



## **Division of Veterans' Services**

### **Joint Legislative Budget Hearing Testimony**

#### **New York State Division of Veterans' Services**

Chair Weinstein, Chair Kruger, and distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly, thank you for the opportunity to address you today. I am Joel Evans, a Veteran who served for 23 years in the United States Navy, retiring as a Chief Petty Officer. I joined the New York State Division of Veterans' Services on November 1, 2007. Since 2013, I have served as our agency's Executive Deputy Director.

The core mission of our agency today is the same as it was at our agency's inception 76 years ago: to advocate for all of New York's Veterans, Service Members, and their families, connecting them with the benefits and resources earned by virtue of their military service.

Our agency's Veterans Benefits Advisors represent Veterans, Service Members, and their families in the preparation, presentation, and prosecution of claims and appeals for financial, medical, educational, and vocational benefits before the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, commonly called "the VA." This representation brought in a total of \$780 million in new and recurring tax-free VA financial benefits for New York's Veterans, Service Members, and their families during the past year.

Additionally, our Veterans Education Bureau has approved 2,001 facilities in New York to receive G.I. Bill funds. These programs brought \$590 million in federal funding into New York in 2020, paving a path for Veterans and their dependents to receive a high-quality education from our state's colleges, universities, and vocational programs.

Yet while our core mission remains the same as it was when the agency was established, we also know that crucial aspects of our mission have evolved with the changing times. Today, New York is home to a diverse population of more than 737,000 Veterans. The largest cohort of this population are Veterans who served during the Vietnam War Era. We take pride in developing strategies tailored to meet their needs and to serve these Veterans where they are, from our field offices across the state to the places where they reside.

Over the past year, the Division has also strengthened partnerships with organizations serving traditionally underrepresented Veterans, improving our cultural competency to better serve and advocate on behalf of historically marginalized Veterans. This includes our representation of Veterans who received "bad paper" discharges rooted in anti-LGBTQ+ policies, racism, mental health-based discrimination, retaliation for reporting sexual assault, and other unjust circumstances. New York's

recently-enacted Restoration of Honor Act is a key pillar of this work, as is our representation of Veterans in discharge-related cases before the VA and the Department of Defense.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also forced the agency to reinvent and improve itself. We met this challenge in several ways: by purchasing the technology necessary to represent Veterans and submit their cases to the VA completely virtually; conducting virtual hearings before the Board of Veterans' Appeals; providing trainings online rather than in person; establishing protocols to conduct entirely virtual appointments with clients; and reaching out to tens of thousands of Veterans through e-mail "buddy checks." These measures ensured the uninterrupted delivery of the Division's services to Veterans, Service Members, and their families throughout these difficult times.

Knowing that providing support to our Veterans takes a village, the Division shared these resources with our partners in county and municipal governments, as well as not-for-profit Veterans Service Organizations. Free of charge, we accredited 69 local and not-for-profit Veterans Service Officers under the State's Power of Attorney during 2020. We shared with them free access to our case management software so they could file claims electronically once remote work became the norm. We provided free access to county and city Veterans Service Agencies for every training that we delivered. We signed a new Memorandum of Agreement with the American Legion, Department of New York, so that completing our annual training will now satisfy the continuing education requirements for Veterans Service Officers to keep their Legion accreditation as well.

Veterans confront food insecurity at above-average rates, a problem that COVID-19 only made worse. Thanks to Governor Cuomo's COVID-19 Philanthropic Fund and the Nourish New York Program, we partnered with the HelloFresh corporation and several community-based organizations to provide more than 300,000 healthy meals to Veterans and military families in New York facing food insecurity during this pandemic, an effort that remains ongoing and successful.

For some Veterans, COVID-19 has also exacerbated mental health conditions, increasing their risk of suicide. Our agency has focused on this issue through our participation in the Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Veterans, Service Members, and their Families, and over the past year New York has become the first state in the nation to commit to training every Veterans Service Officer on the use of the Columbia Protocol, a highly effective suicide prevention risk assessment tool that will help Veterans Service Officers identify individuals experiencing mental health emergencies and connect them to support services. We are also proud to be the first state in the nation to form a partnership between our state's bar association and the PsychArmor online training organization to enhance the military cultural competency of our state's attorneys, including gatekeeper suicide prevention training and training on the mental health impacts of in-service traumas that military members may experience.

As part of his State of the State agenda for 2021, Governor Cuomo also announced that he will direct state agencies to ask their clients whether they or their immediate family members have served in the military; this initiative will facilitate new connections between Veterans, Service Members and their

families and vital resources. This new campaign will help the state reach Veterans and Service Members who may not self-identify as such because of stigma or trauma, linking them with the state and federal benefits, programs, and services that they have earned. The Governor's Budget also seeks to increase access to Veterans Treatment Courts by permitting the transfer of a case from a traditional criminal court in one county to a Veterans Treatment Court in an adjoining county. This will connect more at-risk Veterans in our justice system with the life-changing services that these courts provide.

The Division appreciates the continued support of Governor Cuomo and his administration in addressing the needs faced by our Veterans, Service Members and their families. Our work helps provide better lives for the brave New Yorkers who have served our state and nation, and our dedicated staff will continue to represent New York's Veterans, Service Members, and their families zealously, inclusively, and effectively, and will help them adapt to and overcome the challenges of this ever-changing world. I thank you for your support of the agency's work, and I look forward to any questions that you may have.