

New York State Department of Veterans' Services

2024 Joint Budget Hearing

January 31, 2024

Viviana DeCohen, Commissioner

Good morning, Chair Krueger and esteemed members of the Senate and Assembly. I am Viviana DeCohen, Commissioner of the New York State Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) and proud Veteran of the United States Marine Corps, and I'm honored to provide testimony on Governor Hochul's 2024-2025 Executive Budget.

Under Governor Hochul's leadership, and with the support of the Assembly and Senate, DVS has continued to deliver on behalf of New York's Veterans and their families. Throughout Governor Hochul's administration, DVS has made it a priority to expand our agency's reach and visibility within the community, and to bring more Veterans into contact with the state and federal benefits they earned through their military service. This has included significant success improving our connections with Veterans as they complete their term of service and transition back to civilian life. It has also included the establishment of a network of digital kiosks around the state to provide Veterans with information about important services available to them through DVS. We are also continuing to work toward launching a network of Mobile Veterans Centers, which will boost these efforts even more. In addition to all this, DVS has cultivated relationships with public and private partners at every level, giving rise to successful initiatives to connect Veterans and their families with everything from essential needs to events and opportunities for community members to show their appreciation to our Veterans.

This record of progress continued in 2023, and our accomplishments over the past year are a testament to our commitment to holistic care for and empowerment of New York's Veterans and their families.

Over the past year, DVS began operating New York's first State Veterans Cemetery, launched a new Veterans Memorial Registry website, awarded millions of dollars in capital grants to nonprofit Veterans organizations around the state, and established and built on partnerships with non-governmental partners like the Bombas sock company and Carnegie Hall.

In 2023, DVS also continued to provide nourishing meals to Veterans and Service Members facing food insecurity in collaboration with Hello Fresh and community-based partners. We have now helped deliver nearly 1.5 million fresh meals since the program began. Over the past year our Veterans Benefits Advisors also helped distribute \$200,000 in FreshConnect Checks around New York State, helping put more fresh food on the table in Veteran households.

On top of all this, our Veterans Benefits Advising Program secured a remarkable \$68.47 million in monthly, recurring federal VA benefits payments through 35,034 filed claims in 2023. This substantial tax-free federal financial support directly impacts and improves the lives of Veterans and Military Families, ensuring they receive the benefits they rightfully deserve for their military service. Governor Hochul's Executive Budget proposal includes \$1.25 million in appropriations that will help DVS hire more staff, allowing us to assist more Veterans with more claims and, ultimately, put even more tax-free federal dollars in the pockets of New York's Veterans and their families.

DVS remains steadfast in developing responsive strategies amid changing demographics and societal shifts. We are delivering on our mission to "find and serve" Veterans where they work and live, as demonstrated by the more than 500 outreach events in which DVS staff participated across New York State in 2023.

DVS, in collaboration with the New York State Office of Mental Health (OMH), the State University of New York (SUNY), and the New York State Dwyer Coalition, has also continued its efforts with a working group dedicated to enhancing the effectiveness of the Joseph P. Dwyer Program. This collaborative effort has resulted in the development and release of a comprehensive set of tools to support both new and existing Dwyer Program chapters in fulfilling their mission.

Over the past year, we also provided training and accreditation to Veterans Service Officers in every county of New York State and hosted the largest National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA) conference in recent history. This underscores our commitment not only across the state but also across our nation to ensure the highest-quality services for those we serve.

Our collaborations with external partners have also furthered our commitment to addressing fundamental needs. For example, through a collaborative effort with Bombas, we distributed 15,000 pairs of socks to Veterans facing housing insecurity. Bombas has already pledged 5,000 more pairs, allowing us to reinforce our dedication to ongoing support while emphasizing the importance of holistic care for New York's Veterans.

In response to the unique challenges faced by Veterans, we also continued our work with vital mental health resources such as 'Worried About A Veteran,' a first-

in-the-nation program aimed at preventing suicide among Service Members and Veterans by empowering family members with tools and resources to intervene early. This initiative reflects our commitment to addressing mental health as a critical component of overall well-being.

Governor Hochul's 2024 State of the State initiatives and FY2024-2025 Executive Budget actions reinforce her administration's dedication to advancing Veterans' well-being:

- One proposal involves collaboration with various partners on the development of a comprehensive medical 'pocket card' for healthcare providers. This is crucial, given findings from the New York Health Foundation revealing that fewer than 3% of New York's medical providers had adequate Veteran or military cultural competency. The card aims to equip medical professionals with essential information, enriching the quality of care for New York's Veterans.
- Additionally, we acknowledge the importance of representing the vast diversity of those who serve. This impetus behind the Governor's initiative to establish New York's Women's Veterans History Trail, spearheaded by DVS, honors the exceptional legacy of over 62,000 women Veterans in the state, aiming to document and celebrate their extraordinary contributions to military service throughout New York's rich history and ensuring that their barrier-shattering service continues to inspire future generations of New Yorkers.

- Lastly, we remain committed to ensuring that the unique needs of the Veterans we serve are met. To this end, under the Governor's initiative DVS is collaborating with partner agencies and organizations to develop specialized mental health support tailored explicitly for women Veterans focusing on combating alarming suicide rates. This pioneering toolkit and training program represent a crucial lifeline for women Veterans across New York, highlighting our commitment to their mental health and overall welfare.

As Commissioner of the New York State Department of Veterans' Services, I am proud to share the transformative journey we have undertaken under Governor Hochul's leadership. The actions taken by the Governor and DVS signify a resolute commitment to prioritizing Veterans' needs, and our 2023 accomplishments highlight the tangible impacts of this dedication. With nourishing meals, benefits advising, mental health resources, strategic partnerships, and more, we have truly laid a foundation of comprehensive care.

Governor Hochul's 2024 State of the State and Executive Budget proposals will allow us to continue our important mission. As we navigate challenges and pursue innovation, we remain dedicated to "finding and serving" Veterans wherever they are, ensuring New York's Veterans and their families receive the highest quality benefits, programs, services, and resources. Your continued support is invaluable. Together, we will continue to champion the well-being of our esteemed Veteran community.

I look forward to answering any questions you may have. Thank you.