supporting this diverse community particularly impacted by the pandemic. Thank you.

Testimony by the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG)

Before the New York City Council Committee on Veterans regarding:

Preliminary Budget Hearing – Veterans

March 23, 2021

Chair Deutsch, Council Members, and staff, good afternoon and thank you for this opportunity to speak to the Veterans Committee about the FY22 budget. My name is Isabelle Muhlbauer, and I am the Senior Paralegal in the Veterans Practice at the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG). I am joined by my colleague, Ryan Foley, the Supervising Attorney of NYLAG’s Veterans Practice, who is also on the call. The New York Legal Assistance Group uses the power of the law to help New Yorkers in need combat economic, racial, and social injustice. We address emerging and urgent legal needs with comprehensive, free civil legal services, impact litigation, policy advocacy, and community education. NYLAG serves military veterans, immigrants, seniors, the homebound, families facing foreclosure, renters facing eviction, low-income consumers, those in need of government assistance, children in need of special education, domestic violence survivors, persons with disabilities, patients with chronic illness or disease, low-wage workers, members of the LGBTQ community, Holocaust survivors, and others in need of free civil legal services.

Given the level of need in New York City’s diverse veteran population, NYLAG operates two veteran-specific legal programs. We have a medical-legal partnership with the Bronx and Manhattan VA Medical Centers and a community-based program that provides

comprehensive services to veterans and their families, regardless of their discharge status and eligibility to use the VA Healthcare System.

I have been working with NYLAG's Veterans Practice, our community-based team, for over five years, serving as the first point of contact for New York City veterans seeking legal assistance. It is an extremely challenging role, as I frequently encounter veterans in crisis who are dealing with one of the most stressful and difficult moments of their lives. Many of the veterans we work with struggle with severe mental health issues like PTSD, TBI, and MST, which can complicate their legal issues and needs. Veterans face all the same legal concerns as any other population, but also experience issues unique to their veteran status and military experiences. Our Veterans Practice focuses on veteran-specific legal issues, while simultaneously utilizing the expertise of NYLAG's 300+ attorneys, paralegals, and financial counselors to comprehensively address any other civil legal needs. Over the past year, which has been especially devastating for the vulnerable veteran community we serve, this ability to maximize resources on behalf of New York City veterans has never been more important.

As an example, when a veteran reaches out seeking help accessing medical care, we ensure they will not only be screened for VA healthcare eligibility, but also for Medicaid and Medicare, which are critical to obtaining specialized care, such as cancer treatment, and the long-term care that is increasingly important for New York City's aging veteran population. A veteran seeking help with an eviction will work with attorneys who have been trained on housing benefits specific to veterans, with the goal of not only resolving the current housing crisis, but to also help the veteran establish housing stability for the future. When veterans come to us for assistance with obtaining VA disability benefits, we also

screen for all available public benefits, including other VA benefits, Social Security Disability, and Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, to ensure our clients have access to all the available resources. It is this combination of experienced legal staff, connecting with veterans in need both inside the VA and in the community, and working within a large organization with diverse areas of expertise, which enables NYLAG to provide the highest quality assistance to the veteran population.

NYLAG is extremely grateful to the City of New York for its investment in legal services for veterans over the past several years. NYLAG has been the recipient of funding through the Legal Services for Veterans Initiative since its inception and because of that funding, we have been able to assist veterans with thousands of cases in the areas of veterans' benefits, public benefits, housing, consumer protection, and advance planning, among other legal issues. NYLAG was awarded and is anticipating funding from the NYC Department of Veterans' Services to assist veterans who require discharge upgrades due to receiving less than honorable discharges for issues related to their sexual orientation, sexual trauma, or traumatic injury. This new grant is vital for veterans who cannot access benefits due to their less than honorable discharges; benefits that could provide stabilizing income for veterans facing hardships due to the pandemic. Still, services for veterans have not been spared from budget cuts. NYLAG's Legal Services for Veterans funding was significantly decreased by 32% in the FY21 budget, which has impacted the number of veterans we can serve despite the myriad of new obstacles faced by the veteran community because of COVID-19.

Every day brings us closer to what we hope will be the end of this devastating pandemic, one that has claimed the lives of over ten thousand veterans. Even as we see

positive developments in the fight against COVID-19, we must prepare for the new needs and challenges sure to follow the end of current federal and state COVID-related protections, particularly VA debt relief and New York's eviction moratorium. It is essential that the City Council and the Administration continue and expand the funding that allows NYLAG and other civil legal services providers to help New York City veterans face both their current and impending challenges. While we recognize the budgetary difficulties faced by the City, we must highlight how crucial it remains for veterans to have access to quality, free legal services. As New York works to recover from the impact of COVID-19, civil legal services are more necessary than ever for struggling veterans who have been impacted on all fronts, including loss of income and unemployment, difficulty accessing medical care, housing instability, and exacerbation of existing physical and mental health conditions. City funding for legal assistance makes all the difference for veterans who need an advocate at their side and it is crucial to increase the support that will allow veterans to recover and thrive in the wake of COVID-19.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We look forward to engaging in further discussions about serving our veteran communities and improving their access to critical legal services and other resources.

Respectfully submitted,

New York Legal Assistance Group

Testimony to the Committee on Veterans of the New York City Council

Delivered virtually on March 23, 2021

by Ashton Stewart, SAGEVets Program Manager

Thank you, members of the New York City Council, for holding this budget hearing focused on Veterans' Services. My name is Ashton Stewart, and I am the manager of SAGEVets, SAGE's statewide program for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) veterans. Support from the New York City Council has been instrumental to our SAGEVets program – allowing SAGE to engage older LGBT veterans across this great city and making a real difference in the lives of many older LGBT veterans.

SAGE is the country's first and largest organization dedicated to improving the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) older people. Founded in New York City in 1978, SAGE has provided comprehensive social services and programs to LGBT older people for more than four decades. SAGEVets is one of SAGE's programs and, in fact, is the only program in the state designed for older LGBT veterans.

New York is home to approximately one million men and women who served their country in the Armed Forces – many of whom are LGBT. New York City and State are among the top ten cities and states with the highest concentrations of gay and lesbian veterans, both in number and per capita. In fact, the Urban Institute estimates there are over 38,000 lesbian and gay veterans living in New York State, with 17,000 residing in New York City.

According to a survey by the New York State LGBT Health and Human Services Network, 56% of those LGBT people who were veterans were over the age of 50. Many LGBT older veterans in New York are struggling and yet, are not accessing the services they need. In fact, according to the New York State LGBT Health and Human Services Network:

- 43% of lesbian, gay and bisexual vets live at under 200% of the Federal Poverty line; for transgender veterans, this number was nearly 60%
- 30% of lesbian, gay and bisexual veterans were homeless; 46% of transgender vets were homeless
- 34% of lesbian, gay and bisexual veterans were food insecure; over 61% of transgender vets struggle with food insecurity
- 30% of lesbian, gay and bisexual veterans and 48% of transgender vets fear discrimination from providers

SAGEVets was created to identify, support, and improve access to care among older LGBT veterans across the city and state and to respond to the swelling needs described above.

further, to elevate the visibility of older LGBT veterans and their unique needs, SAGEVets program works in partnership with veteran service programs throughout the city to provide legal information and referrals for VA benefits including medical, pension, and education.

During the COVID-19 pandemic over the last year, support from the New York City Council has been crucial to enable us to reach and engage older LGBT veterans struggling. For LGBT elders and older LGBT veterans, many of whom were already facing financial insecurity, food insecurity, acute social isolation, and exacerbating health disparities, COVID-19 presented mounting challenges. Many of the LGBT older veterans who need help with food, connection, healthcare, or financial security often do not turn to the VA providers who can help for fear of discrimination. This has created a chasm between the need and access to care – one that is especially dangerous in the middle of the COVID-19 public health crisis.

SAGEVets' services are addressing many of these unmet needs. SAGEVets has conducted vigorous wellness checks among with over 400 SAGEVets participants, offered telephonic one-on-one and group support, and launched virtual programming to continue to connect older LGBT veterans to the community. Our team assesses veterans' vulnerabilities around isolation, food security, and mental and physical health. For veterans experiencing food insecurity, in partnership with the New York City Department of Veterans' Services, SAGEVets participants were able to receive non-perishable meals and our SAGEVets team connected those in need to a long-term meal delivery program. We are making referrals to remote legal counsel, teletherapy, and health care. Still, unfortunately not all service providers, including the VA, can offer the full suite of services they offered prior to the pandemic. To work around these issues, we have encouraged veterans to keep up with their primary care doctors with virtual check-ins. The Home-Based Primary Care program at the VA has been suspended, leaving especially vulnerable veterans at risk; they can, however, still conduct telephone intakes and screenings.

With vaccines now available, SAGEVets joined the Manhattan VA's COVID-19 Veterans Action Committee to stay up-to-date on vaccination access and available health services. We recently partnered with the Federal Trade Commission to offer a virtual program on how to avoid COVID-19 scams. We are also helping older LGBT veterans schedule vaccination appointments.

For veterans struggling with isolation, we connected these service members to SAGEConnect, a new SAGE initiative links volunteers with LGBT elders for phone support. And, we have continued to offer our weekly Veteran Support Group telephonically.

Throughout the year, our SAGEVets program continued to create and offer inspiring virtual programs. That included a panel that featured The Steven A. Cohen Military Family Center and the Manhattan VA and was hosted by the Veterans Mental Health Coalition of NYC, focused on the evolution of mental health supportive services for LGBT veterans since the repeal of the *Don't Ask Don't Tell*. In another exciting event, for the first time ever, SAGEVets was part of the [10th Mountain Division & Fort Drum's LGBT Pride Month Observance program](#), honoring the patriotism of the U.S. military from "LGBT members, past and present, who have fought bravely to protect our nation and ensure a quality for all who call America home."

SAGEVets honored Veterans Day, by participating in the historic 2021 New York City Veterans Day Parade. SAGEVets eagerly accepted a special invitation received from the United War

Veterans Council (UWVC). We were one of only 120 vehicles in a symbolic Veterans Day Motorcade representing LGBT veterans who took the oath to serve their country. SAGEVets also participated in the Virtual Line of March, an online recreation of the Parade experience.

Even in the midst of the pandemic, SAGEVets continues to raise the profile and experiences of LGBT veterans. SAGEVets worked with Senator Brad Hoylman nominate the first transgender veteran to the New York State Senate Veterans Hall of Fame. In [Collecting & Sharing LGBTQ Veteran Stories](#), SAGEVets collaborated with the *Intrepid Sea, Air & Space Museum*, to address the notable gap in military museums that reflect the LGBT veteran experience. SAGEVets is honored to be part of the Intrepid's program with the New York City Department of Education, *LGBTQ+ Virtual Field Trips*, designed for our City's youth and focuses on raising awareness about LGBTQ+ veterans who served during and prior to the military's discriminatory policy, Don't Ask Don't Tell.

This funding has also helped fuel SAGE's work to implement the Restoration of Honor Act (ROH), legislation that is designed to help veterans who received Other Than Honorable Discharges gain access to veteran benefits offered by the State of New York. SAGEVets assisted a 63-year-old black cisgender gay male veteran of the U.S. Navy who was one of the first to submit a meritorious ROH application. While serving, he repeatedly received 4.0 performance evaluations, the highest possible score, earned the sailor of the month award several times, and was nominated for sailor of the year by the Commanding Officers. Despite his exemplary service, a disgruntled sailor reported suspicion that Louis was gay. After a subsequent investigation, he was discharged with an other than honorable discharge for "Homosexuality." When asked how SAGEVets and the Restoration of Honor Act has helped, the veteran stated, "I have enormous admiration for the U.S. Navy, but not the policy that ended my career. I have felt haunted by this discharge every time it comes up, but going through this process of getting my discharge upgraded has helped me reenter a social space that I had avoided for far too long, and suddenly I have confidence in myself, and the quality of duty I provided the U.S. military. I would encourage others in my situation to apply for the ROH and reclaim your honor."

Last year alone, SAGEVets outreach and program activities reached over 40,000 individuals, half of whom are veterans. The program made 43 legal referrals to LGBT veterans with nine legal victories including a discharge upgrade, approved disability claims, preventing an eviction, and a ruling by the NYS Supreme Court for a change in guardianship. We were proud to receive the 2020 Black Veterans for Social Justice Gallantry Award for our commitment to our work. Earlier this year, SAGEVets won another service-connected disability case, this time for a 72-year-old Latina transgender female veteran of the U.S. Army who received a retroactive lump-sum payment over \$20,000!

In a year like no other, SAGE is so grateful for the support of the New York City Council. Please feel share this information about our programs and services with your partners and constituents. We look forward to our ongoing collaboration with the Council in our shared work to ensure that our City's older LGBT veterans can access the care, services that they deserve.

VETERAN ADVOCACY PROJECT

THE COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS
Chaim Deutsch, Chair

Preliminary Budget Hearing

Testimony by Coco Culhane, Esq.
Executive Director, Veteran Advocacy Project
March 23, 2021

Good afternoon Chair Deutsche and members of the Veterans Committee. My name is Coco Culhane and I am the executive director of the Veteran Advocacy Project (or "VAP"); we provide free legal services to veterans and their families with a focus on those living with post traumatic stress and other mental health conditions. Our practice ranges from food stamps to DOD applications to capital charges. Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today.

There are far too many issues to effectively address in a short time today: the looming tsunami of evictions, unemployment rates not seen for a century, inadequate access to health care, food, and shelter. The devastating effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities of color, the elderly, and individuals with mental health challenges has been relentless. VAP's clients encompass all of these demographics and the hardship they face has been compounded by a digital divide, leaving an already isolated population more alone than ever. Given VAP's specialization in working with veterans living with mental health conditions, I want to focus my remarks today on how so many of these veterans are being left behind and make recommendations regarding the challenges they are facing: isolation from information, disconnection from treatment, and lack of access to the resources of the VA.

As we all adapt to a virtual world, vast numbers of individuals are living in a kind of darkness, with no access to the internet. Our attorneys have been making house calls because the e-signature software we purchased is useless to a veteran without a smartphone. Last April, the FCC relaxed the documentation standards to prove eligibility for Lifeline, the discounted phone and internet access program. Where was that FCC announcement? Online. Under "training and outreach," the entity that administers the plans offers: webinars, instructional videos about how to apply for a phone, and newsletters via email.¹ Another way these veterans are isolated: as everyone turns to telehealth, what about all of the men and women who have no way to engage in digital medical services? For those who *do* have a smart phone or a laptop, figuring out a new technology can be frustrating enough to dissuade them from continuing in care. One of my clients has a MacBook in a box on top of his tv. When I ask if he wants me to show him some tips, he says no that's okay. It is clear to me that the box has never been opened. A couple of weeks ago he lost my number and had no way to get it because he doesn't have a smart phone with caller ID that stores numbers.

These challenges, seemingly small annoyances to most of us, jeopardize the wellbeing of the vulnerable veterans taking their lives at twice the rate of the general population. Whether the number is 17 a day or 22 does not matter. What leads them to the point of suicide does. Most susceptible among this group are veterans who were involuntarily discharged based on misconduct; these men and women die by suicide at nearly three times the rate of other veterans.² Their less than honorable discharges have been found to be the second highest

¹ Universal Service Administrative Co. "Lifeline: Learn," available at: <https://www.usac.org/lifeline/>; linking to: <https://www.usac.org/lifeline/learn/> (last accessed 8/14/2020).

² Bryan, CJ. On Deployment and Military Suicide Risk. *JAMA Psychiatry*. 2015; 72(9):949-950. doi:10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2015.0671.

predictor of homelessness³; now add a pandemic where an estimated quarter of the population cannot, and has not, paid rent in nearly a year and the potential outcome is overwhelming.⁴

Some veterans have been hit doubly hard: The systemic problems that make certain populations more vulnerable to COVID-19, are the same that lead to less than honorable discharges. One study showed that Black servicemembers were twice as likely to face disciplinary action and courts-martial than white servicemembers.⁵ Mental health conditions cause disproportionately negative outcomes both in service and in the civilian world. A statistic that cannot be repeated enough: A Government Accountability Office report showed that among recent veterans discharged for misconduct, 62 percent *had already been diagnosed* with PTSD.⁶ Survivors of military sexual trauma are 50 percent more likely to receive misconduct discharges.⁷ What all of this amounts to is injustice compounded by injustice: First, those in-service; then, post-service when they are cut off from VA health care and benefits, face stigma trying to get a job, and spend every day struggling to get by.

On top of the systemic prejudices faced in the military and its civilian world costs, as members of low-income communities of color with higher mortality rates, increased policing and criminal justice involvement, and wildly unequal access to health care, the consequences of the pandemic also have hit these individuals and communities harder than most New Yorkers. We saw this devastation last year and thankfully it has, at the very least, created a renewed sense of urgency in addressing the inequalities in our city. For veterans, we need a coordinated effort to target those who are not connected to the VA and have no digital access to treatment, community, or any kind of care.

DVS's VetCheck is a start. Phones and computers cannot actually replace face to face interactions but these check-ins have been vital for many vets. VAP joined the VetCheck effort starting last summer, calling veteran residents to see if they need food or support, yet most of our clients won't answer a number they don't recognize and we were not able to reach many of the veterans on our waitlist for services. For those we have reached, telehealth is usually not an option because of the technology deficits. Too many who used public libraries for internet service and phones have gone straight to voicemail for months.

³ See, Gundlapalli AV, Fargo JD, Metraux S, et. al. *Military Misconduct and Homelessness Among US Veterans Separated From Active Duty, 2001-2012*. JAMA. 2015;314(8):832–834. doi:10.1001/jama.2015.8207.

⁴ Mankar, Noha, "25 percent of NYC renters have not made payments since March," NY POST, July 9, 2020, available at: <https://nypost.com/2020/07/09/25-percent-of-nyc-renters-have-not-made-payments-since-march/>.

⁵ Vanden Brook, Tom. "Black troops as much as twice as likely to be punished by commanders, courts" *USA Today* (June 7, 2017). Available at: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2017/06/07/black-troops-much-twice-likely-punished-commanders-courts/102555630/>.

⁶ Actions Needed to Ensure Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury Are Considered in Misconduct Separations, GAO-17-260: Published: May 16, 2017. Publicly Released: May 16, 2017.

⁷ *Getting It Right: "Bad Paper" Legislation That Works*. Prepared for House Veteran Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Health Legislative Hearing on H.R 918 and others March 29, 2017. Submitted by Swords to Plowshares, with the Assistance of Veterans Legal Clinic at Harvard Law School.

Mid-pandemic I checked in on one of our clients, a Marine who served during Vietnam. He has lost 13 people to the virus. I gently asked if he was still in the PTSD program that we had connected him to and he said it was too hard to get the camera thing going and all that. When he didn't figure it out for the first appointment, no one followed up ... and just like that, his mental health became a casualty. This is a man who has the technology available to him and is struggling. If veterans who do have access to the VA's massive telehealth efforts are not keeping up connections, alarm bells should be going off for the rest of our community. What are we doing about the digital divide for vets?

The beginning of the pandemic brought with it a disconcerting silence as we tried to reach clients and focused on those who had no access to the VA's telehealth, housing subsidies, and more. Now the need for the VA is greater than ever. For those who lost their jobs, the VA is safety net many thought they would never need. Nationally, we know the need is up. While we have only a small window into the numbers in New York, they mimic the national trend. Yet VA resources are inaccessible not only for vets with less than honorable discharges but new applicants, too. The claims backlog at the VA has already tripled this past year, after being at its lowest point in decades in fall 2019.⁸ From 70,000 claims waiting, we are now at 300,000 with a goal of catching up in 18 months.⁹ disability compensation rates are reportedly low in New York State compared to others; and the Veterans Benefits Administration is already drowning in mail and incompetence. If adjudication horror stories exist in the best of times, imagine what twelve months of closed regional offices has done to veterans' due process rights. We need veterans advocates now more than ever.

As Congress pours billions of dollars into the VA to tackle compensation and pension examinations, a surge in health care enrollment, and to hire contractors to adjudicate the backlog of claims, so too must New York City. The VA's Office of Inspector General found that of 5.5 million claims over 700,000 were incorrectly adjudicated.¹⁰ Attorneys and advocates trained and accredited by the VA are crucial while due process rights—rights that represent dollars, health care, and other safety nets—are violated. While VAP's case numbers overall are down, our rate of VA claims, upgrade requests, and criminal justice cases have increased substantially. Despite a slowdown in the courts, we are getting more requests than ever for criminal defense representation for veterans at Rikers. Every area of need when it comes to advocacy is vital in stabilizing veterans' lives. Funding for advocates at all agencies, public and private, must be sustained and increased where possible.

⁸ Richard Sisk, *VA Disability Claims Backlog Spiked to 300,000 During Pandemic*, MILITARY TIMES, 17 November 2020; available at:

<https://www.military.com/daily-news/2020/11/17/va-disability-claims-backlog-spiked-300000-during-pandemic.html>.

⁹ Department of Veterans Affairs, *How the American Rescue Plan aids VA in helping Veterans*, <https://blogs.va.gov/VAntage/86147/american-rescue-plan-aids-va-helping-veterans/>.

¹⁰ Law360, *Veterans' Health Claims Processed Incorrectly, OIG Says*, March 2, 2021; available at: <https://www.law360.com/articles/1360523/veterans-health-claims-processed-incorrectly-oig-says>.

VAP thanks the Veterans Committee for its enduring commitment to the thousands of veterans and their families in New York. We have gone from being nonmilitary town where a veteran could only rely on other veterans for assistance to being a model city for the rest of the country. From collaborations among city, state, and federal government, reducing veteran homelessness by 90 percent, to innovative programs funded by the Council, we have transformed the landscape of resources for vets in New York City. It did not go unnoticed that the Veterans Initiative was one of the few budget lines to actually increase during our budget crisis. There is more to do and we thank the chair and committee members for ensuring we will be able to do it.

Thank you for your time today.



Visiting Nurse Service of New York
220 East 42nd Street
New York, NY 10017
www.vnsny.org

**NYC Budget Hearing for the Committee on Veterans
Visiting Nurse Service of New York (VNSNY)
Hospice & VA Benefits Support for City's Veterans**

Tuesday, March 23, 2021

Good afternoon Chair Dromm, Chair Deutsch, and Members of the New York City (NYC) Council Committee on Veterans. My name is Joe Vitti and I am the Director of the Hospice Veterans Program for VNSNY – I also served in the Army as a battalion intelligence officer for a field artillery unit and in the role of a fires intelligence officer. Thank you for the opportunity to testify about ***VNSNY's Hospice Veterans Program, for which we are requesting \$150,000 in Council funding.***

VNSNY is the largest free-standing not-for-profit home and community-based health care organization in the United States, providing care to more than 44,000 patients and health plan members every day. More than 125 years ago, VNSNY began serving immigrants on the Lower East Side who were shunned by traditional medical institutions. Since then, VNSNY has continuously provided critical home and community-based healthcare services to marginalized populations. VNSNY has been there for New York throughout many of its biggest public health and natural emergencies – COVID-19 has not been any different – since *March 2020, VNSNY has cared for more than 5,000 COVID-positive New Yorkers.*

For over 35 years, VNSNY Hospice and Palliative Care has provided end-of-life care to New Yorkers. VNSNY Hospice is the largest hospice provider to veterans in the state – *in 2020 we conducted 920 Veteran patient admissions.* VNSNY's Hospice Veterans Program is a Level 5 *We Honor Veterans Program* serving all five boroughs of NYC. This national collaboration between the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO) empowers hospice professionals to meet the needs of dying veterans. There are approximately 22.5 million veterans in America today, about 18 million are over the age of 65. As NYC's veteran population continues to age (18% of VNSNY's veterans are from WWII, 22% from Korea, 20% from Vietnam, 16% from the Cold War, and 24% from Peacetime/Other), it is becoming even more important to conduct outreach so that they know about their full VA benefits (which many aren't aware of), which can cover home care, hospice, and long-term care services. Our outreach program has a program director, a per diem VA benefits specialist and coordinator, and two veteran liaisons who serve all five boroughs. Our veteran patients come from Manhattan (33%), Queens (24%), Brooklyn (15.5%), Staten Island (16.5%), and the Bronx (11%).

Request – VNSNY's Veterans Hospice Outreach Program

First, thank you to the City Council – especially the Committee on Veterans – for providing first-time funding to this important program in Fiscal Year (FY) 2021. We are currently expanding in Brooklyn with our veteran liaison Sung Yoon (a former Army Medic) to help engage and support community-based organizations and community hospitals. Through Sung's outreach, she is helping veterans maximize their veteran hospice benefits and building community knowledge, and we look forward to serving more veterans where this service is needed the most.

In FY2022, VNSNY is requesting \$150,000 in City Council funding (an increase from \$60,000 allocated in FY 2021) to expand the VNSNY Hospice Veterans Program to serve more veterans.

www.vnsny.org

Our program is uniquely qualified to conduct outreach and care for NYC veterans. In addition to bringing years of experience from VA hospital sites and active duty sites (including Walter Reed Army Medical Center) - our staff is diverse in the type of military service, ethnicity, and gender, which helps us bring culturally competent care when addressing a veteran's issues.

Additional funding will support more staff resources with a focus in Brooklyn and Manhattan, while also expanding our services in Queens, Bronx, and Staten Island. VNSNY would use these funds to:

- 1) Educate and improve NYC veterans access to their VA benefits;
- 2) Expand partnerships with Veterans hospitals and groups; and
- 3) Educate community-based organizations and providers about veterans' special needs at the end-of-life.

Serving Our Veterans During COVID-19

We have continued to provide care throughout COVID-19 and have conducted virtual events with community organizations and veteran service organizations (i.e. the American Legion). Our liaisons have been providing telehealth visits, securing benefits like home-delivered meals, and advocating for our veterans' VA services and benefits. WNBC-TV New York featured our work throughout the public health emergency during Memorial Day last year¹. This care included one Bronx veteran who tested positive for COVID-19 while admitted under our Hospice service. This veteran had no support at home and relied on neighbors to provide food and groceries for him to eat. His diet consisted of high sodium foods, such as canned goods and cold-cut meats, which did not coincide well with his past medical history of diabetes. The pandemic greatly impacted his ability to utilize his neighbors to help obtain these groceries as well – cutting off his food supply. Once our social worker and clinical teams identified this situation they immediately notified me, and I contacted the NYC Department for Veterans Services (DVS). Once we made contact, NYC DVS acted quickly, helping us ensure this veteran received timely and quality meals. This collaboration throughout COVID-19 illustrated a period of hope and impressive effectiveness during a time of great turmoil and uncertainty. A textbook example of two community organizations coming together for the common good of a shared mission. The veteran continued to receive food without any issues until he passed of natural causes.

Conclusion

Our founder, Lillian Wald, brought compassionate care to low-income, needy families living in the tenements of lower Manhattan. In VNSNY, her vision and mission to serve those in need, in the comfort of their home and community, is as relevant and critical today as it was then. VNSNY is proud to serve our City's veterans who have given so much to our country. Our Hospice Veterans Program makes sure our veterans experience their end of life in peace with personalized care, instead of worrying about their VA benefits or experiencing pain that can be controlled with proper, specialized care. Thank you again for your previous support and we look forward to working with the NYC Council to serve our City's veterans.

¹ WNBC-TV NewYork - VNSNY Hospice Veterans Program May 25, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/422733671>



NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

Tuesday, March 23, 2021, 1:00 p.m.

SUBJECT: Oversight – Preliminary Budget Hearings – Veterans

Good afternoon. My name is Peter Kempner. I am the Legal Director at Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS). VOLS was established in 1984 and our purpose is to leverage private attorneys to provide free legal services to low income New Yorkers to help fill the justice gap.

In addition to my duties as Legal Director of VOLS, I founded and supervise the VOLS Veterans Initiative. I also created and teach the Veterans Justice Clinic at New York Law School; I sit on the New York City Bar Association's Committee on Military and Veterans Affairs; I am a member of the New York State Bar Association Veterans Committee; I co-chair the New York City Legal Services Veterans Working Group; I am a member of the veterans committee at the statewide New York Legal Services Coalition; and I have held many past positions focused on the civil legal needs of low income veterans. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the VOLS Veterans Initiative conducted free weekly legal clinics at the Manhattan Campus of the Department of Veterans Affairs' NY Harbor Health Care System where we provided free civil legal services to low-income veterans aged 60 and over. After the crisis shut the VA Hospital to outside visitors, we moved our services online and launched a legal hotline for low-income elderly veterans. The core work that VOLS does for veterans is the drafting and execution of life planning documents which include Last Wills and Testaments, Powers of Attorney, Health Care Proxies, Living Wills and other advance directives.

As we look ahead to the needs of New York City's Veterans over the upcoming fiscal year, there are many lessons to be learned from the pandemic year we are emerging from and we must acknowledge the enormous challenges confronting our City's veterans. As a legal services provider we focus on where we as attorneys can help address these problems and I want to draw attention to three interconnected legal challenges faced by New York City's veterans. They are the coming eviction crisis, the need to ensure that veterans have access to the benefits to which they are entitled, and the need to make certain that all vulnerable veterans have the right plan in place in the event they ever become incapacitated or pass away.

In January 2021, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs reported that more veterans had died of COVID-19 than from Operation Iraqi Freedom (which lasted from 2003 - 2010) and Operation Enduring Freedom (which lasted from 2001 - 2015), combined. In addition, a 2020 study using national Veterans Administration data showed that of veterans who tested positive for COVID-19 between February 28, 2020 and May 14, 2020, most deaths were attributed to being age 50 and older, male, and having a greater comorbidity burden.

NYC Department of Veterans Services estimates there are 210,000 veterans of all economic backgrounds living in the city, 30% of whom are age 55+. VOLS serves low-income veterans living at up to 400% of the Federal Poverty Level, which considers the high cost of living in New York City and ensure that veterans with service-related disabilities can access our services.

Veterans face civil legal challenges and a dearth of affordable, quality legal services. Many do not know whom to turn to for legal help. According to the Legal Services Corporation 2017 Justice Gap report, 71% of veterans faced at least one civil legal problem and 21% had six or more problems in the past year. According to the same report, veterans seek professional legal help for 21% of problems because they did not know where to look (29%), because they decided to deal with problem on own (25%), or because they were not sure if the issue was a legal matter (18%).

Studies suggest that veterans, like the population at large, have not engaged in life planning. For example, a 2015 study of veterans diagnosed with cancer found that close to half lacked a documented advance directive. A 2017 study by the University of California found that 81% of more than 2,500 veterans they surveyed did not have an advanced directive. Among the U.S. population, approximately 37% have completed an advance directive, including 29% with living wills, according to an extensive review of 150 studies undertaken in 2017.

Military service instills a core set of values that can profoundly impact a service member even decades after completing their service. Values such as hard work, stoicism, service before self, teamwork, honor and courage often shape veterans' lives. These values can also prevent veterans from asking for help when they need it. Members of the armed services are also taught to be self-reliant, to shun complaining in any form, and to conform and maintain a certain level of anonymity. In the military, asking for help can be considered a sign of weakness and is often discouraged. But elderly veterans – whose age and infirmities can threaten their independence – must receive help if their wishes for life planning and end-of-life care are to be honored. Their chosen caregivers must also be empowered to speak on their behalf, should this become necessary due to incapacity.

41% of veterans in New York identify as African American, Asian, Latino, or multiracial. Many low-income and senior individuals of color have lacked access to quality healthcare prior to and during the pandemic; they have been particularly vulnerable to COVID- 19, with 28% and 34% of deaths coming from Black and Latinx communities, respectively. In addition, studies have shown that people of color are less likely to engage in advanced care planning.

By engaging in effective life planning, elderly and disabled veterans are more likely to stay in their homes, age in place and live with dignity. A veteran who has executed a power of attorney empowers their agent to seek government benefits to pay for housing costs, to sign leases, apply for and recertify housing subsidies, and deal with any issue that may arise with their landlord or housing provider. Landlords and market forces are increasingly pushing long term tenants from their homes, so taking action to stabilize housing for veterans is more urgent than ever.

A study release just last week by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development showed that for the first time in decade veteran homelessness in the United States has increased and that was before the devastating impact of the COVID-19 crisis was factored in. Our City has made tremendous strides in the past decade on the issue of veteran homelessness, but the COVID-19 crisis has the potential to undue much of the progress we have made and

return us to the bad old days where veteran homelessness was much more pronounced and widespread. It is estimated that tens of thousands of New Yorkers may face homelessness when the current pauses on eviction filings and executions of warrants of eviction are lifted.

There is no doubt that there are scores of veterans amongst those facing homelessness and many of these veterans are those who are the most vulnerable. These are veterans who suffer from service-connected disabilities, veterans with histories of substance abuse, veterans with mental health disabilities and veterans who were formerly homeless. If evicted many of these veterans will end up in shelters or the streets.

The best way to prevent a backslide on veteran homelessness is to ensure it does not happen in the first place, which must include making sure that these veterans have access to free legal services in the event they face an eviction filing; that they are given representation to ensure access to VA benefits; and they are provided the tools they need to put the right plan in place to empower caregivers should they ever become incapacitated.

The common thread that brings these issues together is how access to free legal services is transformative for veterans in need. From eviction prevention, to life planning, to accessing critical government benefits and on so many other fronts, having access to free legal services is an important tool in our toolbox to help abate the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the New York City veteran community.

VOLS would like to applaud the New York City Council for funding free legal services for our veteran community and urge the Council to take the necessary steps to safeguard and even increase this funding in the upcoming fiscal year. Having access to free, high quality, veteran focused legal services will ensure a brighter future for those who have sacrificed so much for all of us.

Thank you for allowing us to submit this testimony and for supporting the New York City veteran community.

Peter Kempner, Esq.
Legal Director



**City Council FY22 Preliminary Budget Hearing
Committee on Veterans
March 23, 2021**

Testimony of Myung J. Lee, President & CEO

My name is Myung Lee and I am the President & CEO of Volunteers of America-Greater New York, the local affiliate of the national organization, Volunteers of America, Inc. (VOA). I would like to thank the Chair of the City Council Committee on Veterans, Council Member Chaim Deutsch, for the opportunity to submit my testimony.

VOA-Greater New York is a human services organization that serves nine special needs populations through approximately 65 programs in NYC, Westchester County and Northern New Jersey, including homeless individuals and families, veterans, those recovering from domestic violence, the poor elderly, adults living with HIV/AIDS and behavioral health issues, among others. Annually, we provide housing—transitional, emergency and permanent, supportive programs—to 11,000 New Yorkers.

VOA-Greater New York has a long history of serving veterans going back as far as the Civil War. Now, through a comprehensive continuum of care that includes outreach to veterans that are currently homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness, vocational training and placement, and permanent, supportive housing, our services impact the lives of nearly 900 veterans each year.

At one end of the continuum, Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) reaches veterans who are in crisis, providing financial assistance for housing, and leveraging the many partnerships we have in the community – including with the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and NYC Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) – to help them secure employment and address other critical issues threatening their and their family's stability. Last year, in spite of the pandemic, SSVF worked with 275 veterans and far exceeded our housing targets, all due to the dedication and determination of our housing specialists and close working relationship with DVS. Thankfully, just before COVID-19 struck, SSVF had gone paperless, uploading all client files into AWARDS, positioning us to work remotely with full access to veterans' records and continue services to them without interruption. SSVF is a CARF-accredited program, and, having passed the rigorous vetting process required to earn that accreditation, VOA-Greater New York is not required to submit the high volume of material other organizations must when the VA posts a Notice of Funds Availability (NOFA). Instead, we are given priority, a privilege for which we are appreciative that also speaks to the trust the VA has in us to deliver strong outcomes for our veterans.

At the other end of the continuum is VOA-Greater New York's permanent, supportive housing. We are the largest provider of such housing for veterans in NYC, housing nearly 638 veterans, 297 veterans in two residential settings strictly for veterans, and another 444 veterans in our general population SROs through Section 8 vouchers last year.

VOA-Greater New York is the sole provider of supportive housing in City-owned single room occupancy residences (SROs) including our two sites for veterans, East 119th Street Veterans Residence in Manhattan and Commonwealth Veterans Residence in the Bronx. As with our other SROs, these were not constructed to house older adults, and as our veterans age in place (nationwide nearly 50% of veterans are 65+) these properties simply do not meet their needs. Several years ago, we proposed to the City that they sell these properties to us for \$1 so that we could rehabilitate them into living environments our veterans deserve. The response to our request was positive but this has not yet been realized. In the meantime, one crucial upgrade – particularly with the ongoing pandemic – is to bring reliable internet access to these

sites. While we have transitioned to electronic records at Commonwealth and are in process of doing so at E 119th Street, we still need a way to capture client signatures and help our veterans access telehealth. Beyond the lack of hardware – tablets for staff and smart phones for clients – internet access is entirely inadequate. East 119th Street has been without internet for one month and service providers tell us they cannot resolve the issue because the building’s wiring is too old, in addition to connectivity in that area not being strong to begin with.

In 2015, VOA-Greater New York was one of the original nonprofits to participate on the Continuum of Care Veteran Executive Task Force whose mission was to end veteran homelessness. That mission has essentially been achieved. Tragically, the rate of veteran suicide (approximately 15 per day) still remains high.

Unique to Volunteers of America is our innovative Battle Buddy Bridge program (B3), which has two main goals: train and certify graduates to become Veteran Peer Specialists (“Battle Buddies”), a marketable certification recognized by the VA and others, and to provide a lifeline to struggling, service-resistant veterans. As one B3 graduate said so poignantly, *“Before I came to be a peer counselor, I was unemployable and suicidal. All I could think about was how much of a rotten deal I had gotten from society and how no one cared if I lived or died. Helping other vets in the program, I began to see my role as someone who could help my clients (fellow vets) find value in themselves despite their trauma. It changed my life... I still may be living in an SRO, but now when I go to sleep, I know I’ve done something to help a fellow vet...and that makes all the difference.”*

The value of peer support – both giving and receiving it – is invaluable, especially among veterans. After returning to civilian life, veterans often crave structure and a “mission” they can serve, missing the “I’ve got your back” culture they belonged to when serving alongside their military brothers and sisters. Veterans in crisis are more likely to accept help from fellow veterans than from a civilian, and typically, it does not matter in which branch of the military the peer served. It is enough that the person “wore the uniform.”

Peer-to-peer interventions succeed where civilian case managers and others have tried to help but failed. B3’s Battle Buddies have personally experienced traumas before, during or after the military. They have had their own issues with homelessness or substance use, and the veterans they are helping feel they have someone who truly understands, whom they can trust. Upon successful completion of the two-week B3 training program, participants are officially certified as Veteran Peer Specialists, are considered Battle Buddies for the B3 program, and participate in a two-week paid internship where they are assigned to a veteran to assist. Serving as community resource navigators, Battle Buddies do whatever their peers need, accompanying them to medical or benefits appointments or even meetings with their case manager or other helping professionals, referring them to training, employment, legal and suicide prevention services. Prior to the pandemic, one Battle Buddy heard that his assigned veteran had been hospitalized and, knowing he did not have a family to visit him, stayed by his side at the hospital.

While many veterans are not actively looking for employment, especially those who are older, chronically homeless, or have significant medical or behavioral health issues, there are others who want to work but have not been able to transition to civilian employment. We are in the process of leveraging our extensive experience managing our own properties to develop a workforce training program that leads to certification in the building maintenance and repairs trades, including plumbing, electrical work, and painting, among others, to meet the growing demand for skilled labor in NYC and move our clients along to financial resilience.

VOA-Greater New York is at the forefront of developing purpose-built affordable housing and has the relationships to bring developments effectively and efficiently to market. Within the next few weeks, VOA-Greater New York will bring its newest affordable housing program for low-income seniors with set-asides for chronically homeless seniors, online. East Clarke Place Senior Residence is a direct response to the housing crisis in New York City and the need for subsidized housing for older adults with all the services and accessible features they need to be able to “age in place”. These features were designed with the unique needs of seniors in mind — to help ensure that they are safe, healthy, and connected to a caring community.

Financing sources for this \$69 million development project included Reso A grants from Council Member Vanessa Gibson and Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, HPD's Senior Affordable Rental Apartments (SARA) Program, HDC's Extremely Low- and Low-Income Affordability (ELLA) Program, NYS Energy Research and Development Authority Funds, and tax credit equity.

I thank you for your support of the men and women who have served our country through military service and urge you to advocate for funding in these areas that would significantly impact their lives:

1. Fund a Benefits Coordinator position in every supportive housing program for veterans to ensure they are aware of and access all benefits for which they are eligible;
2. Fund Veteran Peer Specialist positions in each veterans residence who can serve alongside civilian case managers who are having difficulty engaging at-risk veterans;
3. Expand funding for SSVF to include after care, so that we can remain in contact with veterans and their families once they are stable and in permanent housing and can become aware of impending crises and intervene before it is too late to do so;
4. Fund Battle Buddy Bridge (B3), with the eventual goal of establishing a network of trained Battle Buddies to leverage the unique bonds of military culture to connect with hard-to-reach veterans who lack support, services and are at risk of suicide;
5. Fund a workforce training program to train and certify homeless men and women, including veterans, who want to work, in trades like plumbing, tiling, painting, etc. for prevailing wage jobs;
6. Finalize the transfer of E 119th Street Veterans Residence and eventually, Commonwealth Veterans Residence, to VOA-Greater New York's ownership so that we can convert these city-owned properties into ones that our veterans deserve, in particular as they age in place.

Respectfully submitted by:
Volunteers of America - Greater New York
135 West 50th Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10020



Dear Council Members,

On behalf of Row New York, I would like to thank you for your support of Row New York's Veterans Rowing Program. With funding from the New York City Council, Row New York is able to provide New York City's veterans, including those with disabilities, with on-water and land-based rowing activities for recreation, rehabilitation, and competition.

The program is designed to help veterans avoid poor health outcomes such as obesity and depression by improving physical fitness, including strength, speed, endurance, and mobility. Rowing can be easily adapted to meet different ability levels, a feature that makes the sport uniquely accessible. Our coaching staff have many years of experience serving veterans and individuals with disabilities including, but not limited to, amputations, visual impairments, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

In response to COVID-19, Row New York's Veterans program is temporarily being offered virtually until it is safe to resume in-person programming. Our coaches remain committed to offering technical coaching and support to the veterans we serve. Each week, Row New York provides veterans with a 90-minute rowing session delivered over Zoom video conferencing.

During each session, coaches work to engage veterans in workout plans tailored to their unique needs. The practice will begin with an introduction before breaking into small groups determined by ability level to participate in appropriate exercise routines. Each session ends with breathing exercises and a group conversation. In addition to the weekly session, veterans are given a training plan and have the chance to discuss workouts with coaches outside of practice. Throughout the pandemic our veterans have received the same quality rowing instruction that they would receive in-person from their coaches, including team warm-ups, workouts, and cool-downs.

We are so grateful for the City Council's leadership and their support of the Veterans Program. We thank you on behalf of New York City's Veterans that have received invaluable support throughout this pandemic, and urge you to continue your support in



the coming year. I would like to leave you with a quote from one of our participants Ricardo Charriez, U.S. Army retired.

“The thing about rowing is that it is calming. As a veteran, I have had many events in my life that are not calming, but rowing for me is like meditation. I am an older man and before rowing I often missed the feeling of being on a team that came from being in the army. But with rowing, I get to compete on a team, while working towards personal goals in a way that calms the mind. At Row New York you have such great coaches that really care about all the veterans. They always give their best and will bend over backwards to help you reach your goals. This year I was able to compete in the CRASH-B’s and reach my personal best time even though classes took place over Zoom and emails. My coaches always trained and encouraged me. They were right with me the entire time. I would recommend Row New York’s program to all veterans.”

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rachel Cytron".

Rachel Cytron, Executive Director of Row New York

My name is HP Schroer a veteran of World War II and director of UMEWE, a Veteran Advocacy organization that represents 12,000 veterans attending colleges in NY City. I want to thank Evelin Collado and Council member Ydnas Rodriguez for making this meeting possible.

Almost 5 years ago through the efforts of Chiam Deutsch, Bill Perkins, Erick Ulrich, the Mayor and Corey Johnson, Veterans attending college in the City were able to purchase MTA fares at ½ price. The only requirements were they had to be honorably discharged and attend Colleges in the City. Their income was not to be a factor in determining their eligibility.

Sadly, after 5 years less than 500 were able to purchase discounted fares. Why, because of income restrictions, imposed by Dept of Social Services...

To correct this injustice, our organization has been fighting to get NY State to pass laws which would enable all Veterans, not just those going to college, to be eligible to purchase MTA fares at ½ price.

Mind full of the MTA financial difficulties and as Pat Foye is aware, there were 2 Bills created and supported by a majority from both parties which provided money to the MTA, for a veteran ½ fare discount. Not only did Bills A0074 and Bill S1287 do this, but the money could only be used for the discount and would not come from the MTA Budget.

For the 4 years I have appeared before the MTA, many board members have personally endorsed UMEWE's mission to establish a Veterans discount. Yet the Board itself, has not recommended the governor pass the Bills. WHY!!

I know the MTA Board fights like hell to get money to operate. Isn't it time you fight for those for those who for over 250 years have fought for you. While we appreciate the words "Thank you for your service" It's time for action. Stop making Veterans pay full fare. Ask the Governor to pass the bills.

For the record my name is HP, I am a World War II veteran and Director of UMEWE a veteran organization representing 12,000 veterans attending college in New York City.

My mission over the last four years has been solely on getting the MTA to charge veterans the same price as seniors. Three years ago, Mayor de Blasio and the City Council approved giving veterans attending college in New York City a 50% discount. However they lose it when they graduate.

Unfortunately after 3 years, of the 12,000 veterans eligible, only 700 have been able to purchase discounted fares. The reason, because of restrictions imposed by HRA. I have requested veteran services to help rectify this, without success. A Foil request has been made.

Three bills were created in the state legislature. A 00774, S 1287, S 3372. **They enable all veterans to purchase Metro fares at half price.** Being keenly aware of the financial difficulties of the MTA, the bills stipulate the money will be supplied by the state and could only be used for a Veteran Discount.

Although supported by the public and a majority of the state legislature, they languished in committee for years. Why? Lack of money and a commitment to fund them.

Veterans are a disciplined, educated and reliable workforce that companies seek when looking to expand or relocate. Over the last 10 years we've lost between 25 and 35% of our veteran population. Two factors contributing to this, the high cost of housing and public transportation.

The American Relief Act has supplied the Governor and the MTA with billions of dollars. It is estimated it would take as little as two cents from every fare to raise enough money to fund a Veterans Discount. Yet the Governor has not taken any action to pass the Bills.

I ask you. **Do you believe a veterans service and sacrifice is worth 2 cents?** If so, join in our fight to get the Governor and the MTA to give meaning to the words "thank you for your service" **by taking action.** Can we count on the advisory board and veteran services **on your taking action by supporting a Veterans Discount .**