



1223 Salt Springs Road
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ClearPathForVets.org

STATEMENT OF

Alexander J. Behm
Executive Director, Clear Path for Veterans
Chittenango, NY

BEFORE THE

Senate Standing Committee on Veterans, Homeland Security & Military Affairs

Chair: Senator John E. Brooks

Assembly Standing Committee on Veterans' Affairs

Chair: Assembly Member Didi Barrett

Assembly Subcommittee on Women Veterans

Chair: Assembly Member Pamela J. Hunter

August 14, 2020

Chairman Brooks and Members of the Senate Committee on Veterans, Homeland Security & Military Affairs, Chairwoman Barrett and Members of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, Chairwoman Hunter and Members of the Subcommittee on Women Veterans: Thank you for the invitation and the opportunity to appear before you this morning.

I am Alexander Behm, Executive Director at Clear Path for Veterans in Chittenango, NY. I am a post 9/11 Marine Corps Veteran and I am honored to serve fellow Veterans, military members, and their families in my role at Clear Path for Veterans.

Clear Path's mission is to recognize the responsibility of communities to serve those who serve in the United States military. We empower active service members, Veterans, Guard and Reserve members, and their families through supportive programs and services in a safe and respectful environment. All programs and services provided by Clear Path are always provided at no cost to those we serve. Our staff of 24 provide essential programs and services to 23 counties in the Upstate New York region. Of the 24 staff members, 12 are Veterans, all of whom have served in one or more major conflict and have a combined total of 153 years of active military service. I highlight these figures as they define how Clear Path for Veterans' programs and services are built on the foundation of peer support and community engagement.



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Our organization provides Holistic Warrior Care to Veterans, military members, and their families through community collaboration and strategic partnerships that offer diverse programs and services. Whether it is wellness, employment or social interaction activities, Clear Path stands ready to reduce the barriers for Veterans seeking to reintegrate into society. Our Veteran and military populations are only as strong as the community resources they have behind them to support their needs.

COVID-19 brought and continues to bring many hardships to Clear Path for Veterans and to the Veterans, military members, and families that depend on our organization's essential programs and services. Social isolation, unemployment, and the lack of access to basic necessities and resources have grossly impacted those in the 23 counties Clear Path actively serves.

On Friday, March 13, 2020, I was named as Clear Path's Executive Director, replacing Melissa Spicer, Co-founder, former Executive Director of Clear Path, and now current board member. After serving as the Chief Operating Officer, I was not only familiar with the organization but prepared to further elevate the delivery of Clear Path's community model of holistic care. Within 72 hours of my appointment I was faced with the task of creating a plan to reduce the size of our on-site workforce due to the pandemic and the Governor's executive orders. By the completion of my first week as Executive Director, 75% of the organization's workforce had been placed in a work-from-home status and our 78-acre rural campus closed to Veterans, military members, and the community. Due to the rapid changes in our environment because of COVID-19, our executive leadership team established the Clear Path for Veterans COVID-19 Community Task Force on March 16, 2020.

The Clear Path for Veterans COVID-19 Community Task Force was established to address the immediate hardships and barriers Veterans, military members, and their families were facing, and continue to face, due to the uncertainties and instabilities brought on by the pandemic. The Task Force has allowed our organization to work at full capacity during the crisis by providing programs and services to Veterans using virtual and telecommunication platforms. The Task Force provides emergency food assistance, career services support, social engagement programming, and mental health triage services.



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All staff serving on the Task Force were deemed essential personnel and received immediate training on all Centers for Disease Control and New York State recommended health and safety protocols.

Emergency Food Assistance

- The Task Force receives requests by email and phone and dispatches emergency food boxes daily via our Peer Mentor team. Thanks to the Massachusetts Military Support Foundation, a full-sized tractor trailer delivered over 2,000 pounds of food boxes to Clear Path in May 2020. This donation, along with support from the Food Bank of Central New York, has provided Clear Path with a continuous supply of essential food and hygiene items to be delivered to those in need.
- As the need continues to increase, the Culinary team is preparing fresh meal kits that are an addition to the pantry meal boxes. The fresh meal kits contain healthy meals prepared every day in our kitchen and are accompanied by recipes and instructions on how to use each ingredient in the food box for maximum efficiency. Boxes are packed to supplement meals for 5-6 days for all household members.
- The emergency boxes also contain essential toiletries and paper products. Through Clear Path's pantry collection, we can provide kitchen essentials, clothing, and hygiene supplies on a case by case basis. Medication can also be delivered on an as needed basis.
- From March 2020 to date, the peer and culinary teams have prepared and delivered 588 emergency food boxes along with 141 fresh meal kits.

Career Services Support & Social Engagement Programming

- As the economy continues to be affected, our Warriors Working program is providing unique career assistance and support to those facing unemployment and to those seeking current employment opportunities.
- The Warriors Working program has worked with 186 individual Veterans seeking career assistance and connections to new employment opportunities since March 2020.



- The Social Engagement program has transitioned to virtual programming to keep Veterans, military members, and their families engaged daily. The virtual programming is designed to help decrease isolation and to keep the Veteran community informed of our current support systems and other community services that would be of benefit. Virtual canine community classes, cooking classes, family support sessions, physical fitness events, holiday events, and Veteran support group sessions are some examples of programming that have been provided by the Task Force.

Mental Health Triage / Buddy Check Program

- Clear Path's behavioral health consultant, Pat Chase LCSW-R, is available to speak with any Veteran or family member experiencing difficulties during the pandemic.
- Mental health triage services have been provided to Veterans and family members each week since the beginning of the pandemic, as well as support to Clear Path's staff members.
- The Buddy Check program is a way for Veterans, military members, and their families to stay connected and engaged with Clear Path. The focus of the Buddy Check program is to help lessen the increased feelings of isolation and loneliness faced by so many in the Veteran population. If a Veteran, military member, or family member would like to talk to a member of our buddy check team, they are able to connect with a staff member by phone.
- From March 2020 to date, the Buddy Check program and Clear Path's part time mental health consultant have conducted 737 mental health and buddy check in calls. Over half of the calls were received by Veterans who frequented Clear Path's weekly canteen lunches and no longer had a means to connect with other Veterans and community members in a social setting.

The Task Force continues to deliver critical services and have reached over 1,700 unique Veterans, military members, and their families since the onset of the pandemic in our region in March 2020. The Task Force has been partially supported by local community initiatives in Central New York to assist nonprofits with the delivery of essential services during COVID-19. To raise additional funds for the Task Force, an online fundraising campaign was launched in April 2020. Clear Path continues to seek additional local community



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and state support to assist with delivering critical emergency services to Veterans, military members, and their families as the pandemic continues.

The Clear Path for Veterans' Canine Program has seen short, mid, and potentially long-term effects due to COVID-19, as many aspects of the program are unable to be delivered through virtual platforms. Due to the mandatory quarantine and closing of non-essential businesses the ability to conduct "in-person" training sessions with volunteers, Veterans, and other staff members was no longer possible. Newly acquired puppies in training lost important opportunities for socialization and exposure during their critical period of development. Veterinary Health Clinics were required to change protocol and only serviced emergency visits, which delayed care puppies in training required. Potential long-term impacts could be seen with the state travel restrictions making the acquisition of new purpose bred puppies from our partnering breeders difficult. Lack of socialization and exposure will affect long term behavior of service dogs in training, a \$25,000 investment per dog. Classes will be reduced in size due to social distancing guidelines, reducing overall numbers served annually. The importance of providing this important program is necessary for the overall health and wellness to our Nation's Veteran population. Careful planning along with a well-trained and adaptable staff have allowed us to continue our success in training and matching service dogs to our Veteran clients.

While Clear Path for Veterans has seen an increase in social media interaction and participation in virtual programming, we have also been faced with the reality of decreased funding from local governments, private donors, and community businesses. Social distancing restrictions and limits on group gatherings have forced the postponement of weekly Wednesday canteen lunches, annual appreciation events, major on and off-site annual fundraisers, and military retreats. With these events and activities no longer able to occur, Clear Path has been impacted with a significant decrease in budgeted annual income for the organization. Clear Path has retained all staff members through the pandemic and did utilize the Payroll Protection Program. The organization continues to seek alternate funding opportunities through grants as well as through virtual fundraising events, when possible. Continued support from New York State will prove vital in ensuring Veterans, military members, and their families continue to receive critical emergency services as well as opportunities to break social isolation through virtual events and



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engagement opportunities. Investing in the Veteran population, especially those who do not have access to the critical services they not only require but have earned through their service to the United States of America, will strengthen our communities for the future to come and set an example for others to follow. Thank you, again, for the opportunity to appear before you today and for your continued support of Clear Path for Veterans and our Nation's Veterans.