

**Testimony of the New York State Veterans Council
before the Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Human Services
Thursday January 30, 2020**

**Kirby Hannan- Legislative Advocate NYS Veterans of Foreign Wars
Bob Becker- Legislative Advocate NYS Veterans Council**

The New York State Veterans Council is an amalgamation of more than 30 Veteran Service Organizations dedicated to the concept that veteran to veteran support must be fostered enabling maximization of public funded initiatives and self funding activities within our organizations and the communities they serve.

Veteran Service Officer Funding

Funding is directed through the Grants Gateway to Congressionally recognized VSOs such as those connected to the VFW and Marine Corp League. The VFW Service officers, for example, bring in approximately 15 million a month of Federal Benefits for NYS veterans. We are looking for continued appropriation for the VFW's VSOs (\$125,000 for the past 8 years) which accounts for 30 million dollars annually of federal benefits for New York Veterans and continued funding for VSOs employed by other Congressionally recognized Service Organizations such as the DAV and Marine Corp League. There are about 15 statewide.

We also desperately need to revisit **funding for County Veteran Service Officers** which is inadequate and restricts the County VSOs (there is one or more in each county) from participating in a broader array of coordination activities within their county. For every dollar of state money spent on County VSOs we get a \$30 return in Federal dollars for NY veterans. County Veteran Service Agencies get approximately \$10k for every 100k of veterans served. Said differently there is a \$300k return on every \$10k spent on county VSA/VSO activity.

Additional funding would enable the County Veteran Service Officer to operate with more resources to continue the business of garnering Federal benefits for homecoming veterans (typically around \$30k for each veteran and much more when disability is involved) and also would channel VSOs to take a more active role in the Dwyer Program. This brings more accountability in distributing and coordination of Dwyer program funding through OMH. It has been suggested that VSO auditing of the OMH Peer to Peer Specialist course be a requirement for continued Dwyer funding which could be readily accomplished by DVS.

PFC Joseph Dwyer Peer to Peer Mentoring

Fully funding VSOs at every level will bring accountability to the PFC Joseph Dwyer Peer to Peer Mentoring program. We are urging additional funding to bring Dwyer to more counties in 2020 (specifically \$4million to bring Dwyer to 23 down state counties)but not without greater accountability as to use of the funds.

Veteran Peer to Peer Certification Program A3197A Ortiz S4261 Parker

We support these bills and are working with Senate and Assembly sponsors and DVS and OMH to develop an accreditation program that would recognize standard training and certification for County VSOs that recognizes veteran cultural competency within OHM's already established peer to peer accreditation program. Successfully completing this OMH program to recognize veteran cultural competence in peer to peer mentoring would be an accountability benchmark for receipt of currently budgeted OMH Dwyer funding. It would also guarantee a more proficient veteran to veteran mentoring program at the Post level and into the Veteran Treatment Courts.

Veteran Treatment Court Mentors

We have supported funding (\$500k) for the Office of Court Administration to support veteran mentors used to facilitate the alternative sentencing methodologies used in VTCs. We believe that training and integration with County VSOs is essential for the Courts to be able to find veterans versed in mentoring other veterans and bring them to the place they need to be with the courts and the law. With more VSOs and Post level veterans auditing the OMH Peer to Peer Specialist course a much greater cultural understanding will surface within the veteran community and translate to a stronger Dwyer mentoring and a better VTC alternative sentencing process.

Veterans Defense Program

Veterans Treatment Courts must be brought to all counties but that will not serve all veterans in need. VTCs tend to deal with misdemeanor level issues that find the Vet sideways with the law. The VDP deals with felony level issues and shows direct dollar results by documenting millions of dollars of incarceration avoidance. Keeping Vets in alternative sentencing pathways is what the VDP is all about and their budget requests of \$250,000 from both houses and an additional \$220,000 to continue a Long Island office will continue to serve Veterans who have fallen into serious trouble with the law and deserve recognition for the unique challenges they have faced. The VDP message that "all hope is not lost for veterans charged with felonies" is an important one that is not lost on the veteran community.

Women Veteran Peer to Peer Programs A3917A Ortiz S4261 Parker

In addition to establishing an audit capability for the OMH Peer to Peer Specialist Accreditation program, A3197A Ortiz also develops the peer mentoring program within the woman veteran community. The bill calls for the DVS and OMH to work through County VSOs to establish regional or county peer service centers to bring women vets together to focus on peer to peer mentoring techniques unique to women veteran needs such as child care and women's health issues. Pilot projects in Erie county have demonstrated that once the invitation goes out for such a Women Vet forum on peer to peer issues more than 200 women vets have gathered to focus on their unique issues.