



## Division of Veterans' Services

### **New York State Division of Veterans' Services 2023 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 2023-2024 Executive Budget as it relates to New York State Veterans' Services.

Governor Hochul has made clear in her administration and in her budget, the importance of Veterans, Service members and their families here in our great State. As we approach our agency's transition from a division to a department, the Governor's expansion and improvements in the Veterans' Services realm have been outstanding, and DVS stands ready to continue providing the highest-quality services for New York's Veterans, Service members, and their families.

Under Governor Hochul's administration, New York continues to be a state where Veterans and their families are proud to call home thanks to the continued investment into Veterans and their families. These investments can be seen through new programs, staffing, and additional funds for peer-to-peer support programs such as the Joseph P. Dwyer program. DVS has increased its economic impact, which directly benefits the lives of New Yorkers throughout each and every community. Through these increases, DVS assisted Veteran families in bringing in over \$900 million in tax-free federal dollars in 2022. This is in addition to the \$400 million dollars brought into New York with over 23,000 Veterans utilizing educational opportunities. These funds filter their way into every community across New York State to support the over 688,000 Veterans of New



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York. 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.

We know that we could not produce such outstanding results alone. 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. No one is an island unto themselves, and we know that without all of you and our incredible partners, the work we do would not be possible. Our work addressing food insecurity, increasing access through digital technologies and transportation, and educating providers on veteran and military competency is only possible through our continued partnership.

Food insecurity has been repeatedly cited as a concern for military-connected families. One in nine working-age Veterans lives in food-insecure households nationally. We know this is unacceptable and in New York State we're doing something about it – we're very proud that in 2022 the millionth meal was distributed to New York's Veterans, Service members and their families through a partnership between the New York State Division of Veterans' Services and HelloFresh, which will continue into 2023. This builds on the successful Nourish New York initiative, a multi-agency effort to reduce food insecurity and support food producers. Additionally, Governor Hochul has committed to doubling the funds committed to the FreshConnect checks program which allows Veterans, Service members, and their families to receive food vouchers to use at farmers' markets and stands across the State.

DVS continues to create and provide additional points of access for Veterans and their families to learn about the benefits they earned through their military service. One of the most common issues we hear when talking about bringing Veterans into contact with their benefits is transportation and isolation. We want to pursue innovative solutions to address that. In her Executive Budget, Governor Hochul is supporting an initiative to help DVS find and serve Veterans in their communities through the



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dedication of \$300,000 for the purchase of vehicles that will form our first-ever fleet of Mobile Veterans Service Centers. This initiative will allow us to reach those with some of the highest needs and the largest barriers to access by eliminating transportation concerns. These mobile centers which will bring the Division's accredited Veterans Benefits Advisors and their best-in-class technologies on the road to meet New York's Veterans, service members, and military families where they work, live, and thrive.

Lastly, DVS understands the immense burden that finding quality, affordable housing can pose to a Veteran and their family. This is why Governor Hochul's administration is taking a two-fold approach to this with the required military and veteran cultural competency trainings for supportive-housing providers that receive State funds for veteran-designated housing units and a \$1.1 million dollar investment to create the Homeless Veterans' Housing program which will be used for emergency housing, providing temporary shelter, repair to homes damaged by disasters, and renovating homes to house Veterans with disabilities. This creates a holistic and comprehensive approach to address the unique needs Veterans, Service members and their families face with housing.

Governor Hochul's State of the State agenda and Executive Budget provides DVS with the resources to build upon these successes and deliver more support than ever to New York's Veterans and their families. 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.