NYSAC
NEW YORK STATE
ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

The County Perspective on

The Effectiveness of Programs to Assist Disabled Veterans

Testimony submitted by the

New York State Association of Counties (NYSAC)

to the

Assembly Standing Committee on Veterans' Affairs
&
Assembly Standing Committee on Local Governments
&
Assembly Subcommittee on Women Veterans

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Hearing Room C
Legislative Office Building
Albany, NY

Chair Stern, Chair Solages, Chair Hunter, and Members of the Assembly Standing Committee on Veterans' Affairs, the Assembly Standing Committee on Local Governments, and the Assembly Subcommittee on Women Veterans:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the effectiveness of programs that assist disabled veterans. The New York State Association of Counties (NYSAC) represents all 62 counties in New York State, including the City of New York. County veterans' service agencies are often where a veteran first learns that a program exists and gets help applying for it, so counties see firsthand where the State's programs are working and where veterans have trouble reaching them. Our testimony draws on that experience and on the early work of NYSAC's Presidential Task Force on Veterans Services and Support.

First, let me stress our main point: the State's programs for disabled veterans are most effective when veterans have a trusted place to turn in their own community, and when the services around them are adequately funded and well-coordinated.

With that in mind, NYSAC respectfully asks the Legislature to support an additional $15 million for the Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program, invest directly in county veterans' service agencies, protect veterans' access to SNAP benefits, fund a rural veterans' transportation pilot, and allow fire districts and other independent special districts to offer the property tax exemption for veterans who are permanently and totally disabled. We also offer recommendations to help more disabled veterans learn about the programs and services already available to them, and to count New York's veterans more accurately.

Benefits Are Federal, but Access Is Local

New York is home to one of the largest veteran populations in the nation, and, as discussed below, official counts likely understate it. The Committees' hearing notice cites U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) data showing that more than 130,000 New York veterans receive disability benefits and Census Bureau statistics showing that the share of veterans nationwide with a service-connected disability rose from 15 percent in 2008 to 30 percent in 2022. A veteran with a service-connected disability may be eligible for federal compensation, VA health care, a property tax exemption, home accessibility assistance, peer support, and employment services, each with its own rules and application process. Many veterans need help to find these programs and apply for them.

State law requires each county outside New York City to maintain a veterans' service agency (Veterans' Services Law § 14). These agencies help veterans and their families apply for benefits, obtain military records, prepare compensation and pension claims and appeals, and connect with health care, mental health, housing, transportation, employment, and education resources, all at no charge. Depending on local needs, they also provide transportation to VA medical centers, home visits for veterans who are housebound, and satellite office hours—services that matter most to veterans whose disabilities make travel difficult.

NYSAC's preliminary survey of county officials shows the pressures these agencies face. Respondents identified limited staffing and administrative capacity, transportation, and insufficient funding as their most significant barriers. Counties reported that additional funding and staff, followed by outreach, would do the most to improve service. The most common reasons veterans contact their offices include VA benefits, claims, and appeals, as well as health

care and mental health services. The survey did not ask specifically about veterans with disabilities, but these are the services at the center of what those veterans need.

Invest an Additional $15 Million in the Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program

NYSAC respectfully urges the Governor and the Legislature to include an additional $15 million for the Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program in the SFY 2028 State Budget. NYSAC joins veterans service organizations in making this request.

The Dwyer program, which began in 2012, connects veterans with one another through peer support, social activities, and community-based programming. For veterans living with service-connected disabilities, including mental health conditions and injuries that limit work or mobility, that connection can ease isolation and serve as a bridge to formal care. A fellow veteran can be the person who encourages someone to file a claim, keep a medical appointment, or contact the county veterans' service agency for the first time.

The SFY 2027 Enacted Budget provides approximately $8 million for the program, unchanged for the past three years, appropriated through the Office of Mental Health (OMH) and allocated county by county. An additional $15 million would allow counties and their community partners to expand programs that are working, reach veterans who are not yet engaged, including those who are homebound or live far from program sites, and design activities that respond to local needs.

The way this funding is distributed also matters. Dwyer allocations vary from county to county, and counties that joined the program before its statewide expansion generally receive more than those added later. A veteran's access to peer support should not depend on when their county joined the program. **NYSAC asks that every county outside of New York City receive the same Dwyer allocation each year.** The additional $15 million provides an opportunity to bring every county to that level without reducing any county's current allocation.

Better data would also help the State and counties see where the program is working. Counties report the number of veterans served through their Dwyer programs to the University at Albany School of Social Welfare, which supports the program's evaluation, but those results are currently shared only as statewide totals. **We ask the State to require the School of Social Welfare to publish county-by-county data on veterans served** so that counties, the State, and the Legislature can see how each program is reaching veterans and make informed decisions about future funding.

Invest Directly in County Veterans' Service Agencies

Separate from the Dwyer request, NYSAC asks the State to invest directly in county veterans' service agencies. The Legislature can create and expand programs for disabled veterans, but those programs depend on a local workforce that helps veterans find and use them.

Claims work is complex and time-consuming. A well-documented compensation claim or appeal often requires several meetings and extensive records, and a home visit to a veteran who cannot travel can take a staff member out of the office for much of a day. Each agency's ability to provide this help depends heavily on local resources, and Task Force members have described

offices that can support only limited or part-time staff. When staff are stretched thin, the most time-intensive services are the hardest to sustain: one-on-one claims assistance, home visits, and outreach to veterans who have never been in contact with the VA.

We ask the Legislature to provide dedicated, predictable State funding that reaches county veterans' service agencies directly to support staffing, training and accreditation, outreach, and case management tools, without new mandates that counties must absorb.

The State can also help bring federal resources to county agencies. Section 302 of the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act (P.L. 118-210), enacted in January 2025 and codified at 38 U.S.C. § 6307, authorizes federal grants to States to improve outreach and claims assistance and requires grantees to carry out that work through county veterans service officers where they exist. NYSAC and the National Association of Counties (NACo) are urging Congress to fully fund it. **We ask the State to join counties in urging New York's congressional delegation to fund Section 302 and to be ready to apply for these grants and direct them to county agencies as soon as funds are available.**

Protect Veterans' Access to SNAP and Hold Counties Harmless

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is an important support for veterans with low incomes, including many living with disabilities. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities estimates that about 56,000 New York veterans lived in households receiving SNAP between 2022 and 2024. H.R. 1, enacted in July 2025, eliminated the exemption from SNAP's time limit and work requirements that Congress had extended to veterans in 2023. Veterans whose disabilities limit their ability to work may still qualify for an exemption, but many will need help understanding the new rules and documenting their circumstances, and they are likely to turn to their county veterans' service agency or local department of social services for that help.

H.R. 1 also shifts significant SNAP costs to New York. As of October 1, 2026, the federal share of SNAP administrative costs fell from 50 percent to 25 percent. New York is one of only three states where counties pay the entire non-federal share of these costs, and NYSAC estimates the change will cost counties $168 million a year. Beginning in October 2027, New York will also be required to pay a share of SNAP benefit costs based on the statewide payment error rate, a penalty estimated at roughly $1.1 billion a year. These costs fall on the same county budgets that support veterans' service agencies and on the same local workforce that veterans rely on to apply for and keep their benefits.

NYSAC appreciates the State's partnership in advocating for a delay in both cost shifts. **We ask the Legislature to continue urging Congress to delay the administrative and benefit cost shifts and, if Congress does not act, to hold counties harmless from both.** On one point we must be clear: **counties cannot absorb the benefit cost shift under any circumstances.** A cost of this size cannot be borne by county property taxpayers without severe cuts to essential local services, including the veterans' services this testimony seeks to strengthen.

The State can also reduce its exposure, and improve service for veterans and other residents, by investing in technology that helps counties process cases accurately and respond to residents

promptly. **We ask the State to invest in county SNAP technology, including by directing a portion of the approximately $27 million already allocated to the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) for technology upgrades toward tools counties have already proven.** More than 20 county departments of social services now use an automated eligibility assistant that answers phone calls around the clock, handles routine intake tasks, and frees caseworkers for the income verification and case review that drive accuracy. Statewide access to income verification services and better tools for tracking periodic reports would address two of the most common sources of payment errors. For veterans, these investments mean calls that are answered rather than dropped, applications that are processed accurately, and fewer eligible veterans losing food assistance because of avoidable errors.

The State should also help veterans apply for SNAP where many of them already are. **We encourage the Legislature to support SUNY campuses, and community colleges in particular, in helping eligible veterans apply for SNAP.** Campuses should work in coordination with county departments of social services and veterans' service agencies to ensure no veteran goes without SNAP for lack of help applying.

Beyond SNAP, county veterans' service agencies help veterans buy fresh food through FreshConnect Checks, a partnership between the Department of Veterans' Services and the Department of Agriculture and Markets that provides checks veterans and their families can use at participating farmers' markets. In 2024, $225,000 in checks was distributed through 44 county and city veterans' service agencies. Counties report that checks are allocated primarily according to each county's veteran population, which does not reflect how many of those veterans are struggling to afford food. **NYSAC asks that FreshConnect allocations also account for county poverty rates** so that more checks reach the communities where veterans need them most.

Improve Transportation and Access to Care

For many disabled veterans, the main obstacle to care is getting there. VA medical centers and specialty clinics can be far from rural communities, public transportation may be limited, and veterans with mobility limitations may be unable to drive. Counties are responding where they can. Cattaraugus and Allegany counties, for example, have partnered on the Cattaraugus-Allegany Joint Veteran County Council Volunteer Van Service to provide transportation assistance to local veterans. Efforts like this rely on volunteers and limited local resources, however, and are not available everywhere.

NYSAC asks the Governor and the Legislature to fund a rural veterans' transportation pilot program, developed by the New York State Department of Transportation (NYSDOT) in partnership with the Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) and county governments. The pilot should build on successful county initiatives, coordinate existing providers, test flexible approaches, and evaluate results so that successful models can be expanded statewide. The State can also support the federal Rural Veterans Transportation to Care Act (S.784), which would extend VA transportation grants to rural areas and make county veterans service organizations eligible.

County officials also report that veterans find referrals to VA community care providers slow and confusing. Counties cannot change VA eligibility rules or scheduling, but county agencies can help veterans understand their options and follow through on referrals, and closer coordination among the VA, DVS, and county agencies would help veterans get care sooner.

Allow Special Districts to Offer the Disabled Veterans' Property Tax Exemption

Recent amendments to Real Property Tax Law § 458-a(11) allow counties, cities, towns, villages, and school districts to adopt a full property tax exemption for the primary residence of veterans whom the VA considers permanently and totally disabled as a result of military service, provided they meet the statute's other requirements. Several counties have already passed local laws to adopt it. The statute does not, however, expressly authorize independent special districts, such as fire districts, to adopt the exemption. Because special districts levy their own taxes, an eligible veteran may continue to owe these taxes even where the county, town, and school district have all opted in.

NYSAC supports amending § 458-a(11) to expressly authorize independent special districts, including fire districts, to adopt the exemption. Any exemption shifts part of the tax burden to other property owners, and giving these districts the same local option as other taxing jurisdictions allows each to weigh that effect in light of its own circumstances.

Help Disabled Veterans Learn What Is Available

Even the best-designed program does little good if the veterans it was built for never learn about it. A July 2026 audit by the Office of the State Comptroller of the Access to Home for Heroes/Veterans Program, which helps low- and moderate-income veterans with disabilities pay for accessibility modifications and emergency repairs, found that about 31 percent of the $19.6 million allocated since 2015 had been spent and that 19 of 35 counties with large disabled veteran populations had no applicants. The Comptroller recommended improved outreach to veterans and local officials.

County veterans' service agencies are a natural channel for that outreach because they are already in contact with many of the veterans most likely to qualify. **We encourage the Legislature to ensure that State agencies administering programs for disabled veterans work with county veterans' service agencies as outreach and referral partners**, sharing program information, application materials, and points of contact.

Outreach also has to reach veterans who are least likely to seek help on their own. Counties have identified younger and recently separated veterans, aging veterans, and rural veterans as particularly hard to reach, and outreach should be designed to reach women veterans, as well. Counties are adapting: Greene County hosts a monthly Veterans Roundtable with local Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion posts to coordinate services and outreach, and Madison County brings veterans and families together through Veterans Outreach Breakfasts and other community events. Operation Green Light for Veterans, which NYSAC launched in 2021 and which has since grown nationally, gives counties an opportunity each November to highlight their veterans' service agencies and connect residents with available programs.

Count New York's Veterans Accurately

Decisions about where veterans' resources go should rest on an accurate count of veterans, and current estimates vary widely. The Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS) estimated that about 550,000 veterans lived in New York in 2024. The ACS counts only those who served on active duty, excluding National Guard and Reserve members whose service consisted only of training, and one household member often answers for everyone in the home.

The Department of Health's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, which asks adults directly whether they have ever served on active duty in the regular military or in a National Guard or reserve unit, estimated that about 968,500 New York adults were veterans in 2021.

County veterans service officers see the reasons for this gap every day. Many people who served do not think of themselves as veterans, whether because they served in the Guard or Reserves, served for a short time, or did not see combat. Questions that ask people directly about their service capture more of them. **NYSAC urges the State to use the Department of Health's survey-based estimates, rather than Census figures, when allocating veterans funding in the future.** The Department's expanded survey is designed to produce estimates for all 62 counties, and using it would help ensure that funding follows the veterans who actually live in each community.

Summary of Recommendations

NYSAC respectfully urges the Governor and the Legislature to:

1. Include an additional $15 million for the Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program in the SFY 2028 State Budget, fund every county at the same amount each year, and require that the University at Albany share county-by-county reporting of veterans served.
2. Provide dedicated, predictable State funding directly to county veterans' service agencies, without new unfunded mandates.
3. Urge Congress to fully fund Section 302 of the Elizabeth Dole Act and prepare to direct those grants to county agencies.
4. Urge Congress to delay the SNAP administrative and benefit cost shifts and, if Congress does not act, hold counties harmless from both.
5. Invest in technology that improves social service delivery and protects veterans' access to SNAP benefits.
6. Account for county poverty rates in allocating FreshConnect Checks for veterans.
7. Fund a rural veterans' transportation pilot developed by NYSDOT, DVS, and county governments, and support the federal Rural Veterans Transportation to Care Act (S.784).
8. Amend RPTL § 458-a(11) to expressly authorize independent special districts, including fire districts, to adopt the exemption.
9. Ensure that State agencies administering programs for disabled veterans work with county veterans' service agencies on outreach and referrals.
10. Use Department of Health survey-based estimates, rather than Census figures, when allocating veterans funding.

Conclusion

Counties share the Legislature's goal of making sure that every veteran with a disability, wherever they live, can find and use the benefits and services available to them. We appreciate the partnership of the Governor, the Legislature, DVS, our federal partners, and the veterans service organizations and community providers who serve veterans every day.

NYSAC thanks Chairs Stern, Solages, and Hunter and the members of the Committees and Subcommittee for the opportunity to submit this testimony, and we look forward to working with you to turn these recommendations into practical improvements for New York's veterans and their families.