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December 13, 2021

The Honorable Kathy Hochul
Governor of New York State
NYS Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Hochul:

I write respectfully requesting the inclusion of state funding for the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer-to-Peer Support Program in your forthcoming 2022-23 Executive Budget Proposal.

Created by the New York State Senate in 2012 in honor of PFC Joseph Dwyer, a veteran of the Iraq War who tragically lost his battle with PTSD, the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer-to-Peer Support Program (aka, the Dwyer Program) exists to support veterans facing the challenges of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and depression. The Dwyer Program's successful peer-to-peer support model provides a safe, confidential, and educational platform where all veterans are welcome to meet with other veterans in support of their successful transition to post-service life.

By providing vital counseling services delivered by fellow veterans and building critical vet-to-vet relationships that enhance positive change through common experiences, learning, and personal growth, the Dwyer Program has proven itself an invaluable resource for New York's military heroes to whom we owe everything. I am especially proud that the Dwyer Program serves all of the counties within my 43rd Senate District.

In Columbia County, Command Sergeant Major Gary Flaherty, who serves as Director of Veteran's Services for Columbia County, is doing an incredible job leading Columbia County's Dwyer Program, always putting the needs of veterans first and tirelessly championing their cause.

The Columbia County Veterans Day Room has been consistently busy this year and recently agreed to host the Newmann Veterans to bus in and use the program's Day Room. Veterans with 100 percent total and permanents rated by the VA for PTSD/TBI are residents there and Director Flaherty visited them for years. In June, Columbia County sponsored a catered event for veterans, with 165 veterans, families, and widows attending and providing positive feedback. In December, Columbia County held a Christmas Party attended by 125 individuals.

Because of the recognized success of Columbia County's Dwyer Program, the Secretary of the Federal Veterans Administration selected it for a recent visit. The Columbia County Dwyer Program has deservedly received the attention of surrounding counties and, more recently, veterans from Massachusetts have shown up at the County's Dwyer Day Room.

Director Flaherty has partnered with High & Mighty Therapeutic Riding and Driving Center of Ghent, which provides equine-assisted services to those of all abilities, with the goal of enhancing physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. In this innovative partnership, High & Mighty offers programming for veterans, active military personnel, and military personnel family members that focus on the many challenges faced by military service members daily. Benefits of the program include improving communication, problem solving, and relationship skills, decreasing stress, anxiety, and depression, increasing confidence and focus, as well as building/gaining trust and respect.

Director Flaherty also has established a strong Veteran Widows' Program that currently serves 23 widows. Director Flaherty started this initiative when one of his young Afghanistan War widow's husband died of cancer and he learned she refused to leave her house, as one of his program mentors was doing her shopping and getting her mail. Thankfully, the individual is now in the program and doing well. The program now has widows mentoring widows and, at Thanksgiving, they were able to deliver turkey and meals to eight families of veterans and other widows. Director Flaherty personally knows of four veterans whose lives were saved thanks to Columbia County's Dwyer Program.

In Rensselaer County, United States Marine Corps Sergeant Daniel E. Wargo, Coordinator for the Veteran Resource and Outreach Center at Hudson Valley Community College, is doing a fantastic job successfully leading the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program for Rensselaer County. Veteran peer mentors are trained in military behavioral health and personally understand the effects of PTSD, TBI, and the challenges of reintegrating into civilian society. Rensselaer County's Dwyer Program is available to all veterans, members of the Armed Forces, National Guard, Army Reserve, and their families. All are welcome regardless of service dates, discharge status, or dependency status and the program is free and confidential.

Most recently, Rensselaer County and Hudson Valley Community College opened the Veterans Resource and Outreach Center (VETROC), which serves as the one-stop-shop for all things relating to the veteran and military-connected community on campus. VETROC staff support student veterans as they reintegrate back into the civilian world and tackle their higher educational goals. As part of the Student Affairs Division, VETROC is available to all military-connected students, including active duty, veterans, reservists, National Guard, spouses, or dependents. Its ongoing mission is to build a supportive and inclusive experience for all VETROC visitors. VETROC will take part in Wreaths Across America at Hudson Valley Community College. This special event will honor and remember the veterans and service members of the community, offer important information about our nation's heroes and services available to veterans, and offer an opportunity to meet members of the 2021 convoy heading to Arlington National Cemetery for the annual wreath-laying ceremony.

In Saratoga County, Frank McClement, the Director of Veterans Services, leads the Dwyer Program with vision and compassion and has been instrumental in its recognized statewide success and efficacy. In fact, Saratoga County was one of the four original pilot counties to receive Dwyer Program funds. The Saratoga County Veterans Peer to Peer Mentoring Program pairs established veterans with veterans who are experiencing PTSD or other re-acclimation challenges. Personalized and informal, these pairings yield relationships intended to ease the transition from combat to civilian life. Saratoga County's program has been most successful and has had a positive impact on so many veterans since its beginning.

Saratoga County's Dwyer Program funds a weekly "Veterans Coffee Night," which is a drop-in social gathering of veterans that allows them to connect with one another without the pressure of a program agenda, etc. It is of no cost to the veteran, and it allows new veterans to be introduced with the program, and meet other veterans. The Program served as the foundation for an integrated mental health/wellness project that engaged the local Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and an area gym. Peers attended a 100-day program and learned a variety of physical wellness and adaptation strategies in the context of peer support, conceptualized as a second "boot camp" experience.

Participants later described such life-changing events as decreased alcohol consumption, marital satisfaction, and increased social engagement in the community. Saratoga County's Dwyer Program entered into a partnership with the Saratoga County Sheriff's Department to bring mentors and resources into the jail for an Incarcerated Veterans Program. The initiative brought together Probation, VA VJO staff, local Veterans housing organizations, and Veterans Service Agency, to bring mentors and resources into the Saratoga County Jail in an effort to connect veterans with influences and programs that could have a positive effect on their life and prevent further involvement with the justice system. Veterans have been connected with each other and outside resources through various social and enrichment activities in a vast degree of subjects from cooking, art, music, exercise, and theatre.

During COVID, the program helped struggling veterans who were declining in mental health due to isolation and depression by maintaining a regular "buddy check" communication strategy, as well as operating an ad hoc food pantry, and providing much needed and hard to locate personal supplies to veterans who lacked the ability to secure such resources.

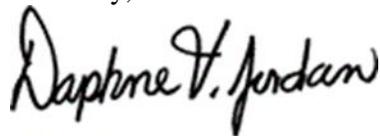
Director Flaherty, Coordinator Wargo, and Director McClement are all proud veterans of the United States Armed Forces and are dedicated, hard-working, innovative leaders of their respective Dwyer Programs. They support ensuring the provision of a dedicated, consistent funding line in the State Budget for the Dwyer Program.

Since entering the State Senate in 2019, I have continually advocated for full funding of this vital program. Thanks to my advocacy, and the advocacy of countless veterans, and veteran's organizations, the final enacted 2021-22 State Budget included \$4,505,000 for the Dwyer Program statewide. I have advocated for, and delivered, \$1,290,000 in Dwyer Program funding for my 43rd Senate District beginning in 2019. While this real result is important, the Dwyer Program and advocates such as America's military veterans and myself should not be forced to start over every budget cycle and come to Albany to lobby for program funding. The Dwyer Program clearly should be part of the annual State Budget. This is a critically important step that our veterans rightfully deserve.

Governor, we can, should, and must build upon previous years' funding success by making the Dwyer Program a regular part of the State Budget. Frankly, the life-saving Dwyer Program is too important to relegate to an annual "legislative add" as it was under the former Cuomo Administration. The State Budget must reflect our values and priorities. The Dwyer Program, and helping veterans, must be a bipartisan priority and officially included in the State Budget, beginning with your 2022-23 Executive Budget proposal.

Thank you for your consideration of my request that your upcoming 2022-23 Executive Budget proposal fully fund the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer-to-Peer Support Program.

Sincerely,



Daphne Jordan
State Senator, 43rd District

Cc: Gary Flaherty, Director, Columbia County Veterans' Services Agency
Daniel E. Wargo, Coordinator, Veteran Resource and Outreach Center at Hudson Valley Community College, PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program Rensselaer County
Frank McClement, Director, Saratoga County Veterans Services Agency