



**August 14, 2020**

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

**Testimony**

**Introduction**

Good afternoon and thank you for inviting me today.

I would also like to thank the veterans and service members who have spoken before me today for their service to our state and our country.

The mission of the New York State Division of Veterans' Services is to assist all veterans, service members and their families with accessing the local, state and federal benefits they earned through their military service. I am proud to share with you, that in the face of an unprecedented health and economic crisis and logistical challenges, our staff continue to work tirelessly on behalf of New York's 680,000 veterans and their families.

In fact, the Division continues to bring in over 63 million dollars per month in recurring federal benefits which comes to more than three quarters of a billion dollars (\$758,000,000) annually – for New York State veterans and their family members. We have ensured that New York's veterans continued to get these benefits throughout the COVID-19 crisis. This money is particularly important in these current circumstance: it is a lifeline to veterans and their families facing an uncertain economy as well as their communities, businesses, schools and the larger state economy.

**COVID Response**

Since the COVID pandemic began, our staff continued to serve New York's veteran community through virtual benefits advising sessions and where safe and appropriate, in office visits. Even during these times of uncertainty, we remain steadfast in our mission to ensure all New York's service members, veterans and their families are accessing the benefits they earned.

All Division employees have been working remotely and performing their normal job duties during this COVID-19 crisis, which means services to veterans throughout New York have continued without interruption. For veterans not connected to VA healthcare we continue to assist them in accessing healthcare through our digital benefits advisement. We can do this because early in 2020, the Division established New York State's first-ever digital pathway to submit claims and appeals for benefits and services to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. This permits DVS to serve clients



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remotely and ensure that claims are submitted in a timely manner despite the VA Regional Offices closing to the public — and allows DVS to complete a claim for benefits without printing a single sheet of paper, greatly reducing DVS's environmental footprint. The Division continues to find creative solutions to meet the needs of veterans during these times.

The Division continues to invest in our county partners' abilities to serve veterans during this difficult time. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Division has conducted trainings for not only our own staff but also for county veterans service officers. These trainings have increased the knowledge base and resources of the veterans service officers to assist veterans, service members and their families. In fact, I just finished administering our annual training prior to this testimony.

This year, DVS training events included:

- Semi-Annual Trainings with over 140 participants at each
- County Accreditation Weeklong Training for 12 counties, all receiving accreditation under the New York State DVS POA

Through accreditation with the Division, dozens of counties have gained access to our online case management system which has allowed them to continue to serve veterans in their local community throughout the pandemic.

Beyond ensuring veterans received the benefits they are owed, in the wake of the pandemic the Division stepped up to assist veterans and their families who were facing food insecurity in these challenging times. As such, we engaged in a collaborative arrangement with the HelloFresh corporation, the United States Department of Agriculture's Farmers to Families Food Box Program, The Campaign Against Hunger in Brooklyn, and Western New York Heroes near Buffalo, to utilize resources from Governor Cuomo's COVID-19 Philanthropic Fund to deliver nourishing food to veterans and their families. This project has delivered over 50,000 healthy meals to veterans and their families across New York, and is slated to continue until at least the end of September.

The Division also recognizes during these unprecedented times that personal outreach is more necessary than ever. While we could not meet in person, the Division contacted over 30,000 veterans online to conduct buddy checks during the pandemic. We used these check-ins to provide needed comfort to those who were socially isolated as well as used it as an opportunity to assist them in accessing their untapped benefits.

The Division provided support by hosting an online gathering for Gold Star Families on Memorial Day, providing these families who have lost loved ones in military service a



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much-needed gathering place where they could be in a community with one another. As a result, some of these Gold Star Family Members were connected with benefits and services about which they were previously unaware. In a time that makes it difficult to feel like a community, the Division has bridged the gap for those who sacrificed and lost so much on behalf of our state and nation.

### **Conclusion**

These are just some of the initiatives and proactive steps the Division has taken to support veterans, service members, and their families in this difficult times. The staff at the Division of Veterans' Services is proud of the work we do.

With the support of the Governor, the Legislature and our many community partners, we will continue to work tirelessly to fulfill the promise we made to those who served by taking care of them upon their return to New York.