

Syracuse University

**Understanding New York State Veteran Needs During COVID-19
Testimony Prepared for the New York State Joint Public Hearing
The Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University
August 14, 2020**

Committee Chair Brooks, Chair Barrett, and Chair Hunter, committee members, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony, and more broadly thank you for your efforts on behalf of veterans and military families across New York State.

As you are aware, right now New York families and New York State communities face unprecedented challenges stemming from the COVID health emergency. The pandemic has caused massive disruption in our collective health, economic, and social stability.

The veteran and military-connected community has not been immune to any of these challenges. Indeed, in some ways, this community has been harder hit than others. The veteran unemployment rate in New York state was nearly 15% in July -- nearly twice the national rate for unemployment among veterans. Of the more than 4,000 recently transitioned service members -- now veterans -- settling in New York state communities so far in 2020, we have estimated that 17% are currently dependent on unemployment insurance.

Critical industries such as retail, food services, transportation and manufacturing have been impacted by the COVID health emergency, putting veteran-owned small businesses and thousands of veterans and transitioning service members out of work. Socially, the isolation and trauma inherent to this type of pandemic has also affected our veterans, a community where some members already face service-connected mental health challenges.

The Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) has been heavily engaged in understanding and responding to the impacts of the COVID health emergency on our veterans. The economic well-being of our veterans, and their broader social determinants of health have long been central issues of focus for the Institute. When the COVID shutdown began, we adapted our programs and our research in response to the dynamic circumstances and evolving needs of veterans and their families.

Specifically, in partnership with the national publication *Military Times*, we launched a poll to understand the effects of COVID on the veteran and military-connected community and assess evolving needs and concerns. We believe the trends we are seeing in this national polling effort, can inform our efforts in New York State. I would like to share some of those findings with you now.

First, I would like to discuss women veterans specifically. Our national polling indicates that right now women veterans are much more likely, as compared to male veterans, to indicate pressing needs related to social service and economic supports. For example, over half of women veterans indicated inadequate mental health support, nearly twice the rate of male veterans. We already know our women veterans disproportionately bear the burden of childcare and family responsibilities. Combining these responsibilities with job loss or impractical working conditions can result in or exacerbate existing mental health stressors. Further, women veterans have been harder hit by the economic downturn. The unemployment rate for women veteran in July was over 3 percentage points higher than male veterans. Taken together, these insights show that women veterans are facing a difficult combination of

challenges stemming from the COVID health emergency. Our subsequent policy responses should take this into account.

Women veterans are not alone within the veteran community, as being disproportionately impacted by the COVID crisis. As we have seen time and time again, issues of racial injustice and inequity manifest themselves in some of the worst ways during a crisis. In our national COVID-19 Poll, veterans of color reported higher percentages of social and economic need in *every single resource category* compared to white veterans. Veterans of color were more likely to report needing support in areas like food and nutrition, housing, benefits and claims assistance and mental health. Additionally, the Black veteran unemployment rate is 9.3%, nearly two points higher than the white veteran unemployment rate of 7.4%.

Our veteran community is not immune to the deep and pervasive racial inequities that exist in our country. As veteran communities of color have been underserved for decades, when COVID hit, they were more vulnerable and more at risk. Our subsequent response to serve our veterans must recognize this and allocate the necessary resources to address it.

So, we are left asking ourselves what to do with this information. The IVMF has been considering this problem as well. We have structured our efforts in New York in four areas: coordination of services in communities, career skills preparation, support for veteran entrepreneurs, and engagement with other New York state leaders.

We know, as with all our challenges, communities will play a critical role in our efforts. The VA alone will not be able to address the wide array of social, economic and health challenges facing veterans and military families. Our AmericaServes networks across the country were standing ready to help veterans and their families coordinate the many services they may need as they navigate the effects of the virus. Today, these networks are seeing a marked shift in the needs our clients are requesting. Veterans and their families are requesting more tangible services such as food, clothing, and income support as opposed to housing and employment services which are usually most requested. Some networks have even done direct outreach, such as our partners at the Department of Veteran Services in New York City.

Having these data and being able to adapt our support strategies to meet the evolving needs of our veterans must be a crucial component of our COVID response.

We know this is a precarious time for the financial stability and employment situations of veterans and their families. Our career skills program, Onward to Opportunity, moved entirely online to meet the ongoing needs of the 1000+ transitioning service members, military spouses, and veterans who enroll in the program each month. People are not only looking to enhance their technical skills for increased marketability in the wake of job loss but are also looking to reskill for an evolving economy.

We know that social networks were already a top challenge for our veteran-owned businesses. In this remote world, that problem has only become more pronounced. We have worked to create virtual environments to help our veteran entrepreneurs find ways to connect with new opportunities. Not to mention we have launched a massive outreach campaign to connect with our alumni, not only as alumni but as people during this isolating time. Feedback and input from our program participants have never been more important.

We have also been heavily engaged with other leaders in New York through our participation in the Governor's Challenge to End Veteran Suicide. Veteran mental health and suicide prevention was a top

challenge and focus for our community before COVID. Today, with high unemployment, intense social isolation and other stressors caused by the pandemic, this work is as critical as ever. New mental health challenges are emerging, and existing ones have the potential to be exacerbated.

The underpinning theme from all these activities is a need for tailored, system level coordination of services and policy. Our state government, Health and Human Services, Labor, and Veterans Affairs must be working together with local governments, nonprofits, and philanthropy with a common agenda to address this crisis. Initiatives like the Governor's challenge represent successful models for driving this sort of necessary collaboration, and the state legislature should take every opportunity to help sustain the solutions proposed through that effort.

Taken together, all this means that New York state is headed in the right direction to address the many adverse impacts of this virus on the veteran community. Of course, we still have much work to do. As we continue to address the needs of veterans in New York, the State would do well to remember that this virus and the collateral damage it is causing is affecting veterans in many ways, but not all veterans equally. Our solutions must therefore be coordinated and tailored. If not, we will fall short and now – more than ever – we cannot.

Thank you.