



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Andrea Stewart-Cousins

Press Release: Senate Democrats Announce Strong Veteran Support

ANDREA STEWART-COUSINS November 12, 2015

| ISSUE: **VETERANS**

Albany, NY - The Senate Democratic Conference today announced a legislative package that will provide additional services, benefits and legal protections to veterans, their families and businesses. The Senate Democrats have helped lead the fight to increase state aid and services for the brave men and women who have served in the armed forces.

“We owe a debt of gratitude to the heroic men and women who have defended our freedoms and served our nation,” Senate Democratic Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins said. “State government has a responsibility to ensure that when veterans return to civilian life they have every opportunity to achieve the American Dream. We must ease access to education, to jobs and to health services that they deserve and need to transition into civilian life and provide for themselves and their families.”

There are approximately over 800,000 veterans in New York State, which is why the Senate Democrats have been outspoken on the need to provide for more aid for veterans and veterans support organizations. The Senate Democratic Conference outlined multiple initiatives to serve veterans in the 2015 Budget priorities letter, including female veterans homelessness prevention aid and increased funding for regional veterans advocacy and counseling programs. Due to Senate Democratic support and advocacy, the final State

Budget included important funding for veteran services such as \$3.5 million for the Joseph P Dwyer Veteran Peer-to-Peer Pilot program and \$350,000 for Veteran's Entrepreneurship Centers. The budget also restored \$550,000 to veterans programs and provided \$1.2 million in new funding for veteran counseling programs, job training and legal services to ensure that veterans receive the support that they deserve.

While the State Budget provided resources for many important veterans services and programs, the Senate Democrats have also led the way on proposing common sense solutions to help veterans transition back into civilian life and succeed in earning a higher education and finding good jobs. The legislation introduced by members of the Senate Democratic Conference includes initiatives that will help veterans receive education credits for their service and ease access to government services and benefits. Legislation has also been introduced to provide greater mental health, counseling, legal protections and treatment programs for returning veterans.

Senate Democratic bills to improve the lives of veterans in New York will:

- Facilitate Course Credits for Veterans: Currently, 26 states have recently passed legislation directing state universities to award academic credit to veterans based on military training and education. As New York State should ensure veterans receive credit for the skills they learned during their service, legislation has been sponsored that would require institutions within the state university system to award up to 6 credits per semester and 60 credits total to full-time undergraduate veterans based on military training and education to apply toward a degree requirement or program of study.
- Create a Veterans Jobs Bank Website: Under this bill, the Division of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Labor would be required to develop an interactive veterans jobs website featuring job openings of interest to veterans and military families.

- **Remove Barriers for Veterans' Housing Tax Exemptions:** Currently, veterans are not allowed to deduct compensation payments for injuries received in the line of duty from their income when applying for the senior citizen property tax exemption. To correct this flaw, legislation has been introduced that will enable veterans to receive this common sense tax exemption.
- **Help LGBT Veterans Access State Benefits:** Due to the "Don't Ask/Don't Tell" policy, many LGBT veterans received an other than honorable discharge from the armed forces and are currently denied access to over 50 state benefit, despite an end to the flawed policy. To assist these veterans, who did nothing wrong, legislation has been introduced that will simplify the process to correct discharge records for LGBT veterans were discharged under the past "Don't Ask/Don't Tell" policy so they can now receive the New York State benefits they have earned.
- **Improve Access for Mental Health Support:** Due to their unique experiences, many veterans are in need of mental health services, and often suicide prevention support, as they transition back into civilian life. To ensure New York State provides the very best possible support and care for veterans, legislation has been sponsored that will create a task force to examine, evaluate and determine how to improve mental health and suicide prevention and provide a report and recommendations by May 1, 2016.
- **Help Survivors of Military Sexual Trauma (MST):** Statistically, women in the military are twice as likely to be sexually assaulted. To address this troubling fact, Democratic leader Stewart-Cousins has sponsored legislation that would direct the State's Division of Veteran Affairs, as well as local veterans' service agencies, to plan and develop assistance programs and benefits for veterans who experienced MST.
- In addition to Senate Democratic Leader Stewart-Cousins' bill, Senator Parker has advanced legislation that will require the Commissioner of the Office of Mental Health and the Division of Veterans Affairs to disseminate information to veterans on where

they can seek treatment and counseling for Military Sexual Trauma. This bill will help veterans access vital resources to overcome MST as they transition back into civilian life.

To find more information about support programs in your community, please visit:

<http://www.veterans.ny.gov>.