



Counties Provide Vital Veteran Services

New York State's county governments, through their Veterans' Service Agencies, are a vital resource to the 676,000 veterans living in our state. By working in partnership with the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs, County Veterans' Service Agencies ensure our veterans have access to the Federal benefits and services they've earned, including compensation for disabilities, life insurance, health care, home loan support, access to records, and local tax exemptions. Local Veterans' Service Agencies also assist with transportation to VA medical centers, in-home visits for housebound individuals, connecting veterans with peer support programs.

To help raise awareness of the local resources available to veterans, counties partnered with Governor Kathy Hochul and the State of New York last year to launch Operation Green Light. As part of that initiative, counties successfully advocated for an increase in funding for Veterans' Service Agencies and for increased support to peer services, securing an increase in the minimum annual State funding to Veterans' Service Agencies from \$10,000 to \$25,000, as well as \$7.7 million to expand the Joseph P. Dwyer Peer-to-Peer Veterans' Support Program statewide in the SFY 23 Budget. This funding represents a significant step forward in strengthening peer support and counseling services to veterans who are transitioning from military service to civilian life.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While we applaud the state for making these investments last year, more needs to be done to create long-term sustainability in veteran programming, including the following.

- Increase state funding to county veterans' service agencies to a minimum of \$50,000. This small increase will help counties hire a part-time veteran service officer to assist in processing benefit claims, link veterans to peer support services, and develop robust Dwyer programs. This would result in approximately \$1,550,000 in additional state resources for county veterans' service agencies.
- Increase the base aid for Joseph P. Dwyer grants to \$185,000 per county. Right now, Dwyer funds are not allocated equally across the state. Increasing the grant to \$185,000 per county would level that playing field. This would result in approximately \$3,585,000 in additional state resources for the Dwyer program.
- Expand the definition of "veteran" to recognize the service of Reserve or National Guard service members who have completed 20 years of service. Those individuals should be treated as veterans and receive access to the same services as those currently designated as a veteran under state law.
- Create a veteran green energy jobs program to train and link veterans with sustainable, environmentally friendly jobs to meet the goals of the CLCPA. The NYS DOL, SUNY and DVS should partner to create the guidelines and program requirements for a new veteran green energy workforce development program.

