



New York State Council of Veterans' Organizations

Adaptive Sports Foundation, Alliance of Public Retiree Organizations; American Military Retirees Association, American Ex-Prisoners of War, AMVETS, Black Veterans for Social Justice, Inc., Blinded Veterans Association, Catholic War Veterans, Civil Service Employees Association Veterans Committee, Council 82 AFSCME AFL-CIO Veterans Committee, Combat Infantrymen's Association, Inc., County Veterans Service Officers Association of NYS; Disabled American Veterans, Fleet Reserve Association, Jewish War Veterans, Korean War Veterans Association, Marine Corps League, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Public Employees Federation Veterans Committee, SAGEVets, The Retired Enlisted Association, United Federation of Teachers Veterans Committee, United Spinal Association, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Veterans for Peace, and 369th Veterans Association, Inc.

**TESTIMONY OF THE
NEW YORK STATE COUNCIL OF VETERANS' ORGANIZATIONS AND
THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS (VFW) NEW YORK DIVISION
BEFORE THE SENATE AND ASSEMBLY
JOINT BUDGET SUBCOMMITTEES ON HUMAN SERVICES
FEBRUARY 2, 2022**

The NYS Council of Veteran Organizations consists of more than 30 veteran service organizations including the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans, AMVETS, Fleet Reserve Association, and Marine Corps League to mention a few.

The VFW New York Division is an active member of NYSCOVO and concurs with this testimony.

This budget year has started off in a very positive direction with the Governor mentioning in her message and budget presentation key programs that our organizations have also identified during the past several budget cycles as critical to sustainable veterans' services delivered in a unified and accountable fashion. The following are our budget priorities.

- STATEWIDE FUNDING FOR THE PFC JOSEPH DWYER PEER TO PEER PROGRAM
- ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR DVS/COUNTY VETERAN SERVICE OFFICERS
- SUPPORT FOR RETURNING VETERANS TO HELP NAVIGATE CIVILIAN TRANSITION
- EXPANSION OF VETERAN TREATMENT COURTS
- VETERANS DEFENSE PROGRAM FUNDING

Our comments will center on these and related initiatives, to develop connections between existing successful and ongoing services and the program initiatives mentioned above.

1) The Joseph Dwyer program is many things to many Veterans in many locations within the state. At this moment the Dwyer program is managed at many levels. OMH disperses the funding which goes to veteran outreach agencies in approximately 30 counties including New York City.

- WE WOULD LIKE TO SEE THE REMAINING COUNTIES FUNDED AT CURRENT BUDGET LEVELS IN ACCORDANCE WITH VETERAN POPULATION IN THOSE COUNTIES.

How the money is allocated and what organizations deliver the services should be vetted in accordance with a plan authored by the Division of Veteran Services. Dwyer is important because it is fostered at the Post level, and creates a pipeline for mentors that works up the chain to Veteran Treatment Courts and the Veterans Defense Program.

2) County veteran service officers serve as the traffic cop for the returning veterans so that they are connected with the benefits they so richly deserve. They are solely responsible for connecting veterans to more than a billion dollars a year of federal dollars. That tax free money turns over at least two times and is a tremendous boost to New York's local communities. Claims can be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

- WE WOULD LIKE TO SEE THE LEGISLATURE SUPPORT THE INCREASE IN FUNDS TO VETERAN SERVICE OFFICERS TO \$30,000 FOR EACH VETERAN SERVICE AGENCY.

The Veteran Service Officer is not only a prolific claims expert but they are also leaders in their community and as the first stop for the returning veteran are able to counsel the veteran and get them connected with the local services that exist in every county but can be overlooked.

3) The military to civilian transition pathway initiative is critical to identifying veterans as they are discharged. Many are not focused on benefits or services when discharged. Upon returning "home" they sometimes are reluctant to be identified as veterans and flounder without mentors to assist. **Filling this gap is certainly a function of the Dwyer program's peer to peer mentoring** but could be partnered with federal resources to be more effective.

- WE WOULD LIKE TO SEE FUNDING ROUTED THROUGH DVS THAT IS TARGETED TOWARD FUNDING VETERAN SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL SUCH AS THE VFW AND MEMBERS OF NYSCOVO THAT ARE ABLE TO RECRUIT VETERAN MENTORS READY AND ABLE TO ASSIST DURING THIS DIFFICULT TRANSITION PERIOD.

4) Veteran Treatment Courts and the Veteran Defense Program go hand and hand in redeeming a lost veteran who brushes with the law. Typically, VTC will create an alternative sentencing path for the Veteran when charged at the misdemeanor level while VDP mounts a defense for the veteran charged with more serious crimes. Both programs are highly successful. VTC operates in a similar fashion to Drug Court in most localities but through diligent mentoring provides the oversight necessary for a successful alternative to incarceration.

- WE URGE FUNDING FOR VETERAN TREATMENT COURTS SO THAT ALL WILLING COUNTIES ARE ABLE TO ESTABLISH THEIR OWN COURT.
- WE ALSO URGE THE LEGISLATURE TO MAINTAIN THE FUNDING FOR THE VETERANS DEFENSE PROGRAM AT THE CURRENT LEVEL. THE VDP IS NOT ONLY A HIGHLY

RECOGNIZED AS A LAST STOP FOR VETERANS IN SERIOUS TROUBLE BUT SERVES AS AN EDUCATOR AND INTERPRETOR BRINGING THE SERVICE JARGON AND UNIQUE PLIGHT OF THE VETERAN TO THE ENTIRE COURT SYSTEM.

- Finally, we urge the Legislature to continue the funding for specifically named items such as the VFW's Buffalo and Downstate Veteran Service offices at \$125,000.

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