



## Division of Veterans' Services

### **New York State Division of Veterans' Services 2022 Joint Budget Hearing**

Good morning, Chairs Krueger and Weinstein and distinguished members of the Senate and Assembly. My name is Viviana DeCohen, a Marine Corps Veteran, and I have the distinct honor of being the Director of the New York State Division of Veterans' Services, or DVS.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss Governor Hochul's 2022-2023 Executive Budget as it relates to New York State Veterans' Services.

In December 2021, I joined DVS and found a truly inspiring and hard-working group of individuals dedicated to our mission of serving those who served. As a Veteran myself and having previously served as the Commissioner of the Mount Vernon Veterans Service Agency, I have benefited not only as a constituent from the work DVS does but also as a teammate and partner.

Governor Hochul has made it clear in her administration and in her budget, that we are ushering in a culture of respect, teamwork, and expansion in our great State. The Veterans' Services realm is no exception to this, and DVS is eager and excited to implement the many programs and services to provide the highest-quality care for New York's Veterans, Service members, and their families.

Under Governor Hochul's leadership, New York remains a state where Veterans and their families are proud to call home. DVS's economic impact, which goes straight into the hands of New York's Veteran families, yields incredible results annually, with over \$790 million in tax-free federal dollars for thousands of Veterans and their families in 2021. These funds filter their way into every community across New York State to support not only the over 714,000 Veterans of New York but their entire community and businesses.



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The work of this agency delivers concrete results and benefits for Veterans and their families in the form of these federal funds and healthcare access.

Throughout the past year, DVS has shown time and time again it is ready and able to provide the services our constituents need during these challenging and ever-changing times. DVS has addressed food insecurity, increased public access to Veterans benefits information through digital technology, and expanded peer-to-peer mentoring programs to assist transitioning Service members. We are grateful for the support of the Legislature, Executive Chamber, and the tremendous work of DVS staff, which have enabled us to rise to the occasion.

Food insecurity has been repeatedly cited as a concern for military-connected families. Despite the new challenges brought by COVID-19, this season DVS distributed over \$140,000 worth of FreshConnect Checks which allow Veterans, Service members, and their families to receive \$20 food vouchers to use at farmers markets and stands across the State. In the past seven years since the program's creation, DVS staff have distributed more than \$600,000 in FreshConnect Checks. To further address this concern, DVS worked in collaboration with multiple public and private sector partners to facilitate an unprecedented endeavor to distribute healthy and nourishing meals to Veterans and their families. To give perspective to the expansiveness of the food distribution efforts, since June 2020, approximately 800,000 nourishing meals have been distributed to Veterans, Service Members, and Military Families confronting food insecurity in Western New York, the North Country, and New York City. We are fortunate to have the ability to continue these partnerships to address this vital concern in the communities we serve.

DVS has also worked to provide more points of access for Veterans to learn about their benefits, and on Veterans Day 2021, DVS joined with several partners in state government to dedicate New York State's first-ever digital Veterans Welcome Center kiosk. The Veterans Welcome Center kiosk provides Veterans and Military Families with



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quick and easy access to information about benefits, programs, services, and resources available to them. Located at the Capital Region Welcome Center adjacent to the New York State Thruway in New Baltimore, a spot that welcomes approximately 500,000 visitors annually, this digital kiosk marks the first of several Veterans Welcome Center kiosks that DVS plans to place throughout New York State, and Governor Hochul's Executive Budget provides funding to support the expansion of this valuable resource.

Lastly, DVS has endeavored to find ways to best support transitioning Service Members and make New York State a place they would like to call home. DVS began this process by facilitating new partnerships between New York State and the Expiration of Term of Service (ETS) sponsorship program, a new federal effort focusing on training community mentors and connecting these mentors with Service Members who are nearing their date of discharge from the military. Already, more than 150 New York State residents have completed the training to serve as community mentors. We at DVS are excited about continuing this fruitful partnership.

Governor Hochul's State of the State agenda and Executive Budget will provide DVS with the resources to build upon these successes and deliver more support than ever to New York's Veterans and their families. And while we as a Division do an immense amount of work to serve our Veterans and their families, we could not do it without the tremendous support and work done by our local partners. It is why we are grateful Governor Hochul's proposed budget would increase County and City Veterans Service Agencies' annual funding from a minimum of \$10,000 apiece to a minimum of \$25,000 apiece, bolstering these agencies that provide vital services in their areas of operation. But the efforts don't stop there – the Governor's agenda also provides for expanded support for Service Members transitioning from military to civilian life, additional resources to help connect more Veterans to their benefits, and increased support for programs offering assistance to struggling Veterans. And DVS itself is supported in the Governor's Executive Budget



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with increased staffing and funding to ensure the agency continues providing the highest quality of services to Veterans around the state.

DVS appreciates the continued support of Governor Hochul and her administration in addressing the needs faced by our Veterans, Service Members and their families. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the Governor's Executive Budget with this committee, and on behalf of New York's veteran families, thank you for your continued support of the agency's mission. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.