



**Testimony of James Hendon  
Commissioner for New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS)  
New York City Council Committee on Veterans  
Preliminary Budget Hearing - Veteran  
March 5, 2020, 2:00pm**

***Introduction***

Good afternoon Chairman Deutsch, members of the committee, and advocates. I would like to begin by thanking you for the opportunity to discuss DVS's Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year 2021. 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 Cassandra Alvarez, Associate Commissioner for Public-Private Partnerships, and Jason Loughran, our Assistant Director of Special Projects at DVS.

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 210,000 heroic veterans and their families across the five boroughs need and have come to depend on. Veterans are more likely to vote, volunteer, and are more civically engaged in their communities than their civilian counterparts. In short, they are one of our city's greatest assets. 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.

As the first new agency in The City of New York in over fifteen years, DVS has diligently worked to onboard a talented, passionate, and diverse group of professionals, many of whom are veterans or current service members, to best match resources through peer support with individual veteran needs. As we embark on this new year, DVS is actively endeavoring to fill our nine remaining vacancies with likeminded, talented, and diverse individuals. We strive each day to reach our authorized strength of forty-nine (49) employees. In FY20, \$6.1 million was allocated under the agency's budget for staffing and programmatic functions. As we continue our upward trajectory, DVS stands committed to improving on the success of our notable 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. To accomplish this we commit ourselves to working smarter by effectively managing resources, staff, and time to deliver verifiable, evidence-based outcomes.

### *Our History*

At the heart of DVS's mission is the foundational goal of fostering purpose driven lives for our veterans and their families, regardless of era, length of service, or discharge status. Before I go into our accomplishments and successes from this past year, I think it is important to remember DVS's origin and charter. With that, I would like to talk about Local Law 113.

In 2015, through the hard work of the councilmembers in front of me, the advocates behind me, and the leadership of Mayor Bill de Blasio, Local Law 113 was introduced into law. The law removed the Mayor's Office of Veteran Affairs and created the Department of Veteran Services'.

Local Law 113 was a call to action for a group of constituents who have more than earned it for their dedication to our country.

Our original charter was built upon four pillars of veteran services that create the foundation of the agency that we are now. Those pillars are: education and retraining services; health, well-being and rehabilitation; provisions and benefits across all governmental levels; employment and re-employment services. With these pillars in mind, I begin my testimony in continuing to evolve, understand, and serve a constituency that gives so much back.

### ***Health, Wellbeing and Rehabilitation***

Someone once said, that “home is where one starts from”. As I often say, without a strong foundation, the house will crumble. Since our inception, DVS has been at the forefront of finding suitable housing for homeless veterans. We have housed over 860 veterans in total in just under four years. In the first four months of FY 20, DVS housed 54% more homeless veterans than the same period last year. DVS is on pace to hit a remarkable milestone over the coming year – housing our 1,000<sup>th</sup> veteran. While these numbers show the tremendous growth, pride, and expertise found in DVS staff, it is the lives that we impact that is our greatest win.

Take for example, the story of Steve who served in the Army. He moved here from South Carolina to build a better life for him and his son. He went through some hard times, including losing an apartment right before Christmas that he was scheduled to move in to due to problems with a landlord. Through it all he kept a cheery disposition, telling our veteran peer coordinator that he knew that we would find him a safe place soon. Shortly after that we secured a space for him and

he moved into his new residence in Staten Island. We continue to follow up with Steve who is ecstatic that he now has a home base from which he can take care of his family and give back to the community.

Or take the story of Sonia an Army veteran. She had been living in a family shelter and had a tough time finding a unit for her and her disabled son. She was lucky to get linked to a Mitchell Lama apartment and avoid a long-term wait, but unfortunately the three apartments that she was offered had a variety of problems. We worked hard and strategically to find a suitable apartment for her and her disabled son. She was finally accepted into a beautiful apartment early last year.

While Steve and Sonia's story are only two examples, the care we provided displays DVS's unwavering commitment to finding suitable housing for veterans in need across the five boroughs.

An example that shows this dedication on a larger scale is our recent Surf Vets Place (Surf Vets) partnership with Concern for Independent Living and Georgia Green Venture. Surf Vets Place is a brand-new building in Coney Island that not only contains supportive housing for Veterans but also serves as transition housing for those returning from military service. Through Surf Vets, we not only assist our veterans in need, but connect with those who are transitioning to provide them the support services and assistance to prevent isolation and further homelessness. As part of Surf Vets, we identified 82 homeless veterans for the project and helped them with apartment applications and gathering the appropriate documentation that they would need. We began moving veterans in last July and finished in December. The last veteran to move in required DVS to collaborate with NYCHA, the Bronx Mental Health Court, a veterans shelter, and the Department of Veterans Affairs. Needless to say, this was an all hands on deck moment that our team

coordinated seamlessly, and on December 30, 2019, the veteran was successfully moved into his new home at Surf Vets Place.

DVS is also making measurable strides when it comes to housing policy. Most recently, DVS and NYCHA successfully pushed for triple the allocation of VASH continuum vouchers for DVS to provide rental assistance and case management to homeless veterans who are disconnected from the VA. In receiving an additional ninety-five Vouchers, we can continue to drastically reduce the number of veterans who are homeless and begin to assist them to achieve economic success and stability. Further, through this advocacy, DVS was able to receive a long-term commitment of utilizing up to 15% of NYCHA's total VASH allocation over the coming years.

I'd now like to discuss a topic that is painful for our community, veteran suicide. According to the most recent data, veteran suicide deaths range between 0.3%-0.7% of the total veteran deaths each year. Veteran status is determined using information provided on the death certificate. The informant (usually, the next-of-kin) provides personal information to the funeral director that is recorded on the death certificate. To ascertain veteran status, informants are asked if the decedent 'ever served in U.S. Armed Forces?'. It is possible that the informant may not know if the decedent served in the U.S. Armed Forces. Between 2010-2017, the average number of suicides were thirty-four (34) per year, averaging less than three (3) per month. To further our efforts in understanding the issues surrounding veteran suicide in New York City, DVS and DOHMH entered into an MOU to better determine the age, race, education level, contributing causes, and cause of death, amongst other data points to better understand the situation aggregated through borough. In doing so, DVS will utilize this information to determine effective, data driven policies with the goal of reducing the number of veteran suicides in New York City. As always, we encourage any service member,

veteran, or those concerned about their loved ones to call the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255 and press 1 to talk with someone.

Simultaneously, to help combat this epidemic, we held a Crisis Intercept Mapping training session three weeks ago in Staten Island. At this training we brought together more than 35 individuals from 20 organizations representing medical, mental health, city, state, and federal agencies to engage in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration training session in that borough to close gaps that will help to reduce the number of veteran suicides there. It's the first time that New York City has held such training focused on lowering veteran suicides.

Further, DVS continues to explore holistic methods in the health care space. Take for example, our Veteran Insurance Collaborative (Collaborative) and Veteran Data Initiative (Data Initiative). Through the Collaborative, DVS in conjunction with the VA, Medicaid, Medicare, TriCare, MetroPlus, and other organizations seek to increase health care access for veterans, starting with affordable insurance. Our goal is to create one-point of access to information for veterans and military families about insurance eligibility for public and private insurance, as well as VA eligibility. Our Data Initiative is a coalition between DVS, New York City Health and Hospitals (NYCH&H), and CIDI whose intent is to explore data in regards to constituent access to insurance, care, and housing. It is through these data-driven approaches that DVS can effectively shine light on the issue, and lead in its solution.

DVS is also committed to ensuring veterans and their families are aware of and have access to non-traditional mental health services. Since launching VetConnectNYC, providers such as the David Lynch Foundation, Sierra Club Military Outdoors, and most recently, GallopNYC and

Catholic Charities have joined--or are in the process of joining the network, enabling our veterans access to meditation, equine therapy, outdoor group activities, caregiver respite and substance abuse support group services. We continue to work with our partners at the Institute of Veterans and Military Families to be certain this platform evolves based on community needs, opportunities, and strengths.

In addition, ThriveNYC has been a strong partner in addressing the mental health gaps and issues facing veterans throughout New York City. Addressing mental health needs is a citywide commitment whereby advocates, agencies, non-profits and elected officials work together in the pursuit of enhancing mental health support and addressing the mental health needs of our veterans and fellow New Yorkers. Between January 1, 2017 and December 31, 2019, over 29,000 veterans, military families, and caregivers were engaged through the VetsThriveNYC program. Through our ECS staff, DVS works to connect individuals with social service and mental health resources. Our outreach efforts also include spreading word about the VetConnectNYC platform, Mental Health First Aid training, the Columbia Protocol for suicide prevention, NYC Well, and veteran competency training. Further, through the reconfiguration of a demographic versus a geographic approach, we anticipate greater engagement with our constituency.

Lastly, as we take care of our veterans in life, we must also be there for them in passing. In partnership with our sister agencies, DVS stands as a model for providing for the care and humane burials of our fellow warriors. On average, DVS ensures the proper burial of approximately eighty-five veterans per year. Through these efforts by our dedicated staff, DVS continues to provide the support and services across a variety of veteran issues and needs.

## *Employment and Re-Employment*

As DVS continues to build on its success and expand services for our most vulnerable veterans, we are also broadening our efforts to move our community to a higher plane of well-being and professional success. Last fall, DVS launched the first-ever city employee mentorship program for veterans and AmeriCorps alumni called, Service2Service. Through this program, service-minded New Yorkers are paired with city employee mentors to learn the intricacies of city government employment. Service2Service also includes educational workshop programming about professional careers in NYC government. As of the end of January over 30 individuals have been paired with mentors from department such as Small Business Services, FDNY, the Department of Transportation, NYCHA, and the Public Advocate's Office. We recently heard from one Service2Service veteran participant who shared the following comment with us about the program: "You did a wonderful job pairing me with my City mentor. We either email or text almost every day and she has diligently been sending me job postings. She has also revised my resume."

In addition to Service2Service, DVS has experienced favorable outcomes with VeteransCARE, a Pay For Success initiative that improves employment outcomes for veterans with service-connected PTSD. Presently, over seventy (70) veterans spanning different wars, gender, and race have been enrolled in the program. So far, twenty-two (22) have found full-time employment in companies such as Amazon and Warby Parker and fields that range from government to logistics. One such veteran who entered the program is Mike, a US Army Gulf War veteran who suffered from PTSD and was struggling at his job. He was bullied by his coworkers and referred to as the "PTSD Veteran". His work atmosphere was loud and unforgiving, so he sought help from VeteransCARE. The project matched Mike with an employment specialist who helped him



identify suitable job opportunities that matched his interests, skills and disability needs. Thanks to VeteransCARE, Mike landed a job with a federal agency a role that will continue his pension and will aid in his mental health recovery.

VeteransCARE has been a pathway to the middle class for Mike and so many others and programs like this strengthen this agency's goal of economic empowerment and wellness for our veterans and their families.

### ***Education***

We all know a successful career starts with a solid education—that's why DVS is committed to ensuring the administrators at the schools with the largest student veteran populations have an established point of contact with our agency. By bringing together these administrators, who are essentially the boots on the ground, DVS is positioned to disseminate crucial information and resources down to the student veteran population. Through Veterans of Campus, DVS has created a direct line of contact between our staff and the schools, enabling us to support and problem solve in real time, such as when VA BAH payments were delayed in the fall of 2018 and our students were in need of rental assistance.

In addition, just this past January, thanks to a grant we secured through the Mayor's Fund, our Veterans on Campus initiative sponsored 17 CUNY student veteran leaders, one from each undergraduate institution, to attend Student Veterans of America's National Conference in Los Angeles. The "SVA 17", as they are now fondly referred to by the CUNY Office of Veterans Affairs, learned about on-campus chapter development best practices, employment opportunities, mental health resources, and advocacy, both at the government and academic levels. The SVA 17 continue to build upon the relationships they forged at the conference, bringing together their

schools and campus chapters in new and unprecedented ways. In fact, the students are even exploring the creation of a university-wide CUNY Office of Veterans Affairs Student Veterans of America chapter that would unite them.

I am also pleased to share that the Posse Veterans Program has recently become a part of the VetConnectNYC platform. The Posse Veterans Program identifies, trains, and supports veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces interested in pursuing bachelor's degrees at top colleges and universities. Participants receive training prior to matriculating on campus and mentoring once enrolled. In addition, Posse partner colleges provide veterans in the program with supplemental funding to cover the full cost of tuition.

We are always open to new collaborations and ideas that will help Veterans on Campus further reach, serve, and empower our student veteran population.

### ***Provisions and Benefits***

In order to provide better benefits and services, we must first be able to engage and interact with our constituents. As many of you are aware, our constituency is getting older and our veteran population is getting smaller. Right now, over 70% of our population are fifty-five and older. As our World War II, Korean, and Vietnam veterans continue to age, and less young people join the military, that population will continue to decrease. To that end, DVS held its first Partnership Convening Event on February 6<sup>th</sup> to hear firsthand how we can build stronger bonds with our veteran community and expand our reach. I see many familiar faces here on the council and in the audience that were there. The event was attended by more than 160 people from over 75 different organizations and is the first step in what I consider to be a listening tour to better inform us so

that we can provide the most value to our veterans and to the veteran community as well as bring new veterans into the fold. We have already been examining the comments and suggestions that were returned to us, and I look forward to hearing more ideas from the veteran community in the days ahead.

Next, to better interact with our constituents and notify them of their benefits, DVS has shifted our outreach approach from geographical to demographic. While we will maintain our presence within each borough, our engagement staff has undergone a restructuring to better care for those who have served based on their unique attributes. Under this restructuring, DVS staff will oversee portfolios focused on demographic categories such as women and LGBTQ veterans, students and those presently serving, as well as the elderly, caregivers, survivors, and spouses. Through this restructuring, we hope to better engage with organizations, players, and key community leaders to foster ongoing relationships and better reach our constituency.

DVS also seeks to increase the number of veterans with access to benefits across all levels. It is estimated that approximately 10% of the over 210,000 veterans living in New York City hold a less than honorable discharge status. Spread across all war time eras, discharges under dishonorable conditions have prevented many veterans from concluding their service with pride and receiving benefits afforded on behalf of their service. While DVS serves all veterans regardless of discharge, we seek to more effectively address, include, and engage all pockets of our constituency.

Because of this, DVS has been hard at work drafting a negotiated acquisition to award \$1.7 million over three years to non-profit legal organizations to address the growing backlog of discharge

cases. In doing so, we hope to not only remove that backlog, but to return the recognition these veterans deserve. Known as the Discharge Upgrade Assistance Legal Services or DUALS program, DVS and the city of New York continue to address the issues facing thousands of New York City veterans.

Also, while we continue to discuss a strategic plan for the functionality of a contract shop, DVS has begun a search for a Director of Contracts. In this role, the Director of Contracts will serve as subject matter expert for already existing contracts such as VetConnectNYC, and Pay For Success; all the while leading the agencies expansion into contracts like the DUALS. Furthermore, as we move forward, the Director of Contracts will serve as a subject matter lead in determining the potential of being an agency for discretionary contracts. Working hand-in-hand with our Ombudsman, this Director of Contracts will lift some of the concerns raised by our constituents and allow us to further engage our people with the help they desire. As we continue to improve and refine our agency direction and fill the remaining roles, I am certain that our committed and talented staff will engage more of our constituency and assist in providing them with the many services they have earned.

### ***Conclusion***

As DVS expands its programs and services to better address the needs and concerns of our veteran community, I am certain that we will continue to stand as the national model for years to come. Moving into this next fiscal year, we hope to continue our tradition of improving with each day to better serve our constituents and the issues they face. We thank you for the opportunity to testify

on this matter and we look forward to any questions you or any other member of the committee may have.

###

**Testimony by the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG)**

**Before the New York City Council Committee on Veterans regarding:**

**Preliminary Budget Hearing – Veterans**

**March 5, 2020**

Chair Deutsch, Council Members, and staff, good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Veterans Committee about the Fiscal Year 2021 budget. My name is Ryan Foley, and I am the Supervising Attorney of the Veterans Practice at the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG), a nonprofit law office dedicated to providing free legal services in civil matters to low-income New Yorkers. 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 victims, people with disabilities, patients with chronic illness or disease, low-wage workers, low-income members of the LGBTQ community, Holocaust survivors, as well as others in need of free legal services.

Understanding the unique needs and challenges that exist among the diverse group of veterans that call New York City home, NYLAG operates two veteran specific programs. NYLAG's LegalHealth Veterans Initiative holds weekly legal clinics within the Bronx and Manhattan VA Medical Centers, as well as at the Northport VA on Long Island. These clinics provide an opportunity for NYLAG attorneys to work closely with medical professionals to address the nonmedical needs of low-income veterans with serious health problems.

Among the legal clinics operated by the LegalHealth Veterans Initiative is the nation's first legal clinic focused on women veterans. Women veterans are the fastest growing veteran population and currently comprise 20% of the active-duty armed forces and 10% of the total

veteran population.<sup>1</sup> Women veterans experience higher rates of military sexual trauma (MST), are the fastest growing segment of the veteran homeless population, and have a significantly higher rate of suicide than civilian adult females. NYLAG's clinic for women veterans aims to provide a comfortable space for this often-overlooked segment of the veteran population to receive legal assistance that can help veterans and their families achieve stability and security.

In addition to the medical-legal partnership NYLAG has with the Department of Veteran Affairs, we also have a community-based veteran program. NYLAG's Veterans Practice, which is funded by the City Council's Legal Services for Veterans Initiative, provides comprehensive services to veterans and their families, regardless of whether they use, or can use, the VA Healthcare System. With only 30% of veterans seeking care from a VA medical facility<sup>2</sup> and approximately 15% of veterans receiving a less-than-honorable discharge, which can impact eligibility for VA Healthcare access,<sup>3</sup> NYLAG's Veterans Practice looks to reach this large population of underserved veterans by working with other agencies and community-based organizations focused on assisting veterans.

NYLAG's Veterans Practice holds regular offsite clinics at locations like Samaritan Daytop Village's 43<sup>rd</sup> Street Veterans Program, a Manhattan-based residential addiction and mental health treatment program often utilized by non-VA eligible veterans; Core Services Group's Beach House, a shelter in Rockaway providing temporary housing and social services to veterans and their families; and American Legion Post 213 in Park Slope, a leader among

---

<sup>1</sup> 2018 Women Veterans Report – Women Veterans: The Journey Ahead. Disabled American Veterans. [https://www.dav.org/wp-content/uploads/2018\\_Women-Veterans-Report-Sequel.pdf](https://www.dav.org/wp-content/uploads/2018_Women-Veterans-Report-Sequel.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> VA Utilization Profile FY 2016. United States Department of Veterans Affairs. [https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/QuickFacts/VA\\_Utilization\\_Profile.PDF](https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/QuickFacts/VA_Utilization_Profile.PDF)

<sup>3</sup> Veteran's Benefits: The Impact of Military Discharges on Basic Eligibility. Congressional Research Service. <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/R43928.pdf>

veteran service organizations in Brooklyn. We also have close referral relationships with dozens of other non-VA organizations and offices of elected officials, are a network provider within VetConnectNYC, and accept direct referrals through phone and email requests. Recognizing that it can be very difficult for individuals to seek help, especially veterans, NYLAG provides multiple avenues to receive that request and answer the call.

Veterans deal with all the same legal issues as civilians, but also run into issues unique to their veteran status. Both of NYLAG's veterans programs place their main focus on those veteran-specific issues, but legal issues rarely fall neatly into one category. This makes NYLAG's team of nearly 300 attorneys, paralegals, and financial counselors a powerful resource for every veteran we touch. A veteran seeking help accessing medical care will not only be screened for VA healthcare eligibility, but also for Medicaid and Medicare, which are crucial to obtaining long term care for New York City's aging veteran population. A veteran seeking help with an eviction will work with attorneys who have been provided trainings not only on housing benefits specific to veterans, but also on military and veteran cultural competency. And veterans seeking help obtaining VA disability benefits are screened for all available public benefits, including Social Security and Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, to ensure they are receiving all the resources they are entitled to. It is this combination of experienced veteran attorneys both inside the VA and in the community, working within a large and knowledgeable organization dedicated to social justice, which enables NYLAG to provide the highest quality assistance to the veteran population.

One such veteran is James, an 89-year old Korean War veteran who was facing eviction in a nonpayment proceeding. James had been living in the same apartment for over 43 years, but, as a result of unexpected healthcare expenses, did not have enough income to pay his rent.



When his son initially contacted NYLAG's Tenants' Rights Unit, he was screened for veteran status and was immediately connected with the Veterans Practice. While one Veterans Practice attorney started working on his housing case, another began looking into maximizing his income. James was eligible for VA non-service-connected pension based on his age, dates of service, and limited income. NYLAG gathered the necessary supporting documents and filed the application on his behalf. He was quickly awarded the benefit, and this additional income proved crucial in the negotiation of a settlement agreement with his landlord. James was not only able to stay in his home, but with the veterans pension he now has greater financial stability. NYLAG is continuing to work with James to connect him with non-VA healthcare options for more comprehensive care, as well as putting together advance planning documents to ensure his future health care treatment is consistent with his wishes. Many of our veteran clients, like James, need assistance with multiple legal issues, and greatly benefit from having qualified and experienced attorneys to assist them with the complexities surrounding their veteran-specific legal issues and other associated legal needs.

The crucial and comprehensive work that NYLAG does on behalf of veterans would not be possible without the Legal Services for Veterans Initiative funding. As such, NYLAG strongly urges the Council to continue and expand the Legal Services for Veterans Initiative to allow us to help even more New York City veterans.

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. I would be happy to answer any questions.

Respectfully submitted,

New York Legal Assistance Group

### **Committee on Veterans: Preliminary Budget Hearing**

Good afternoon, My name is Art Cody, I am the Director of Criminal Programs at the Veteran Advocacy Project. I welcome this opportunity to testify before you on the needs of our veterans in the justice system and how VAP is uniquely designed to meet those needs.

I am 34-year veteran of the Armed Services, my most recent was in Afghanistan. What was particularly distressing to me in Afghanistan, perhaps a better word is heartbreaking, was what our troops, particularly our young enlisted troops go through. The amount of danger, the amount of fear, the amount of death. None of them come home the way they went over, none of them. When they return, however, we don't always get them the treatment they need. This is most pronounced with respect to the post-traumatic stress issues.

Some veterans are able to cope with it better than others, but many had issues prior to deployment and those difficulties are only exacerbated. Iraq and Afghanistan are not therapeutic. Veterans often encounter the criminal justice system as they are trying to reintegrate into civilian society. Commonly, they are without adequate or *any* mental health support services. Typically our National Guardsmen are discharged from active duty as quickly as possible because the Army understandably wants to stop paying them. They are discharged into society with little follow-on care. They're trying to get back into a family, a job, a civilian social circle. With rare exception, none of those groups has any idea what the veteran has been through or how to help that veteran. If we use VA statistics, roughly a third of veterans are suffering from some significant post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, and/or depression. We are looking at countless veterans here in New York City.

One of the most frequent charges is weapons possession. Part of the underlying cause is that servicemen and women are absolutely used to carrying a weapon. In Afghanistan, you are required to do so, so it's like shoes, socks, shirt, weapon. Sometimes weapons bought into New York City because the veteran is ignorant of the New York law, sometimes the weapon is in a veteran's car because he is contemplating suicide. I have had both of those cases.

Only 7% of the population are veterans. One of the most important things that I do is explain in depth to a prosecutor, a judge, a jury what one of our veterans went through in order to translate this kind of strange, dangerous, traumatic experience so as to foster understanding and engender compassion. I do this by establishing a trust with the client, interviewing him or her (veteran to veteran), looking at the veteran's record, talking to colleagues. I then write the brief and personally advocate in court. Once I explain in depth the veteran's background, often the recommended disposition goes from 5 years of incarceration to 6 months of treatment. That's exactly what happened in the two cases I mentioned above.

Many of our veterans don't just suffer from a single issue. Sometimes in addition to criminal issues, mental health problems also give rise to housing, education, and substance abuse issues. I am in the courts a lot and at Rikers at least monthly along with other VAP staff. We take a holistic approach to our veterans' issues. I have the resources inside the Veteran Advocacy Project to get them into housing, help them use their educational benefits, file for the disability benefits, get their discharges upgraded, connect them to treatment, and more. I seek your assistance in funding VAP, particularly its newly established Criminal Programs, to enable us to serve our veterans.



### **Committee on Veterans: Preliminary Budget Hearing**

Good afternoon members of the Committee on Veterans. My name is Coco Culhane and I am the executive director of the Veteran Advocacy Project ("VAP"). Since 2010, we have been providing free legal services to low-income veterans and their families, with a focus on those who have post-traumatic stress disorder ("PTSD"), traumatic brain injury, and other mental health issues. Our holistic approach to advocacy helps individuals enter treatment instead of prison; removes barriers to housing, health care, and income; and allows veterans to focus on recovery. And our work doesn't end with a legal decision; we ensure that veterans access the services and benefits they need through our many partnerships across the city.

This year VAP spun off of the Urban Justice Center so that we could become a more efficient, independent nonprofit. We continued evolving by adding a criminal defense and mitigation practice. By offering civil legal services, criminal defense, and veterans law under one roof, VAP reaches and serves the most vulnerable veterans in New York. Our comprehensive approach is best exemplified by a veteran we served this year through our justice-outreach initiative.

In April last year we met a Marine who had served 10 years in a state prison and came home to New York City with severe PTSD and nowhere to go. He had no safety net of family to turn to, so he diligently called and visited SSVF providers and veterans job programs. The clock was ticking as he spent each night on the street. With unreturned calls and no leads on appointments or interviews, he turned back to what he knew: drugs. He was soon picked up by police and sent to Rikers where VAP met him.

It took some convincing to persuade the Marine that, when he got out this time, something different could happen. We told him that we could cut through red tape with organization for him and that he really would get help. However, last spring, when he was released from Rikers, the agency assigned to his reentry planning sent him to clinics that were difficult for him to get to: one in east Harlem and one in South Brooklyn, even though he was in Queens; and the methadone program was not prepared to deal with his severe PTSD. He was kicked out of treatment and quickly relapsed. It is at this point that his story would be an unknown but VAP's advocate kept tracking him and offering resources every time he would call our intake line from a LINK station on the street. Eventually, months later, he agreed to get help; we found a detox and a separate rehabilitation facility for him through a partner organization because his Bad Conduct Discharge, a result of drug use, barred him by statute from receiving Department of Veterans Affairs health care.

After that, we arranged for him to be seen at a methadone treatment program one block from a partnering Community Healthcare Network (CHN) center. VAP is currently working on his VA character of discharge appeal to get him compensation for the attempted rape he suffered during service, among other traumas he has experienced over his lifetime. During the last six months, we have submitted his applications and appeal to the VA, advocated on his behalf with the Department of Homeless Services to get him a housing voucher, connected him to health care, and worked on finding a veteran-specific employment program that fits his needs. Our experience with this veteran identified the massive disconnect that exists between criminal

justice, reentry services, and veteran-tailored resources. We are trying to build bridges among these stakeholders. And we are starting at home: if that Marine had counsel familiar with veterans issues, there is possibility he would have made it to veteran treatment court or had his sentence reduced given his mental health history.

One of the ways we are addressing the disconnect and the unmet need is the launch of our criminal defense services. Captain Art Cody (Ret.) is now leading this effort as a part of VAP's team. As a nationally known expert on military mitigation, I will let him expand on the tremendous work that he is doing in his separate testimony today.

Finally, I would like to highlight that while things like connectivity and interagency collaboration remain a challenge we should all tackle, the sheer number of veterans waiting for assistance with VA and DOD cases is astounding. New York City is so rich in resources. We have at least five specialized, free mental health programs that are privately run and we can offer to a client; in the rest of the state and country, veterans have to drive hours and hours for one program and even then they may be found ineligible later. I get calls from Veteran county Services Officers every week seeking assistance, wondering where they can find psychological treatment for their veterans. The next question is: can you take the case? Character of Discharge and most upgrade applications involving misconduct have a high evidentiary burden to prove that a mental health condition mitigates the misconduct.<sup>1</sup>

We have hundreds of millions of dollars in legal services of all kinds available to New Yorkers. And yet, my office is flooded with veterans needing housing representation because they don't live in a certain zip code; they are desperate for assistance when they are just over the 200% cutoff for right to counsel; and we have hundreds of veterans waiting on VA character of discharge claims and Department of Defense discharge upgrade applications.

Year and after year VAP testifies about this great unmet need. The veterans who are getting left behind, particularly those with less than honorable discharges. But this year is different. The three largest supporters VAP relied on, private foundations, have all decided to stop funding legal services for veterans. This means that our services, unique in New York City, are in serious jeopardy. We are asking for increased support from the council because no one else is set up to take these cases like VAP. No one else has the expertise and the network of resources necessary for these trauma cases.

In a hearing in September I testified that the city's investment in a referral network was a nice idea but what does the city do when it pays over one thousand dollars per referral and there is no provider to take the case? That is the situation we have currently. As VetConnect staff attested, the City Bar and VAP are it when it comes to any real volume for taking these specialized cases. Veterans have to wait years and it should not be that way.

---

<sup>1</sup> Memorandum of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness re: Clarifying Guidance to Military Discharge Review Boards and Boards for Correction of Military/Naval Records Considering Requests by Veterans for Modification of their Discharge Due to Mental Health Conditions, Sexual Assault, or Sexual Harassment; August 2017 ("Kurta Memorandum")

**Our ongoing initiatives:**

- **Homelessness**

We partner with the **Jericho Project** and **Services for the Underserved** on the VA's Supportive Services for Veteran Families ("SSVF") grant, focusing on legal representation for eviction prevention, as well as providing wrap-around legal services to promote housing stability. We are onsite weekly at SUS's veterans office and at Jericho's SSVF office. Our partnerships allow us to connect veterans to rapid rehousing assistance and arrears when other resources have failed.

- **Medical Legal Partnerships**

We have two medical-legal partnerships ("MLPs") that comprise multiple locations for each partnership entity. With the Department of Veterans Affairs ("VA"), we used to have MLPs at three **Vet Centers**, in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Queens, where combat veterans and their families can receive therapy, adjustment counseling, and much more. With a reduction in funding and staff we are now only on site one day a week at the Bronx Vet Center with office hours for appointments and walk-ins. Our MLPs included training for the staff on legal topics and issue spotting, and know-your-rights sessions for veterans. This created better outcomes for our clients.

We also have an MLP with **Community Healthcare Network** ("CHN"), a system of federally qualified health centers across the city. For the many clients we serve who cannot or do not want to access the VA, CHN's Military Family Health and Wellness program has been a useful resource. They provide primary and behavioral health care, dental services, and specialized women's health care and pediatrics for our clients and their entire families.

Unfortunately, the spending limit on their city grant means they do not have sufficient funds to support the legal work needed for their patients. VAP, again, has had to drastically reduce services.

All of our MLP sites work with us to provide medical evidence, including trauma evaluations, for VA and Department of Defense cases. Our clients with mental health needs are guaranteed to get the culturally competent care they need, without delay, and in their own neighborhood. Our work with all of these centers improves health outcomes, removes barriers to housing and income, and provides veterans law representation and advocacy for VA and DOD matters.

- **Family Law**

We have launched a partnership with Legal Information for Families Today ("LIFT") and will be piloting the project on child support in the Bronx Vet Center. LIFT brings their family law expertise and VAP provides counsel on the many ways that child support can get tangled in the VA benefits system. Together we are serving veterans who are trying to do the right thing but getting caught in massive bureaucracy.

- **Justice-Involved Outreach**

We have launched outreach and services for justice-involved veterans. In treatment courts and at four units at Rikers plus the veterans track at the Rikers parole court, we are providing direct services and empowering veterans with knowledge about the VA and other resources available to them, even with a bad discharge. In addition to providing direct legal services, our initiative, which is rooted entirely in partnerships and collaboration, educates key stakeholders in the criminal justice system about veteran-specific resources, eligibility issues, and the VA's collateral consequences. Our primary partner is the **Department of Veterans Affairs' Veterans Justice Outreach ("VJO")** initiative, whose social workers engage in all areas of the justice system, advocating for treatment for veterans. We are also partnering with **veteran treatment courts (VTCs)**, public defenders, and others. We complement the incredible work they are doing, bringing veterans law to their clients. By working with those already advocating in the system, we remove barriers to income and health care needed for recovery; we prevent VA debt, connect families to benefits that would otherwise stay with the Treasury, and improve reentry success.

Unfortunately, the foundation grant for this work has also come to an end, putting our future ability to play this vital role at risk.

- **LGBTQIA+**

One newer initiatives focuses on restoring honor to the service of LGBTQ veterans with bad discharges. In addition to veterans who were forced out under "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," there are older veterans who were often discharged under a pretext of misconduct and need expert advocacy to uncover the prejudice that led to their less-than-honorable discharge status. We hope to expand capacity for this work, as our formalized our partnership with **SAGEVets** doesn't currently provide the funding to take on more than a couple of cases.

- **Criminal Defense and Mitigation**

VAP educates and trains the criminal defense bar in effectively representing veterans; provide expert assistance with presentation and development of military mitigation. WE are currently working with Brooklyn Defenders and Bronx Defenders on capital cases in addition to conducting continue legal education (CLEs) about military culture and how it affects both a veteran and a legal case.

- **Veterans Law Expertise**

In addition to our general legal services and initiatives, we specialize in veterans law, with an emphasis on fighting for veterans who have experienced trauma or a mental health condition. It would not be VAP testimony if I didn't close by advocating for those veterans who served their country and, because of invisible wounds, were left behind—cut off from VA health care and benefits because of unjust less-than-honorable discharges.

Less than honorable discharges are the second highest predictor of homelessness; individual with these papers have a suicide are that is three times that of other veterans, already at 20 a day. Government reports show that of servicemembers discharged for misconduct, 62% had already been diagnosed with PTSD or a related condition. We are punishing mental injury. VAP is the only legal services organization in the city with a practice dedicated to military discharge upgrades. Together with our network of forensic psychology and psychiatry programs,

our pro bono relationships, including the New York County Lawyers' Association (NYCLA) and the Veterans' Rights Clinic taught by our director at Brooklyn Law School, we are representing hundreds of veterans to restore honor to their records and open the door to the benefits they earned. This past year a Marine who came into our office in 2011 for a child support issue, finally got full medical care for his TBI and PTSD and got back awards of over \$500,000 for his family. That is 7 to 8 years of work—not typical but it has changed a family forever. It is federal dollars coming into the city. It is one less person on Medicaid. And he is one less person on our waitlist for a VA COD. Our upgrade list, with intake closed since September is at over 300 names again. This is better than when it was at 650, but we cannot narrow our criteria any further. We simply have had to shut the phone off.

All of the work being done for veterans in the legal space is vital to New York City's veteran communities. Together there is good coverage of various typical problems, but the Veteran Advocacy Project has no one to refer to. The veterans with complex cases or those involving prejudice or trauma, can't go to someone else. They need the expertise and forensics that VAP can offer. We are requesting an increase in support so that we can reduce the number of people on our waitlists for veteran-specific legal representation.

Veterans and their families need all kinds of legal services; for example, nothing is more crucial than housing, and thus representation in housing court is critical. But there are other sources for those services; in fact, massive city funding already exists for civil legal services that do provide representation to veterans who are among all other low-income New Yorkers.<sup>2</sup>

We believe that the Veterans' Initiative dollars should prioritize veterans law, which is so distressingly scarce in our city. Pretty soon there won't just be a waitlist through VetConnect, there will be no provider to take these difficult cases. I thank the chair and entire committee for the terrific effort that has gone into creating a Department and for the funds supporting many terrific programs. VAP looks forward to what comes next.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

---

<sup>2</sup> We are seeing that veterans get turned away from large legal services offices when they are not in certain zip codes or when they are over income by a small amount. So where are the Veterans Legal Initiative dollars going? One attorney in the veteran space told me she couldn't even get her own colleagues to take a housing case from her when the veteran was outside the zip codes that get counted for city contracts. Just as DVS needs accountability, so do all of the providers receiving city dollars.





Visiting Nurse Service of New York  
220 East 42<sup>nd</sup> Street  
New York, NY 10017  
[www.vnsny.org](http://www.vnsny.org)

**New York City Council Budget Meeting for Committee on Veterans  
Visiting Nurse Service of New York (VNSNY)**

*Thursday, March 5, 2020*

Good afternoon Chair Dromm, Chair Deutsch and Members of the New York City Council Committee on Veterans. My name is Joe Vitti and I am the Supervisor 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 and speak about ***VNSNY's Veterans Outreach Program, for which we are requesting \$150,000 in Council funding.***

VNSNY is the largest 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.

For over 35 years, VNSNY Hospice and Palliative Care has provided end-of-life care to New Yorkers. VNSNY Hospice is now the 8<sup>th</sup> largest nationally, and the largest hospice provider to veterans in the state – *last year we conducted 876 Veteran patient admissions*. VNSNY's Hospice Veterans Program is a Level 5 (the highest level) *We Honor Veterans Program* serving all five boroughs of New York City (NYC). This national collaboration between the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO) recognizes hospices that provide a high level of care to veterans, are experts in VA healthcare and benefits, and educate themselves on the population's needs and provide culturally sensitive care.

VNSNY is proud to be a contracted community care network provider under the newly implemented VA MISSION Act. We are a preferred vendor of home health care and hospice services for when NYC veterans are being discharged from VA hospitals and also partner with the New York State Veterans Skilled Nursing Facility at St. Albans.

There are approximately 22.5 million veterans in America today, about 18 million of whom are over the age of 65. Veterans comprise about 25% of our country's deaths every day (1,600 daily). This community has diverse and complex physical and mental health needs that the VA (our nation's largest healthcare system) addresses with a multitude of services and benefits. However, because of the complexity of the VA system and systemic poor health literacy among veterans, many veterans never fully access or utilize the benefits they need.



As NYC's Veteran population continues to get older (26% of VNSNY's veterans are from WWII, 20% from Korea, 18% from Vietnam, 3% from the Cold War and 33% from Peacetime/Other), it is becoming even more important to conduct outreach so that they know about their full VA benefits, which can cover home care, hospice and long-term care services. Our outreach program currently has three veteran liaisons that serve all five boroughs, with most of our veteran patients coming from Manhattan (32%), Queens (24%) and Brooklyn (21%).

#### **Request – VNSNY's Veterans Hospice Outreach Program**

***VNSNY requests \$150,000 in City Council funding*** to expand the VNSNY Hospice and Palliative Care Veterans Program to serve more veterans throughout NYC. Our program is uniquely qualified to conduct outreach and care for NYC veterans – in addition to years of experience at various VA hospitals sites and active duty sites - including Walter Reed Army Medical Center - and serving veterans throughout all NYC Boroughs, our staff is diverse - in the type of military service, ethnicity and gender – which helps us bring perspective when addressing a veteran's issues. Every service member has a unique experience and is impacted differently by their time in service, and it is our responsibility to provide healthcare that is sensitive to their individual needs.

We have implemented cultural sensitivity training for our staff, as well as within our healthcare informatic practices. The collection of this data has enabled VNSNY to assess areas of opportunity to help address veterans in the community - it helps us see the current health landscape for veterans in NYC and to ensure positive patient experience during the era of value-based care.

Funding will support additional staff resources – with a focus in Brooklyn, solidifying VNSNY's approach to providing specialized outreach to veterans at the end of life. Specifically, funding will enable VNSNY to:

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

#### **Patient Stories**

**Staten Island: Helping a Vietnam Veteran get the benefits he deserved.** Our cultural understanding and demonstration of addressing the various prevalent diseases (service-connected illnesses) was demonstrated with a veteran patient on Staten Island. He had served in the U.S. Army's Military Intelligence Corps during the Vietnam War and suffered from PTSD, lung cancer, COPD, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and hypertension. The veteran had a loving and supportive wife, who also cared for their 40-year-old son who was legally blind and a legal dependent of his parents.

The patient had sought health services outside the VA health system while still being followed by his VA doctors. These additional health services attributed to very costly healthcare bills that put the family in a severe financial crisis – on the verge of losing their home. The patient was

50% VA disabled for PTSD, but not for his lung cancer, which was due to his exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam. This left his family without potential VA survivor benefits, causing additional stress and anxiety for the household.

Our Veterans' program has gained the trust of local military veteran healthcare professionals and won the trust of patients by recognizing and celebrating their service with challenge coins, volunteer made military knitted blankets, and a certificate. In this case, our efforts resulted in healthcare professionals guiding and consulting the family in successfully applying and working with other veteran organizations service officers to file for Agent Orange exposure - qualifying the family for 100% service connection and continued benefits for the spouse and son following the patient's death.<sup>1</sup>

**Bronx: A special ceremony for a Marine with ALS.** A recent study found that service members are 70% more likely to be diagnosed (compared to non-service members) with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, more commonly known as ALS. This was the case with a Marine from the Bronx. His health had been deteriorating over three years, so he was enrolled in VNSNY's Veterans Hospice Program. With the help of VNSNY's outreach liaison and Army veteran, Ms. Sung Yoon, the Marine was able to enjoy the final weeks of his life within the comfort of his own home. VNSNY partnered with the community-based organization American Veterans (AMVETS) To hold a special private ceremony for the Marine and his family thanking him for his service because, with his condition, he was unable to attend public Veterans Day events.<sup>2</sup>

### **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, as they have given so much to our Country – our care and outreach program makes sure they are able to 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.

We look forward to partnering with the City Council on this critical program.

---

<sup>1</sup> NY1 News Video <https://vimeo.com/334949757>

<sup>2</sup> CBS News Video <https://newyork.cbslocal.com/2019/11/08/marine-als-honored-veterans-day/>

Good afternoon chair Deutsch and fellow City Council members.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify here today.

My name is Jody Rudin and I am the chief operating officer of Project Renewal, a New York City homeless services nonprofit agency.

For more than 53 years, Project Renewal has empowered individuals and families who are homeless or at-risk to renew their lives through critical programs focused on health, homes and jobs.

Each year we serve nearly 15,000 New Yorkers, including hundreds of veterans.

We are grateful to Speaker Johnson, Chair Deutsch, and the City Council for their generous support of Project Renewal's homeless prevention services for veterans – support that has been crucial for us to help veterans across all of our programs.

In FY2019, we have provided health care to over 140 veterans at our mobile medical vans and shelter-based clinics, and through our psychiatry and substance use disorder programs.

And, we successfully placed more than a quarter of the veterans living in our homeless shelters into permanent housing. In the past two years, over 87% of the veterans we have admitted to our housing programs have successfully maintained their housing, thanks to our on-going support services.

But what I want to focus on today is the life-changing impact that our workforce development programs have on the veterans. We believe that the individuals who have served our country deserve sustainable employment and a living wage.

Our workforce development programs, which help our clients obtain and keep career-path jobs, served 42 veterans in 2019.

One such program, our award-winning culinary arts training program, places 80% of graduates in jobs—higher than the national average for similar programs. We've placed veterans in great jobs throughout the five boroughs, from high-end restaurants like Del Posto, to major institutional and corporate kitchens like Morgan Stanley. Our graduates also find careers at our own social-purpose catering company, City Beet Kitchens, which employs our trainees.

Additionally, our Next Step program provides job training, internship placements, and retention support for our clients—including 36 veterans in FY2019.

A 33-year-old Staten Islander named Sibhon is the perfect example of how Project Renewal's comprehensive services—including job training—help veterans overcome the complex challenges they face.

After serving in the Army, Sibhon had trouble finding a stable career—a problem far too many veterans face in our city. She experienced homelessness and struggled to support her young children.

Then Sibhon enrolled in Next Step, where we prepared her for a career in social services. Sibhon received training in nonviolent crisis intervention and opioid overdose prevention, as well as financial literacy. Today, Sibhon is employed full-time as a case manager. Her inspiring story motivates her clients to overcome their own challenges.

We want to continue renewing the lives of veterans like Sibhon. With further support from the City Council, we have an opportunity to expand our workforce development programs and ensure that more veterans achieve the economic stability they need to live independently.

We are ready to work with each Council Member to ensure their veteran constituents are being served, and never forgotten. And we remind all present that Project Renewal is a resource their office can call upon at any time.

We applaud the city for creating the Department of Veterans' Services over three years ago. Project Renewal strongly supports the department and values our role as a partner in its mission. We look forward to working more with DVS and welcome suggestions for greater partnership in the future.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify. I'm happy to answer any questions.



**We refuse to be invisible**

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

**Delivered in person on March 5, 2020  
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. I am the SAGEVets Program Manager.

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 four decades. SAGEVets is one of SAGE's programs and, in fact, is the only program in New York City 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 State and New York City are among the top ten states and cities with the highest concentrations of gay and lesbian veterans, both in number and per capita (Urban Institute). 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 (ibid).

According to a statewide survey by the LGBT Health and Human Services Network of New York State, 56% of LGBT New Yorkers who identified as 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. And the needs are deep among LGBT older veterans.

Consider that older LGBT veterans served in the military at a time when discrimination against LGBT people was rampant and a matter of official government policy. For transgender people serving in the military, this is still not a resolved issue. Older LGBT veterans have a unique set of needs that stem from this discrimination and harassment, and therefore have been reluctant to engage in VA and other veteran services that they might be eligible for, fearing ignorant and inferior treatment from providers, because of an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity. Furthermore, older LGBT veterans live in isolation and usually do not have family caregivers to rely on when their health begins to deteriorate.

SAGEVets is the only program in New York City that serves LGBT veterans over the age of 50. As a trusted LGBT organization, SAGE's reputation and commitment to the LGBT community helps instill trust among LGBT veterans trust. Once that trust is established, SAGE is able to provide

them with the information that they need refer them to service providers who understand their unique needs, improving their overall health and well-being.

Thanks to generous support received from the New York City Council's Committee on Veterans in FY21, this past year was SAGEVets most productive year to date. Thanks to this funding, this program has raised the issue and visibility of LGBT elder veterans and the SAGEVets program across the City. With this support, our SAGE Vets staff have presented and engaged with communities, forged and nurtured valuable partnerships including with the VA, VSOs like the American Legion and VFW, and produced programs for LGBT older veterans in each of the five boroughs – all while offering lifesaving, invaluable case assistance to individual veterans in need of deeper support.

As an extension of SAGEVets' impact in New York State and further to the above, SAGE's ongoing advocacy helped usher in the recent passage of the Restoration of Honor Act, which was signed into law by Governor Cuomo on November 12, the day after Veterans Day. Thanks to SAGE and our partners' advocacy work, along with the leadership of Senator Hoylman, the Restoration of Honor Act will enable LGBT veterans who received a less-than-honorable discharge due to their sexual orientation or gender identity to access all the services, benefits, and supports from the Veterans Administration in New York State. SAGE is now advising the NYS Division of Veterans' Services on implementation of this new legislation, with the launch expected in the spring of 2020.

With help from our legal partner, the Veteran Advocacy Project we had our first successful discharge upgrade case, with several others pending. Less than honorable discharges are fairly common among older LGBT veterans and are most often directly or indirectly related to one's sexual orientation and gender identity. Advocating for and securing discharge upgrades are a game-changer in the lives of these veterans and reconnect them to the benefits and support that they deserve. With the passing of the Restoration of Honor legislation, SAGEVets will leverage its unique position to support LGBT older veterans through an increased number of discharge upgrades, once the New York State Division of Veterans' Services begins accepting applications. We are already seeing an uptick in the number of inquiries received from veterans and legislators.

Also, recently, SAGE worked closely with Mayor Bill de Blasio's team, providing data in support of a Discharge Upgrade Initiative that would fund legal service providers who assist veterans seeking a discharge upgrade at the federal level. The initiative was announced by the Mayor on Veterans Day. These are significant victories for all of New York's LGBT veterans and illustrate the power of outreach and advocacy in ensuring they can age with dignity – and the honor and care they so richly deserve.

With increased visibility, SAGE continues to experience growing demand for the tailored services provided by the SAGEVets program, reflective of the need of older LGBT veteran community and willingness of veteran service providers and agencies to work with us.





## Row New York Veterans Rowing Program

**About Row New York:** Through the discipline of rowing and rigorous academic support, Row New York transforms the lives of New Yorkers, regardless of background or ability.

**Veterans Rowing Program:** Row New York's Veterans Rowing Program provides opportunities to experience the sport of rowing to hundreds of New York City's veterans. The program is designed to help veterans and military service members avoid poor health outcomes such as obesity and depression by offering land-based and on-water workouts led by experienced rowing coaches. Veterans build strength, speed, endurance, and mobility, and benefit from the opportunity to compete on a team, belong to a supportive community, and experience New York City's waterways. Recreational and Competitive programs take place at the Peter Jay Sharp Boathouse in Manhattan and the World's Fair Boathouse in Queens.



**Adaptive Rowing:** Row New York proudly serves veterans with disabilities at our boathouses in Manhattan and Queens, VA centers, and partner veterans services organizations. Since 2013, when RNY was certified by the U.S. Olympic Committee as a U.S. Paralympic Sports Club (the only club of its kind in New York City), we have continually worked to expand the reach of our adaptive programming, and to build relationships with other organizations dedicated to expanding athletic opportunities for individuals with disabilities. The design of our program ensures that any veteran with a disability can choose an appropriate level, from a one-time demonstration to regular competitive practice.

Row New York's Veterans Rowing Program encompasses the following:

- **Competitive Adaptive Program:** Veterans meet three days per week to practice for competitive races, including the C.R.A.S.H.-B Indoor Rowing Championship in Boston, MA, and the Mid-Atlantic Erg Sprints in Alexandria, VA. Row New York coaches create individualized training plans for each rower based on their goals and needs.
- **Recreational Program:** Veterans learn the fundamentals of rowing, build technique, improve mobility, and enjoy outdoor and indoor workouts.
- **Indoor VA Program:** Row New York delivers indoor rowing instruction at local VA Centers in the Bronx, Manhattan, and Queens throughout the year.

For more information, please contact Denise Aquino, Director of Community Rowing, at [daquino@rownewyork.org](mailto:daquino@rownewyork.org) or call (718) 433-3075x205.



**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: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Joe Vitt,

Address: 220 East 42nd Street

I represent: Visiting Nurse Service of New York

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**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: 03/05/2020

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Ryan Foley - NYLAG

Address: 7 Hanover Square, New York, NY 10004

I represent: NYLAG

Address: 7 Hanover Square, New York, NY 10004

**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: 5 March 2020

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: James Fitzgerald

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms



**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: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Ashton Stewart

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: SAGEVETS

Address: 305 7th Ave.

**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: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: J Cascardo Alvarez

Address: 1 Centre St

I represent: DVS

Address: 1 Centre St

**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: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: J James Hobbs

Address: 1 Centre St

I represent: DVS

Address: 1 Centre St

**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: \_\_\_\_\_

**(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name: John Lyphran

Address: Centre St

I represent: DVS

Address: Centre St

**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: \_\_\_\_\_

**(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name: Almond Kraus

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Row NY

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**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: 3/5/20

**(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name: Torah Kametser

Address: Bay St

I represent: Self

Address: \_\_\_\_\_



**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: 3-5-2020

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: COCO CULHANE

Address: 1 Liberty Plaza NY NY 10006

I represent: VETERAN ADVOCACY Project "VAP"

Address: 1 Liberty

**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: 3-5-2020

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: ART CODY

Address: 1 Liberty Plaza NY NY 10006

I represent: VAP

Address: 1 Liberty Plaza NY NY 10006

**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: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Jody Rudin

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Project Renewal

Address: \_\_\_\_\_