

The City University of New York



**Testimony of University Coordinator of Veterans Affairs Wilfred Cotto
The City University of New York
New York City Council Veterans Committee
Services for Veterans at CUNY
June 17, 2009**

Good afternoon, Chairperson Sanders and members of the committee. I am Wilfred Cotto, university coordinator for veteran affairs at The City University of New York.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak with you today about CUNY's programs and services for our returning veterans and reservists. At CUNY we understand that, as an institution, our profound gratitude for our veterans' enormous contributions to this country is best expressed through resources that will enhance their educational and employment opportunities and advance their personal and professional aspirations. As a 28-year veteran of the U.S. Navy, and a combat veteran of the Persian Gulf, OEF and OIF, I take a very special interest in ensuring that veterans find at CUNY the specific resources they need to successfully meet their educational, career, and personal goals.

As Vice Chancellor Moore said, the CUNY student veteran population continues to grow. The availability of the enhanced Post-9/11 GI Bill educational benefits and the New York State Veterans' Tuition Award makes CUNY an even more attractive and viable option for veterans.

The Post-9/11 GI Bill will become effective for training on or after August 1, 2009. This program will pay eligible individuals:

- Tuition and fees directly to the school, not to exceed the maximum in-state tuition and fees at a public institution of higher learning
- A monthly housing allowance based on the basic allowance for housing for an E-5 with dependents at the location of the school
- An annual books and supplies stipend of \$1,000 paid proportionately based on enrollment

For the 2008-09 academic year, The New York State Veterans' Tuition Award was set at 98% of tuition or \$4,287.50, whichever is less for eligible veterans who are New York State residents discharged under honorable conditions from the U.S. Armed forces and who are:

- Vietnam veterans who served in Indochina between February 28, 1961, and May 7, 1975
- Persian Gulf veterans who served in the Persian Gulf on or after August 2, 1990
- Afghanistan veterans who served in Afghanistan during hostilities on or after September 11, 2001

- Veterans of the armed forces of the United States who served in hostilities that occurred after February 28, 1961, as evidenced by receipt of an Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, Navy Expeditionary Medal, or a Marine Corps Expeditionary Medal.

Through our collaborative efforts with campus veteran services liaisons, campus student veteran clubs, and faculty and staff, as well as the use of technology, email, Facebook, flyers, mailings, meetings, and conferences, CUNY is doing all it can to ensure that student veterans are informed about and can access their educational benefits.

While student veterans contribute richly to University life, they encounter considerable challenges to their transition from military to college and civilian life that put them at high risk for attrition. Among other transition issues, they must adjust to college culture, which is considerably less rigidly structured and more self-directed than the military; they must endure the academic and social disruption of being called to active duty; they often must manage the impact of significant service-related disabilities, including TBI, PTSD, and social, emotional, physical, and other psychological disabilities; and they must navigate through complex bureaucratic structures in order to receive crucial veterans benefits.

Despite its modest resources in this area, CUNY is working diligently to meet the considerable needs of this burgeoning, high-risk, and highly deserving student population. CUNY presently lacks a budgetary line item for services to student veterans and reservists. As a result, system-wide there are only five higher education professionals dedicated full-time to serving student veterans. Presently, veterans' services on most campuses are loosely coordinated by college student services professionals, most of whom have veterans' services responsibilities as a small part of often large professional portfolios, which dilutes their efforts to serve student veterans and reservists in a meaningful way.

Allow me to offer a brief summary of the resources that presently support student veterans and reservists at CUNY:

- **The CUNY Office of Veterans Affairs** is staffed by one full-time University Coordinator and a half-time Assistant Coordinator. The office is responsible for the

overall coordination, outreach, recruitment, retention, programs, and services available to the University's student veteran population.

- **The CUNY Office of Admission Services** is staffed by one half-time veterans' recruitment coordinator responsible for outreach and recruitment, and conducting a bi-weekly CUNY Information Session for returning veterans.
- **The Hunter College School of Social Work Project for the Return and Opportunity in Veterans Education (PROVE)** is dedicated to increasing support and services to returning Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) veterans, as well as other student veterans. The project complements and enhances what limited resources are already in place at several CUNY campuses to ensure returning veterans a smooth transition and a successful re-adjustment back into civilian and student life. The CUNY Central Office for Student Affairs provides funding resources to hire a full-time field instructor and stipends for graduate student interns in support of the project. My colleague Tom Popowich will describe the project in more detail.
- **The CUNY Veterans Affairs Web site** (www.cuny.edu/veterans) is a virtual one-stop source of information for returning military veterans and their families. It is a guide to educational benefits, entitlements, counseling, advocacy resources, and the latest news. Students can also register to be a CUNY VIP to receive veterans-related communication and can link to the CUNY Student Veterans Facebook page to meet other CUNY veterans.
- **The Annual CUNY Veterans College Fair** is geared specifically for veterans to learn how CUNY can help their transition from military to academic life. Participants have the opportunity to speak with admission professionals from CUNY colleges regarding all academic programs. College veteran liaisons and current student veterans are also on hand to answer questions and offer guidance.

- **The Annual CUNY Student Veteran Conference** features experts offering updates on GI Bill and VA benefits and answering questions regarding financial aid, and career, transition, and employment assistance. Participants are also able to network and connect with other vets.
- **CUNY Application Fee Waivers** are offered to all veterans applying to CUNY undergraduate programs.
- **Community-Based Partnerships** continue to be an area of emphasis. The CUNY Office of Veteran Affairs has cultivated strong community-based collaborations with numerous city, state, and federal agencies, in addition to various local community-based organizations in an to better outreach, inform and provide better services to the New York City veteran community. Examples of such collaborations and partnerships include, but are not limited to: the U.S. Department of Veterans Administration NYC Regional Office, The New York State Division of Veterans Affairs, the Mayor's Office of Veteran Affairs, VA Vet Centers, Bronx Borough Presidents Office of Veteran Affairs, NYC Veteran Resource Centers, Student Veterans of America, Jewish Board of Family and Children Services, Inc. (Veterans Initiative), Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, Fort Hamilton and Fort Totten Army Garrisons, Fort Schuyler - Navy Operational Support Center, and the New York City Police Department and Fire Department New York Veteran Associations.

The University has also established a process to fund projects at the campuses. In academic year 2008-09, the CUNY Office of Student Affairs funded 12 campus projects through an RFP process at the following campuses: Borough of Manhattan Community College, New York City College of Technology, Hunter College, John Jay College, College of Staten Island, Kingsborough Community College, Lehman College, Hostos Community College, Baruch College, Queens College, City College, and Queensborough Community College. In addition to the funded projects, there are also established student veteran programs at La Guardia Community College and Brooklyn College.

These student-centered RFP projects identify and develop best practices in facilitating outreach to veterans, promote program enhancement for student veteran retention, work to strengthen the academic success of student veterans, and enrich the diversity of student life throughout the University. Areas of emphasis given priority in this competitive RFP process include, but are not limited to, the following areas: outreach to veterans and reservists, retention of student veterans and reservists, promoting successful transitions for veterans and reservists, with particular focus on re-entry into the higher education system, helping student veterans effectively access government and community resources, supporting the needs of women student veterans, supporting the needs of veterans with disabilities, developing student leadership among veterans, and acknowledge the skills veterans bring to the campuses, and to utilize those skills throughout the University.

In order to meet the needs of this burgeoning and particularly deserving student population, CUNY must continue to invest in its student veteran services infrastructure. We would particularly appreciate the support of the City Council in providing additional funding to the University centrally to hire full-time student affairs professionals on each campus, whose sole responsibility is to coordinate services for student veterans that support their success and well-being.

On behalf of all of us who serve CUNY's student veterans, thank you for your interest in and support of services to CUNY students who have so selflessly served their country.

The City University of New York



**Testimony of Garrie Moore
Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs
The City University of New York
New York City Council Higher Education Committee
June 17, 2009**

Good afternoon, Chairperson Sanders and members of the committee. I am Garrie Moore, vice chancellor for student affairs at The City University of New York. I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon about CUNY's services for veterans.

Testifying with me today are Wilfred Cotto, a veteran and the university coordinator of veterans affairs, who will offer detailed information about CUNY's veteran services and operations; and three CUNY students who will speak to their specific experiences: Don Gomez, a veteran and student at City College, who was recently named a 2009 Truman Scholar; Tom Popowich, a veteran, Hunter College student, and staff member of Hunter's PROVE program; and Kinda Ford, a veteran, student at Hunter College, and employee of the CUNY Central Office.

All of us at CUNY are profoundly grateful for our veterans' service and their many contributions to our country and our University. In turn, we are proud to serve our student veterans by helping them advance through high-quality academic opportunities. Our Office of Veterans Affairs is actively engaged in reaching our student veterans and offers a comprehensive and carefully developed array of services. As a Vietnam-era veteran myself, I take a very special interest in ensuring that veterans find at CUNY the specific resources they need to successfully meet their educational goals.

Currently, there are more than 1,700 student veterans enrolled at CUNY. This places the University in the top 10 for veteran student enrollment among the country's higher education institutions. The University's student veteran population has grown by about 10 percent every year since 2004. We anticipate further growth as service members return to the New York City area from Iraq and Afghanistan. As our student veteran population grows, so does the demand for veterans services. The City Council's assistance in helping us to meet this demand is critical to our efforts and has been much appreciated.

The University and its campuses provide a range of academic and support services to ease veteran students' transition to college and civilian life, including academic advising; counseling, particularly for post-deployment issues; advice on financial aid and benefits; and job placement counseling.

In addition, outreach efforts are an important part of our commitment to encourage veterans' participation in higher education. Both the University's Central Office and its colleges work closely with the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs and community groups in all five boroughs.

Assisting our students in accessing available financial benefits is also a priority, especially those benefits related to the enhanced Post-9/11 GI Bill and the New York State Veterans Tuition Award.

In all of these activities, the University's central Office of Veterans Affairs works collaboratively with veterans affairs offices on our campuses. Our goal is to ensure the quality and availability of student programs and services and to be a comprehensive resource for students, campuses, and the community. In particular, we have established mechanisms to ensure that the campuses can access available funding through a centralized RFP process that emphasizes accountability and quality.

Our robust veterans services are reaching more students than ever and constantly evolving to meet the specific needs of our student veterans. To build on our efforts, we ask the City Council to continue its funding for CUNY's veterans services, which was at the \$500,000 level this year. In addition, directing funds for veterans services toward CUNY's Office of Veterans Affairs would enable the University to maximize funding through an efficient, centralized process, as we have done in the past.

My colleague, University Coordinator of Veterans Affairs Wilfred Cotto, will offer the committee details about the funding process and about the initiatives and issues I have mentioned.

I can assure you that CUNY is fully committed to assisting the men and women who have served our country in achieving an excellent post-active-duty education. We deeply value our partnership with the council in serving our student veterans, and I thank you, Chairperson Sanders, and this entire committee for your continuing support.

New York City Council Veterans Committee Hearing

Testimony of

Thomas E. Popowich

Project for Return and Opportunity in Veterans Education (PROVE)

Hunter College School of Social Work

June 17th, 2009

Good afternoon, Chairperson Sanders and members of the committee. My name is Thomas Popowich, and I am here today representing the Project for Return and Opportunity in Veterans Education (PROVE) of the Hunter College School of Social Work. I come to you today, first as a combat veteran of Lebanon, and second, as student of the Hunter College School of Social Work, and as a social work intern serving the student veteran population of CUNY through PROVE. I also come before you today as a proud and grateful citizen of this great city and nation. I would also like to take this opportunity thank those who have proudly served this great nation, and those who faithfully support them.

During the past academic year, it has been my honor and privilege to serve the student veteran population of CUNY through my affiliation with PROVE. The mission of PROVE is to assist student veterans in making a successful transition from military to academic life. Based upon a model of vets-helping-vets, PROVE provides social work interns who in turn provide counseling and support services to the student veterans of Hunter College, John Jay, and, the Borough of Manhattan Community College (BMCC), while at the same time seeking to promote and create a thriving community of student veterans at those three campuses. PROVE community organizers have also outreached student veterans at several other CUNY campuses. The overall strategy of PROVE is based upon the premise that the best way to help the student veteran to succeed is by encouraging as many as possible to actively participate in the veteran community on their campus, where they can interact with other student veterans, exchange information, give or receive help, as well as engage with PROVE interns. And it is through such

engagement within a viable community can a struggling student be identified and given the help they need.

So what have we accomplished? During the past academic year, the PROVE staff has outreached over 500 student veterans throughout CUNY. Of those 500, 160 student veterans were interviewed and assessed by social work interns at the three primary PROVE campuses. Any student with an identified need was provided either counseling services by PROVE interns, or given appropriate referrals to outside agencies. During the year, PROVE interns have also taken groups of student vets to enroll with the VA; they have organized and planned well attended social events and outings; they have provided individual and group counseling, and facilitated workshops. At Hunter College, we were very engaged with a small but thriving group of about 15 to 20 student vets. Early in the semester, we identified several struggling vets, including some who were experiencing difficulties as the direct consequence of their exposure to war. But since those vets were active participants in their vet club, and thus actively engaged with PROVE interns, those vets received timely and appropriate interventions, and are now thriving in school. So what I can say with certainty is that what we do works. What I cannot say with absolute certainty, however, is how many student veterans there are who were not successful, and who may otherwise have been had they been engaged with either PROVE interns or their campus vet club. Indeed, this is the number one question, and part of the reason why we are here today.

The other day I received a phone call from a counselor we've worked with at the VA. He had a woman in his office, a veteran of Iraq, who was looking for help to get

back into school. She had failed her first and only semester because she was dealing with combat related issues. Suffice to say, had she possibly been engaged with her campus vet club and the PROVE interns, her outcome just might have been different. Now getting her back into school is PROVE's main objective.

What is clear, esteemed members of this committee, is that out of the tens of thousands of student veterans throughout CUNY, or even the even the 120 or so vets at Hunter, we are only scratching the surface. We all know that with the new GI Bill, and with thousands of vets coming home every day, that the number of student veterans enrolled at CUNY is going to increase, and increase significantly. Because our project is limited both in funding and resources, we are also thus limited in both size and scope. And though we are confident that we are making a difference with the vets that we do work with, we are also gravely concerned about the fate of the vets we do not. This is where your help is so urgently needed. CUNY is committed to providing a world-class education to our student veterans, and has demonstrated that commitment over and over again by providing quality programs and services to student vets. But what we urgently need is to significantly expand the size and scope of our programs and services if we are to have any chance of meeting the growing needs of this burgeoning population. That is why we are here before this esteemed committee today, as old warriors looking for a hand out, so our young warriors can have a better future. And it is only with your help, that we can set the standard that no vet will be a preventable casualty on the home front. With your help, we can work to ensure that no vet is MIA, missing in America. Failure is not an option. From this day forward, no vet should go missing on

our streets, missing in our homes and workplaces, or missing from the classrooms of our city university system. Please help CUNY to realize its vision of being the national model for veteran's education and give our veterans to education they have earned and deserve.

Thank you!

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

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Name: Wilfred COTTO

Address: _____

I represent: The City University of New York

Address: Office of VETERANS' Affairs

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I represent: CUNY

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Name: Thomas Popowich

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(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Kinda M. Ford

Address: 535 E 80th St New York NY 10075

I represent: The City University of New York

Address: 535 E. 80th Street New York NY 10075

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

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Date: _____

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Name: THOMAS MUALVELP

Address: 1856 HONE AVE

I represent: NEW ERA VETERANS INC

Address: 1150 COMMONWEALTH AVE, BX

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Name: Oronde TAKUMA

Address: _____

I represent: Black Veterans For Social Justice,

Address: 665 Wullaughy St. P

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

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Date: 06/17/2009

Name: Jason Ortiz (PLEASE PRINT)

Address: 1150 Commonwealth Ave.

I represent: NEV-Bronx Veteran Resource Center

Address: _____

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

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

in favor in opposition

Date: _____

Name: DAN ROSSI (PLEASE PRINT)

Address: _____

I represent: Veteran

Address: _____

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