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Testimony by

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Assembly Subcommittee on Women Veterans

Hearing on

The Impacts of COVID-19 on New York's Veterans

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Thank you to the Chairs and Committees for this opportunity to testify today. My name is James Fitzgerald. I am a 9-year veteran of the United States Army achieving the rank of Staff Sergeant. My military service career spans combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan with various assignments with well-renowned military units, such as the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. While deployed to Afghanistan with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, I was seriously injured during combat operations and after a hard-fought recovery was medically discharged from active duty in 2014. Experiencing many of the hardships and obstacles firsthand, I was activated to stand with my fellow veterans as they navigated many of the same circumstances during their transition journey. I live in Brooklyn, and I'm proud to call New York my home.

I am the Deputy Director of the NYC Veterans Alliance, a member-driven, grassroots advocacy and community-building organization that connects, advocates for, and empowers veterans and their family members to make change as civic leaders. We work with more than 150 different organizations serving veterans, military members, and their families in the NYC-metro area to consolidate events and resources online at OurVeterans.NYC. We advocate for veterans and families locally in NYC, and our members were instrumental in the creation of the NYC Department of Veterans' Services, as well as spearheading the addition of protections for veterans and servicemembers in NYC's Human Rights Law.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in extraordinary impacts to the New York veteran community since initial cases were reported in early-March 2020. A slowed government response demanded community organizations pick up an increased burden in order to fill essential support gaps and provide the key resources needed by families during the pandemic. On March 19-21, NYC Veterans Alliance asked veterans and family members for their feedback in an online survey on how the COVID-19 emergency was affecting them, and what type of help they required. The survey results from 208 respondents spoke to a wide array of growing concerns with top responses being preventing the spread the coronavirus to loved ones and continuing to maintain food resources in the household after losing their financial security.

To manage these overwhelming community needs, NYC Veterans Alliance launched the Veterans Mutual Aid - NYC Metro, a network for intake and coordination of incoming requests from veterans and family members in need. Veterans, military members, their spouses and family members, and Gold Star family members were able to receive the help that was notably lacking from city agencies tasked with this responsibility. To date, over \$15,000 in direct assistance has been provided to over 140 veteran families throughout the NYC-metro area. This aid includes over \$6,100 in groceries to veteran families in need and over \$7,200 spent on housing assistance for at-risk homeless veterans. Social isolation remained at high levels during the pandemic as a large portion of the veteran community, especially older veterans, lived alone or did not have immediate family available. Our Veterans Mutual Aid program activated to perform vital outreach to distribute key information and provide a lifeline to each veteran in need. With over 1,800 recorded veteran interactions, the pandemic has displayed how

fundamental social contact is to our lives, and how important it is to maintain open communication channels to stay informed of current community needs. COVID-19 underscores the necessity of strengthening city and state outreach efforts to rebuild and sustain the social needs of the veteran population – a task that will be critical to our recovery from the pandemic. In order to gain a full understanding of the impacts, I recommend a detailed study be conducted and presented to the public addressing COVID-19-related social isolation and loneliness to identify working solutions for long- and short-term models.

We created NYC Veterans Mutual Aid to serve a community in crisis. We have had more than 18 veterans who are members of our organization volunteering to make phone calls, to coordinate grocery deliveries, to talk with veterans worried and in need, and they've even spent hours of their time helping others with tasks that otherwise no one would help with. Our program has been a program of last resort. When we stood this program up in March, NYC's Department of Veterans' Services wasn't communicating directly with veterans about the pandemic, and they veterans expressed to us that it was difficult to get in touch with staff. Meanwhile veterans were telling us they were jobless, hungry, worried about their health, and in some cases barely hanging on to their housing. We heard from one veteran that he was trying to get out of homelessness and that NYCHA had effectively stopped appointments for housing—leaving him in limbo, with no government agency giving him any answers. He was left with no options or financial means to safely shelter in place until he connected with our volunteers. Our Veterans Mutual Aid program placed him into a secure location so he could safely shelter in place. Our support was needed for 25 nights before additional support was available to move him into more permanent housing. The need for our extended support was due to the lacking resources available to quickly and effectively housing our at-risk homeless veterans. Without our support, this veteran would not have received the necessary housing support for them to make it through the pandemic.

We heard from a disabled veteran who needed to move himself and his children from one NYCHA apartment into another one at the height of the horrific death toll in NYC—with no resources at all from the city. He could not afford the expenses, and he wasn't physically able to even do the packing he needed to make the move. We raised funds, coordinated with Veteran Movers, a local moving company staffed by veterans, and we paid them a very fair price to do great job of helping this veteran get his family and service dog moved into a new place. He said our assistance was invaluable to his family and without our vital support, he did not know how he would get his family into their home. This family needed additional resources to ensure all household goods were transported safely but could not find that additional support through government services.

City services for veterans gradually got organized and began reaching people by late April. But a tremendous range of needs went unaddressed. We got referrals from both city and state veterans' services agencies, asking us to support veterans when they could not. Veterans were getting shut-off notices on their utility bills. They could not get out to pick up food at distribution sites, so we got deliveries to them.

We supported the families of mobilized National Guard members who had nowhere to turn. As government-supported food delivery stood up, we heard from disabled veterans with specific dietary needs who were not receiving adequate food, and we got them groceries.

We are proud to be a community organization that could mobilize veterans to help veterans during this crisis. One of our greatest successes has been the continuous check-ins with more than 165 veterans and family members—providing information, referrals, and the confidence that a community cares about each and every one of these veterans. We are focused on providing the needed connections to government agencies to advance the needs of the veterans and connect them to vital services. Our volunteers have made over 50 referrals to our government partners for services. Over 65% of referrals made have been to connect veterans to NYS Division of Veterans' Services Veterans Benefits Advising Program so can access all the benefits and services they are entitled to. This can ensure veterans have meaningful support and resources for their families and they can have long-lasting success while achieving their goals.

We wish we had the resources to do much, much more for our community, because the need has been vast. Government services were slow or absent. There are still gaps. We need a sustained food program to provide nutritious food resources to families. Food assistance remains the top issue our veterans are expressing they need. The technology gap for low-income families and older veterans must be addressed to ensure we are not missing any veterans that are in need. With telehealth being the main communication method for medical services, it is imperative that all veterans, young and old, have access to the proper technology so they can communicate with their respective medical care teams. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Pending your questions, this concludes my testimony.