



Dwyer Coalition
for MILITARY
VETERANS & FAMILIES



Dwyer Coalition for Military Veterans & Families, Inc.

[Mental Hygiene Budget Hearing]

www.dcmvf.org

Mental Hygiene Budget Hearing - February 4, 2026

Gavin T. Walters Sr., MSW, USAF Veteran

Executive Director, Dwyer Coalition for Military Veterans & Families, Inc.

Good Evening. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

My name is Gavin Walters. I am a United States Air Force Veteran and the Executive Director of the Dwyer Coalition for Military Veterans & Families, which serves as the statewide coordinating and advocacy body for the Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program across New York State.

I am here today to speak on several **FY2026 budget priorities**, but just as importantly, to explain **why these requests are grounded in work that is already happening**.

The Joseph P. Dwyer Program has become a cornerstone of Veteran Peer support in New York State. It reaches Veterans in all 62 counties. As the program has grown, what has become increasingly clear is that a statewide program of this size values support, communication, and consistent advocacy. That is why the Dwyer Coalition exists.

Over the past 5 years, we have already stepped into that role.

We built and now maintain the **official statewide Dwyer Coalition website**, which has created a central, transparent platform for counties, partners, and policymakers. Currently, we are developing the first statewide Dwyer app that will provide resources and important information for our military, Veterans, and their families. We facilitate **monthly statewide coordination meetings**, bringing together Dwyer programs from across the state to share updates, address challenges, and stay aligned. And we are **in Albany every week**, meeting directly with legislators, staff, and state agencies. This is not occasional advocacy. This is consistent, hands-on work to ensure Veterans and their families remain visible throughout the budget process.

To sustain and strengthen this work, our first request is **\$600,700 in recurring funding** for the **Dwyer Coalition's FY2026 Foundational Budget**. This funding supports staffing, operations, and statewide infrastructure. A key component of this request is **DwyerCare**, our case management and care coordination initiative.

Across the state, we consistently hear the same issue from Veterans and families: they are trying to navigate multiple systems at once and are falling through the cracks. DwyerCare is designed to address that gap by supporting coordination, follow-through, and continuity. It helps Veterans and caregivers connect services, keep momentum, and avoid starting over every time they reach out for help.



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I also want to be clear that these requests are **in addition to** - not in place of - continued and increased funding for **local Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Programs** operating at the county level.

Local Dwyer programs are the front door. They are where Veterans show up, build relationships, and stay connected within their own communities. As the demand for these programs has grown, counties are being asked to do more with the same level of resources. That creates strain and limits their ability to respond to emerging needs.

An increase in funding for local Dwyer programs is essential to maintaining program quality, retaining staff, and ensuring that Veterans continue to have reliable access to peer support in every county. Statewide coordination cannot replace local investment. It is meant to reinforce it.

The Coalition's role is to strengthen the statewide framework, but the success of the Dwyer Program ultimately depends on sustained and increased investment at the local level. These funding streams should work together - not compete - to ensure the long-term stability of the program statewide.

Our third request is **\$600,000 in recurring annual funding** to ensure equitably inclusion of **New York State's Tribal Nations** within the Dwyer Program.

While the Dwyer Program serves every county, Tribal Nations have never been included. This is not due to a lack of interest or need. It is a structural gap. Tribal Nations are sovereign governments, and participation must respect that sovereignty. This proposal establishes a dedicated funding line that allows each Nation to determine internally how Veteran support should be structured. Six Nations have already expressed readiness to participate, and the framework remains open to all.

Together, these requests - **\$600,700 for statewide coordination and DwyerCare, increase funding for the Dwyer Programs, and \$600,000 for Tribal Nations inclusion** - are investments in work that is already underway. We are not asking the State to start something new. We are asking you to fund and sustain a framework that is already supporting Veterans across New York State.

Attached, you will find our budget request explained in more detail to further apply context to our testimony.

Thank you for your time and for your continued commitment to Veterans and their families.