

**Testimony of the NYS Council of Veterans Organizations
Before the
New York State Legislature's Joint Budget
Committee Hearings on Human Services
February 6, 2018**

Good morning esteemed Chairs and members of the Human Services Budget Subcommittee. I am **Bob Becker, Legislative Chair for the NYS Council of Veterans Organizations**, or the Vets Council as we call it. I would like to thank you for the opportunity to bring priority veterans budget issues identified by the Council before you for consideration.

The Vets Council consists of more than 25 Veteran Service Organizations, meeting monthly to discuss key issues of importance to veterans. With me today are fellow veterans and members of the Council, Commander Mike Burke, New York State leader of the Veterans of Foreign Wars,

Linda McKinnis, Disabled American Veterans Legislative representative, Jim Ader, Albany County Division of Veterans Affairs, and Kirby Hannan, Legislative Coordinator for the VFW.

Our purpose today is to apprise this committee of our budget goals for 2018 - 2019 and to thank you for the highly interactive hearing you conducted last year. My associates will go to the details of why we are grateful, but suffice it to say, that we testified last year and you listened. Money was appropriated or redirected to critical programs benefiting New York veterans: **Veteran Service Officer funding, Peer to Peer Mentoring, Veterans Defense Program and money for mentoring within the Office of Court Administration for Veterans' Treatment Courts.**

We would like to insure a continuation of the 2017 funding for these purposes, which is not yet disbursed, comment on the necessity for a timeline on an RFP to be issued by the Division of Veterans Affairs, and the stress the value of continued funding for veteran to veteran activities.

Good morning, I am **Mike Burke, NYS Commander of the VFW**. I would like to address the issue of funding for the Veteran Service Officers. I am a VietNam veteran and recipient of the Purple Heart. When I came back home there were no Veteran Service Officers to channel me to needed benefits and support mechanisms. In fact, my reception at the airport was disgusting and the many months I spent in the hospital and later recovery was very much a solo trip. I am here to say we have come a long way together.

Today we have a cadre of Veteran Service Officers, some employed by the counties, some by Vet Service Organizations like the VFW and DAV. There are between 30 and 40 VSOs that are active and that is not nearly enough! I will tell you why. The VFW's VSO in our Buffalo Office alone, accounts for more than 3 million dollars per month of Federal benefits for New York Veterans. The VSO's are bringing money into New York State, keeping our soldiers here, and are a worthy investment that can stand any test of return on investment.

Hello Chairs and committee members. Thank you for listening to me. **I am Linda McKinnis, the legislative person for the Disabled American Vets**, and a certified Veteran Service Officer and a certified Peer to Peer Specialist. Last year I testified before this committee and told you what a VSO does and how Peer to Peer mentoring works at the Posts and within the Courts. We can go over that again but the bottom line is, veterans assist veterans. They counsel anonymously at the Post level as volunteers, and sometimes seek certification as a career path but the most important ingredient is the Veteran to Veteran part.

Current funding for the PFC Joseph Dwyer Peer to Peer mentoring is directed at the very important connection of veterans to other veterans at the Post level. This is where mentoring begins. Later as counseling and mentoring progress to more formal settings such as Veteran Treatment Court there is frequently a need for additional accreditation which is why I am a certified Peer Specialist.

I could describe the course content offered by NYS Office of Mental Health, but I would like to focus on what I think is needed to make an excellent course, veteran friendly. The course should be offered by the Office of Mental Health for free to veterans. The course should be readily available online for vets and veterans should be considered as pre qualified candidates for the course. This will give the Office of Court Administration a "basic training course" and serve as a pipeline for qualified mentors to counsel veterans during alternative sentencing.

I am Kirby Hannan, volunteer VFW Legislative Coordinator and Vietnam era veteran.. I too am here to thank you because the current budget contains approximately 2 million dollars of funding for what is termed "Veteran to Veteran programs that provide counseling, advocacy and court mentoring. We are told that one million of that carries over from last year and one million is appropriated for this year. Half of that sum is to go to the Office of Court Administration and half is to be administered in an RFP by the Division of Budget.

This would not have happened without the Legislature's input last year. We testified last year that allocating all the finding to OCA might be counterproductive. Without a reliable pipeline of veteran to veteran mentors coming from the Posts, Veteran Treatment Courts would have no suitable counselors. This year, we are simply urging educational access for Veterans who wish

to take a more formal approach to Peer to Peer mentoring suitable to the OCA and we are asking the OCA to make sure that they are doing everything possible to reach out to the Post level for these mentors.

A special look at S6237 Parker and A3197A Ortiz will give you a sense of an educational direction that could be adopted by OMH, OASAS and DVA that would help immensely in getting the qualified veteran that OCA could be looking for in their mentoring process. A certified social worker or second year law student cannot ever replace the Veteran to Veteran value added to a one on one situation. Just ask any vet.

So we are encouraging the legislature to insure that the appropriations follow a predictable timeline. We recognize the importance of an RFP but would not want this appropriation and last year's appropriation to continue to carry over. Thank you for your insightful treatment of our issues in this process.

I am Jim Ader, an Afghanistan War veteran and Albany County Veterans Affairs coordinator. As such I see everyday what my colleagues are speaking about and have been both the recipient and now the giver of mentoring at many levels. One of the most emotionally stirring situations I face in my job and my life, is the veteran who runs crosswise with the law. You have heard much about Veterans Treatment Court and Albany County has one of the best but their principal focus is at the misdemeanour level. What about the felony?

Right now the Veterans Defense Program is the last line of defense for veterans who have got in serious trouble because of service related stressors. I see way too much of it right here in Albany but the word is getting to the Post and on the street. Veterans facing serious charges are learning that there is hope for an informed defense and perhaps light at the end of the tunnel. The VDP is educating defense attorneys, and those involved in mitigation to know a veterans service history and how to make it relevant in pursuing alternatives to incarceration. For the last three years the Legislature has appropriated \$500,000 to keep this critical program going. Please keep this line item alive in this budget cycle. It is much less expensive than the cost of a jail cell.

Bob Becker here to close. So, our asks are few but really big for us . We need a timely roll out of the one million dollar RFP, an educational track for veteran to veteran mentors that works at all levels of mentoring, more money for Veteran Service Officers, a continuation of the Dwyer Peer to Peer mentoring program, and continued appropriations for the Veterans Defense Program. Thank you very much for your attention and I sincerely hope that we can get this done this year because at my age next year is not always an option and our vets can't wait.