

Narrative of Veterans Panel
Before the
Senate Finance Committee
February 9, 2016

Submitted by:

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Good day Senators and esteemed staff. This panel consists of veteran volunteers who greatly appreciate the opportunity to outline for you some of our most pressing and challenging issues facing the Veteran today.

We will be brief so as to leave time for your questions which could be as important as what we have to say. I am Kirby Hannan, legislative coordinator for the VFW. With me is John Lewis, Vice Chair of the VFW Legislative Committee, Linda McKinnis Legislative Coordinator for the Disabled American Veterans, and Bob Becker, Legislative Coordinator for the New York State Veterans Council.

We will touch on several issues:

John Lewis - the importance of a continued emphasis on orientation for returning vets of all wars
- the fiscal implications of that sustaining effort

Linda McKinnis - Kirby Hannan - Efforts to fully fund Service Officers and the Peer to Peer program and to urge Senate support for the Federal Women Veterans Access to Quality Care Act.

Bob Becker - the critical nature of what is know as the Veterans buyback bill, and the ground swell of support for the Veterans Defense Program

Good Afternoon: My name is John Pemrick Lewis and I am here today representing the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the Unites States – Dept. of NY as their State Legislative Co-Chairman.

As we are aware, the U.S. has been at war for more than 15 years. Reorientation funding for our combat troops and sailors is on the decline. We have found many veterans with multi-tiered systemic problems – these include family problems, mental health problems, problems with the law, and problems with living their life.

Veteran Service Organizations are dealing with this the best they can, but we need help – VSO's pride themselves in taking care of their own. We have discovered raising money privately simply is not enough. Various stress disorders are rampant and causing mounting fiscal implications. While Service Officers and Peer to Peer mentors are available, many current and former service members are falling through the cracks. Many are finding problems with the law.

I present to you Madame Chair, two examples of why we need a strong Veterans Defense Program. The first example occurred here in Albany's Federal Court system. A married veteran with a very young

autistic child served in both Iraq & Afghanistan. He was arrested and incarcerated. He was facing five years in a federal penitentiary for his crime. Representatives from the VDP engaged the court system providing extenuating mitigating circumstances, as recorded in his service records, to which, the Federal Judge ruled favorably resulting in a fighting chance for this warrior to work towards becoming whole again.

My second example Madame Chair; a young local veteran serving over 12 consecutive mos. in the Iraq theatre, engaged in two combat patrols each day, every day, came home and began self-medicating in order to cope with his experiences. He nearly lost his life in a motorcycle accident. The Albany County Court System, with the assistance of the VDP representatives, recognized the impact his service has had on his person, and ruled with the VA's assistance, to give him a fighting chance.

I am thrilled to convey to you today, both warriors are doing very well in their progress. Neither has re-offended and both remain steadfast in working towards becoming whole again.

Thank you for your attention. I strongly urge your support for the inclusion of \$1.1 million in this year's budget for the Veterans Defense Program of the NYS Defenders Association, which will create the sustainability needed to defend those who defended America.

Linda McKinnis - Kirby Hannan - We would like to create awareness of the importance of Service Officers and the importance of peer to peer counseling and there is no better way to do than by turning to Linda McKinnis who is both a Service Officer and a peer to peer mentor.

Linda McKinnis - I am the legislative coordinator for the DAV Chapter #38 and as Kirby said, serve as both a Peer to Peer Specialist and a Claims Service Officer.

A service officer is an ombudsman for the Veteran directing traffic so to speak, so that the Veteran, particularly the returning veteran, knows where to go and what to do to get the best assistance available for questions and problems with health care, and claims of all kinds. While some funding exists supporting service officers in some congressionally recognized VSO's such as the VFW and American legion there are not nearly enough to go around.

Kirby Hannan - To that point S2497a Addabbo creates a voluntary contribution on the NYS personal income tax return much like the check off for breast cancer. It is the VFW's preliminary step in solving service officer funding issues and could raise \$500,000 or more and if matching funds were created in subsequent years, a million dollars or more could easily put 20 more service officers on the job all over the state.

Linda McKinnis - Switching to the Peer to Peer mentoring program, please let me thank all the participating Senators who have stepped up to support continued funding for what is the most successful counseling program I have encountered in my service career. The peer mentor, I am one, works with veterans in an anonymous fashion much like an AA program. It creates an opportunity to vent about innermost problems and provides a constructive outlet for veterans. This program regularly keeps veterans in a problem solving mode and out of the crisis mode. Again thank you and please keep this program viable.

Kirby Hannan - Let me point out Senator Larkin's bill S2206 which adds a permissive component to the peer to peer program allowing for a mentor to seek credentials in counseling if they choose to do so. Many veterans in assisting other veterans in the peer program have discovered that they are good at counseling and would like to make it a career. The key however is the base level funding for the program which the Senate has provided and is now found in 11 counties. It would be wonderful to have such a program in all counties.

Linda McKinnis - Lastly I would like to take a minute to urge the Senate to support, in your interaction with Congress, the Women Veterans Access to Quality Care Act. This is a special cause for me as I believe that there are unique health care needs for women in the service. The Federal Bill introduced by Senators Dean Heller and Patty Murray recognizes as women come home from serving they must have the necessary access to full time obstetricians and gynecologists, be tracked by outcomes measurement, and have health care facilities that meet the specific needs of women, who now comprise 15 percent of active duty personnel. I recognize that this is Federal, not State, but a resolution in support from the Senate to Congress would go a long way toward recognizing women in the service. Thank You.

Bob Becker - I am Bob Becker and as Kirby mentioned serve as the Legislative Coordinator for the Council of Veterans Organizations. Our Council is a coalition of 31 veteran organizations in New York State. With this testimony is a memorandum of support for the Veterans Defense Program and a current synopsis of their accomplishments.

The VDP as we call it, cuts across all service lines and has touched the very core of our Council. It doesn't matter whether you are an Ex Prisoner of War, A Black Veteran for Social Justice or a PEF Veterans Committee member, a VFW member or an American Legion member you are represented by the Council and most probably have benefited from the VDP.

I can't say enough for what the program has done in the short time it has been in place and what it can do in the very near future. The memo speaks for itself, so please take a moment to look at it because I would like to mention one other thing that the Council is really keen on.

Senator Larkin's bill S5937 creates a civil service pension buy back for three years of active military duty. The legislature has passed the bill in previous sessions and I thank you folks for that from the bottom of my heart, but it was vetoed by the Governor. Well now he says, "put it in the budget and I will sign it" so I think it is important to hold him to his word.....so please put Senator Larkins bill in the budget and let's send a positive message to veterans who now serve their government in a civil capacity. Thank you.



New York State Council of Veterans Organizations

MEMO OF SUPPORT

\$1.1 Million for NYSDA Veterans Defense Program

In FY 2016-2017 State Budget

The New York State Council of Veterans Organizations strongly supports the inclusion of \$1.1 million in the FY 2016-2017 State Budget for the NYS Defenders Association's Veterans Defense Program.

The New York State Council of Veterans Organizations represents 31 veteran organizations in New York State. We value the important work of the Veterans Defense Program (VDP) which is critical to veterans and service members who find themselves with a family court or criminal court legal matter. The VDP legal professionals are providing essential services to public defense lawyers representing veterans. We urge the State Legislature and Governor to help the most vulnerable of our veterans by supporting the work of the VDP so that more veterans, especially those harmed in the service of their country with PTSD or TBI, can be helped through their own individual nightmare if they find themselves in the criminal or family court system. Since its launch, the VDP lawyers have helped nearly 1,000 veterans and public defense attorneys representing veterans. The VDP's assistance provides a second chance for veterans who have lost their way and facilitates a treatment-oriented approach. The VDP has saved veterans from incarceration, providing them with treatment leading to family restoration and reintegration into society. Justice-involved veterans need the VDP. **The VDP is truly *defending those who defended America*. The inclusion of \$1.1 million in the FY 2016-17 Budget will enable the VDP to open a New York City office to better serve NYC and Long Island veterans, and to expand its overburdened Western NY Batavia office.**

Member Organizations of the New York State Council of Veterans Organizations

American Merchant Marine Veterans
American Military Retirees Association
American Ex-Prisoners of War
Atomic Veterans Association
AMVETS
Black Veterans for Social Justice
Blinded Veterans Association
Catholic War Veterans
Combat Infantrymen's Association
Council 82 AFSCME AFL-CIO Vets. Com.
CSEA Veterans
Disabled American Veterans
Eastern Paralyzed Veterans Association
Fleet Reserves Association
Jewish War Veterans
Korean War Veterans

Marine Corps League
Military Order of the Purple Heart
Non-Commissioned Officers Assoc.
NYS Co. Vets. Service Officers Assoc.
PEF Veterans Committee
Sampson Navy WWII Veterans
The Retired Enlisted Association
Tri-County Council Vietnam Veterans
Veterans of Foreign Wars
Veterans of Overseas Serv. of America
Women Veterans of America
369th Veterans Association
6924 Heritage Association
United Service & Veterans Action Co.
UFT Veterans Committee
Veterans for Peace