

Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to speak today.

As members of the Veterans Affairs Committee, I imagine you're all familiar with the term "presumptive conditions" regarding toxins our service members are exposed to in the military and the presumed diseases which result from said exposures.

This is important because there is a correlation between presumptive conditions and those who are at higher risk for serious complications from COVID-19. Vietnam veterans were exposed to Agent Orange... Desert Storm veterans were required to take anti-nerve agent Bromide pills, which has been linked to a series of conditions called Gulf War syndrome... Post 9/11 vets were exposed to Burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan... And Marine Corps veterans who served at Camp Lejeune had contaminated drinking water from 1957 – 1987.

All of these exposures have led to cancers, respiratory conditions, diabetes, and / or other issues that would put someone who tests positive for COVID at high risk for serious complications. Thus, veterans' are collectively in jeopardy of not being able to recover from the physical effects of COVID-19.

With that being said, we are also all too keenly aware of the veteran suicide rate in this country. We know that veterans are taking their own life at a rate of nearly 22 a day, which is nearly double the rate of nonveterans in the United States. And given risk factors for suicide such as physical health problems, joblessness, homelessness, and social isolation... we can see that the impacts of COVID-19 will be catastrophic for many in our veteran population.

Let me share some of what we've seen at Veterans Outreach Center relevant to mental health challenges that we believe stem from COVID quarantining, fear of infection, and economic losses. VOC has operated a homeless shelter for male veterans since 2001. We typically have about one altercation per year between residents that escalates to a point where staff intervention is necessary to avoid physical harm.

Since March of 2020, we've had TWELVE such altercations, one of which sent a veteran to the hospital. In addition, our residents have been unable to see family members for many months in an effort to avoid the spread of the virus throughout the shelter. But the reunification of families and healing of relationships is a key element for those in recovery; therefore, forward progress has been slow for many of our homeless veterans.

Moreover, we've had six residents lose loved ones during this time, and they couldn't even have funeral services. These losses and lack of closure resulted in significant challenges to our veterans' mental health. Relapses were kept at bay during the strictly followed initial quarantine from March through June, but they rose almost immediately when the quarantine began to lift.

In a typical month, we have two vets discharge successfully from our program and move into permanent housing.

In July we had eight discharges, and not all were for positive reasons. Finally, substantial back payments of unemployment and stimulus checks resulted in a handful of residents going from having no financial resources to having tens of thousands of dollars which is generally not healthy for people in recovery. Finally, in all of our years of operation, we have only had a couple attempted suicides. One of them was this year in April. Thankfully the veteran's attempt was unsuccessful and he continues to recover now with inpatient psychiatric care.

As for our employment and training programs, I can tell you that pre-pandemic, we anticipated serving 60 veterans who were in need of work between April and June. Instead, we enrolled only 33. As an agency, our staff were not able to do outreach or meet with veterans, so these enrollments were all done virtually.

Our numbers are picking up for July and August, but finding both available jobs and permanent housing for many of these vets is even more challenging. Rent prices remain high, many people are not moving, and landlords are on hold with evictions. And of course, many companies are reluctant or unable to start hiring again at this point in the pandemic.

I'd also like to add that the additional \$600 per week of unemployment support definitely discouraged workers from wanting to return to work. Moreover, the lack of child care remains an issue, as does the fact that many veteran job seekers lack computers and internet access to complete on-line applications or do virtual interviews.

Finally, many of our training partners are still not back up and running fully, which limits the support we can provide to workers who need updated and/or new skills to return to the workforce.

In terms of how we have mitigated many of these issues, VOC has done the following:

1. We began offering and facilitating virtual networking sessions for employers and veterans.
2. We put extensive safety protocols in place prior to our reopening in June, including plexi-glass shields on workers desks, hand sanitizing stations throughout the agency, temporal thermometer checks upon arrival for all staff, clients and guests, UV lights for deep cleaning at night, and much more.
3. We've assisted clients without the proper technology to complete virtual interviews at VOC (now that we are reopened), and we purchased cameras to give to veterans who have their own computers at home.
4. We linked directly with the state Division of Veterans Services to help veterans with unemployment issues. Many veterans made dozens and even hundreds of phone calls to DOL themselves with no resolution, but through our partners here at DVA, we were able to help get those issues resolved immediately.
5. We conducted 3,200 buddy checks which entailed phone calls, texts and emails to check on the welfare of our clients from March through August. (By way of comparison, all of 2019 only had a total of 2,813 buddy checks.)
6. Our staff created over 600 handmade cards and mailed them to clients in March and April.

7. We created virtual peer support groups including some specifically for men, specifically for female vets, and even a book club.
8. Between March and August of 2019, we served 168 veterans through our quartermaster club. This is where we provide them with food baskets, hygiene items, and other essentials. But in that same time period of 2020, we served 317 vets, and many of these service episodes involved VOC staff delivering the food directly to vets homes.
9. We applied for a grant and received funding to purchase 50 tablets with two years of internet connection to provide to our most vulnerable clients. This way they will be able to connect to their VOC case manager, conduct telehealth appointments, attend substance abuse recovery groups online, and connect with family and friends.
10. We purchased two sound-proof booths under the same grant for our homeless shelters. These booths are outfitted with a tablet for the same functionality I just described so that vets can do those things with privacy, which would be otherwise impossible in the community living setting.
11. We created a number of videos for our website and social media apps that include tips for healthy eating on a budget, fitness routines that can be done at home, meditation ideas and more.

The way ahead for VOC and our veterans includes a hybrid of the ways we used to deliver services, and all of the new technology we've been able to add due to the pandemic.

Moreover, it includes new partnerships. Due to funding cuts at many governmental levels, we have partnered with the veterans service agencies in our surrounding counties and effective October 1st, we will begin providing onsite case management on a rotating basis in six Finger Lakes counties. These agencies are unable to handle the influx of veterans in need, particularly given the budget constraints they are now facing. VOC will support them and the veterans they serve.

Lastly, as we continue to look for new ways to generate revenue at VOC to maintain relevance in an ever-changing world, we also hope that we can count on NYS for the support we were approved for in this year's budget. With so many of our fundraising efforts being adversely impacted by the Coronavirus, our partnership with NYS is critical to the health and welfare of veterans in the Finger Lakes Region. Thank you very much for your time.