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Testimony for Public Hearing
February 11, 2014

Melissa Spicer - Cofounder & President of the Board of Directors

Clear Path for Veterans Inc.
1223 Salt Springs Rd.
Chittenango, NY 13037

Subject: Extension of the Joseph Dwyer Peer to Peer grant and Funding from the Division of Veterans Affairs - Aid to Localities for Services and Expenses of our Veterans Outreach Center.

Senator DeFrancisco, members of the senate, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify on behalf of our Veteran community, as recipients of the Joseph Dwyer Grant and for other Veteran support organizations in Central New York. My name is Melissa Spicer and I am the Cofounder and Board President of a community-based organization called Clear Path for Veterans. Our organization is based just southeast of Syracuse sitting in both Onondaga and Madison Counties. We serve the same Veteran population that resides in the 13-county catchment area treated by the Syracuse VA Medical Center. These counties are home to over 130,000 Veterans and their families. Projections show in the next five years, tens of thousands of men and women will separate from the military and many will make New York their home. Our mission at Clear Path for Veterans is to help these people rejoin their communities or find new communities. We empower military members, Veterans and their families through community-based programs and services. We work towards expertise in the field of Veterans' Wellness, and selectively identify effective measures to help Veterans find peace of mind, safety and connection to their loved ones. As you know, these are struggles common to many Veterans of the wars our nation has fought for over a decade. Men and women of all conflicts are now looking within their communities for support and resources outside of the VA. We work closely with the VA to help Veterans access their services more effectively. The VA relies on us to explore the field of Veterans' Wellness and get the community involved in these programs. There is more to the notion of bringing a Veteran home than just VA healthcare. Veterans face challenges in finding appropriate employment, housing, healthcare and education. Many Veterans have not won their own wars, even as they try to succeed in their daily lives back home. Our mission is to be the deciding factor for those Veterans who need help in any part of that process.

As Veterans leave the structured environment of the military, they require and deserve a knowledgeable and compassionate community that helps them navigate the world outside the military. While excellent health care is readily delivered, access is often cumbersome or worse yet, unavailable due to the backlog of benefits and claims. What sometimes appears to be a successful transition becomes complicated by the symptoms of PTS (Post Traumatic Stress), a normal response to the stressors of combat. If reintegration and restoration after service is not done well, some believe we could be facing a social and economic "tsunami" that will overload our system for decades to come.

Success outside the military frequently falls short because it's often perceived there's a quick and easy solution to reintegration. A broader and better understanding of warrior and military culture brings to the forefront the complexity of what we as a state and nation are facing. When led by peers, a structured and supportive community can mirror the structured military community that Veterans find comfort and familiarity with. Realizing that actual "separation" from military can be as traumatic as what's to follow, helps us better understand the importance of easing the struggles of those just leaving the service. While in the military, members rely on one another. It's that same system of support they seek when leaving the military. Veterans search for other Veterans who have successfully made the journey home. Dr. Edward Tick, author of the book "War and the Soul" describes this as the life cycle of a warrior. There are "elder" warriors, defined not by age but by experience, who help those on the start of their journey home. Clear Path for Veterans models our Joseph Dwyer Peer-to-Peer Program around this life cycle. We call it our Wingman Program. The Wingman Program creates an organized platform for Veterans to share knowledge and address financial, mental, physical and spiritual needs of other Veterans. Veterans are selectively paired, and a mentor/mentee relationship is formed. This mirrors the Life Cycle of a Warrior. It also mirrors the way that military members are first trained after joining the military. Peer-to-Peer mentoring is a successful model in other civilian organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step-programs have successfully used peers as pathways to recovery.

In rural Upstate New York, access to Veterans' services and resources are scattered. In preparation for a large influx of military men and women, Clear Path for Veterans has become one of New York's premier Veteran Outreach and Support Centers. The term "one stop center" is used for places like Clear Path. We act as initiators, facilitators and leaders in the community. We invite other organizations and resources to join under one roof for one cause. Benefits include streamlined

funding, preventing duplication of efforts, and user-friendliness for Veterans and their families. If you compare Buffalo, Rochester, Utica and Syracuse, the "one stop centers" do not look alike in location nor facility. But the goals and outcomes are the same. In addition to our work as a "one stop center", our Wellness Program informally partners with the Syracuse VA Medical Center. This medical center was recently rated number one in the country and provides specialized care only found in Syracuse. It effectively serves Veterans from across the entire state. Clear Path's partnership with the Syracuse VAMC connects many of these veterans with our complementary and alternative therapies as well as support programs enhancing their overall wellness and restoration.

One of Clear Path's most important programs is our Wingman Program, funded by the Joseph Dwyer grant recently extended from 4 to 11 counties throughout New York State. The Wingman Program's goal and purpose is to reduce barriers and create easy access and support to healthcare, education, employment, wellness and social engagement. While the "one stop model" offers a physical space for easy access to healthcare, educational, housing and employment opportunities, the support and knowledge that peers provide, help newly transitioned warriors navigate the "system" both physically and emotionally. Peers serve as informal "caseworkers" without the logistical red tape that accompanies that title. Veterans who have successfully experienced the life cycle of reintegration are best prepared to help others navigate the emotional, physical and spiritual needs of those just coming home. In addition, peer support encourages social engagement and offers a much needed "hand up" for those confused with their priorities. Research proves that early social engagement reduces the symptoms of PTS and leads to greater success in transitioning. For many, the road ahead is long and complicated and will require a long time commitment from our community and its leaders.

History has proven that healthy Veterans transform communities. Generations of military men and women formed the backbone of our country. They have volunteered to serve in the military and long for relevant service comparable to their experience in the military. Veterans must not be perceived as broken, nor victims. Veterans are aspiring contributors to their community. Sometimes, we must intervene to make that possible. The experience of Vietnam Veterans is a stark, memorable example of how Veterans can be abandoned by their communities. Veterans today are understandably cautious of their role in society. There is now, more than ever, an overwhelming amount of support for military men and women. We must not forget that this extends to all generations and Veterans of all wars. For example, many Vietnam-era Veterans are just now getting

the help they need for physical or mental illness. For too long, their options were limited, and treatments were arguably inappropriate. Pills do not cure PTSD. But for the first time, many Vietnam Veterans are receiving the right help and they're returning, finally to their communities. Veterans of different wars often state that they have more in common than what separates them. Help can extend from any source, in any direction. This grassroots form of peer support offers us a wonderful resource of peers for our Wingman Program, funded in part by the Joseph Dwyer Program grant.

When the planes hit the twin towers in 2001, New York State was more united than ever. It was the beginning of what we now refer to as "Operation Enduring Freedom" and shortly after, "Operation Iraqi Freedom". Our National Guard and hometown Army at Fort Drum endured multiple deployments being named the most deployed base in the country. Reserve units throughout the state, including the Marine Corps and Navy, have been pushed to their limit as well. For over 13 years, men and women in uniform have made this state their home. During the second longest war of our country, George Washington said "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the Veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation." As elected representatives of our community, you play an important role in ensuring we offer the best forms of support for those who served their country. By extending the Joseph Dwyer Peer to Peer grant and supporting our community based "one stop" centers, you are contributing to the strength of appreciation within our community. Please enable us to support the military men and women, our Veterans, in the home state we share with them. Please, extend the Joseph Dwyer Grant and fund the Services and Expenses required to operate New York State's Veteran Outreach and Support Center at Clear Path.

Clear Path for Veterans

SUPPORTING THE JOURNEY HOME

Clear Path for Veterans is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization founded in 2011 to provide a barrier free, one stop location for programs, services and support for military members, Veterans and their families.

Our beautiful and central location offers easy, one stop access, to programs and services for all Veterans and their families. At Clear Path, we're leading a community initiative to support the soldier's journey home. We foster hope and create a supportive environment for successful reintegration after separation from the military.



Our Mission: Clear Path for Veterans empowers military members, Veterans and their families by integrating community based programs, services and resources in a traditional and non-traditional wellness enhancing environment.

To learn more, visit us online at ClearPathForVets.com

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Wellness & Social Engagement

Wingman

- Joseph Dwyer Peer Support
- Warrior Reset
- Weekly Canteen

Dogs2Vets Program

- Service dog training
- Trained companion
- Family training

Recreation

- Golf
- Basketball
- Picnic & Camping
- Hiking trails

Health

- Complimentary Alternative Medicine
- AA & Al-Anon Meetings

Employment Services:

- Vocational Training
- Resume writing
- Job Search assistance

Residential Assistance

Education & Counseling

- Vocational training
- Financial aid (GI Bill)
- Financial Literacy
- Legal Service

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President George Washington