

**Testimony of the NYS Council of Veterans Organizations
Before the
New York State Legislature's Joint Budget
Committee Hearings on Human Services
January 24, 2019**

Good morning esteemed Chairs and members of the Human Services Budget Subcommittee. I am **Kirby Hannan, speaking today in behalf of the NYS Veterans Council**, 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, Linda McKinnis, Disabled American Veterans Legislative representative, and Art Cody, Veterans Defense Program.

Our purpose today is to apprise this committee of our budget goals for 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.**

Today we have a cadre of Veteran Service Officers, employed by Vet Service Organizations like the VFW. There are approximately a dozen such VSOs state wide 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 2 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. The Veterans Council and the VFW are asking that the legislature to continue to fund \$125,000 to the VFW for our two service officers and to add an appropriation of \$500,000 so that other congressionally recognized Veteran Service Organizations can apply for similar grants utilizing the grants gateway to create a statewide network. Currently we are in need of coverage on Long Island, Hudson Valley, and Southern Tier.

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.

The Governor in his current budget proposal has included funding for the PFC Joseph Dwyer Peer to Peer mentoring in all New York Counties. We support that budget initiative although the funding level is uncertain. It 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 enhancement of peer to peer capabilities 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. The Veterans Council supports the continuation of \$500,000 to encourage the participation of qualified peer to peer mentors assisting in the Veteran Treatment Courts alternative sentencing program.

(Kirby Hannan) I would like to defer to the testimony before you, submitted separately by Art Cody and the Veterans Defense Program. 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 life, is the veteran who runs crosswise with the law. You have heard much about Veterans Treatment Court and my experience with Albany County’s program has it as one of the best but their principal focus is at the misdemeanor 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. Where a veteran has been and what they have seen cannot always be weighed properly by those in the court system. It is not about giving a vet an unwarranted break, it is about understanding what got him or her there. 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. The program is a success saving more than 30m in incarceration time. We are asking for an additional \$400,000 to expand it to fund additional capacity on Long Island and the Hudson Valley. Please keep this line item alive in this budget cycle. It is much less expensive than the cost of a jail cell.

Kirby Hannan to close. So, our asks are few but really big for us .We need \$500,000 for more Veteran Service Officers, a continuation of the Dwyer Peer to Peer mentoring program in all NYS Counties, and continued appropriations for the Veterans Defense Program. Thank you very much for your attention.