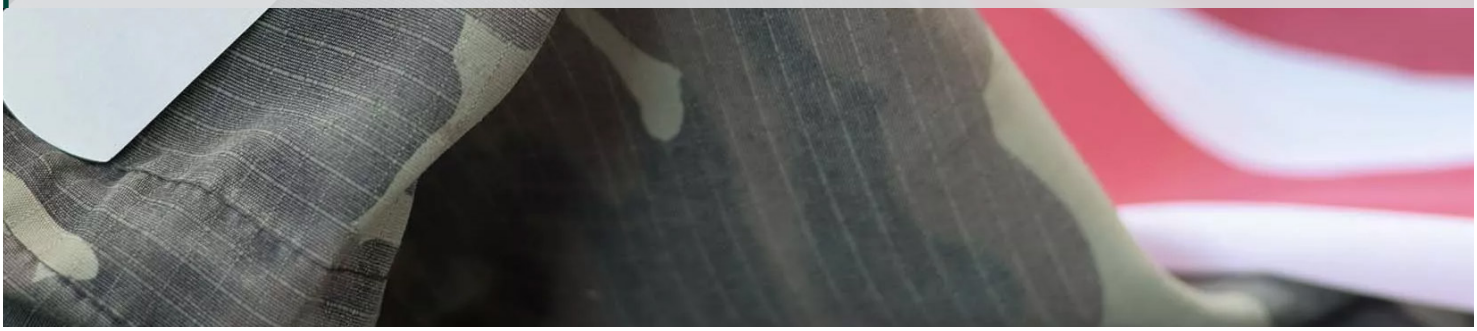
NYSAC
NEW YORK STATE
ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

Strengthening County Veterans Services in New York State

Preliminary Survey Findings and Policy Considerations

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Executive Summary

County veterans service agencies help veterans and their families navigate benefits, connect with health care and other essential services, and access support close to home. Their work often requires coordination across federal, state, county, and community partners, even as county offices face staffing, funding, and transportation challenges.

In 2026, the New York State Association of Counties (NYSAC) established the Presidential Task Force on Veterans Services and Support at the direction of NYSAC President Dr. Kevin Watkins. The Task Force is examining county-level needs, identifying successful local approaches, and developing recommendations to strengthen services for veterans and their families. An initial survey of county officials offers an early picture of the priorities that should inform this work.

The message emerging from the survey is consistent: counties are doing important work with limited resources. A stronger state-county partnership, improved access to services, and greater flexibility to respond to local needs will be central to the Task Force's ongoing work.

The County Role in Veterans Services



History

The history of veterans receiving service-related benefits in the United States extends back to the birth of our nation. In the 1790s, the War Department created a small office to administer pensions awarded to veterans of the Revolutionary War. Years later, in 1849, the Pension Bureau was created as an extension of the Department of Interior, overseeing disbursements of military pensions, and would remain in the Department of Interior until 1930.

County Veterans Service Offices (CVSOs) are a much newer entity within Veteran Services and now serve as a keystone resource within the field. Modern CVSOs began in Minnesota at the very end of World War II, with the Minnesota State Legislature passing a bill in March 1945 that allowed each county to appoint one or more veterans to become County Veterans Service Officers. New York State followed suit, passing similar legislation that same year.

In the ensuing months, millions of Americans returned home from Europe and the Pacific Theatre, requiring assistance with the benefits they were promised. These original CVSOs created the framework and standardized procedures for CVSOs to blossom around the country.

County Veteran Services Today

Today, County Veterans Service Officers serve as trusted local points of contact for veterans and their families, helping individuals understand and apply for veterans' benefits, obtain military records, navigate compensation and pension claims, pursue education and employment opportunities, and connect with health care, housing, transportation, and other community resources. County agencies provide these services to veterans and their families at no charge.

Depending on local needs and resources, some county agencies also provide or coordinate transportation, home visits, outreach at satellite locations, assistance obtaining records, and connections to community programs.

The needs of veterans vary across New York. Aging veterans may need help accessing medical appointments or benefits, while recently separated service members may need assistance with employment or the transition to civilian life.

Geography also matters: transportation and the availability of specialized services can be significant barriers in rural communities.

County agencies are positioned to identify those needs and coordinate a local response.



What Counties Reported

Preliminary Survey Findings

To inform the work of the Presidential Task Force on Veterans Services and Support, NYSAC surveyed county officials about the services they provide, the challenges they face, and the state and federal changes that could make the greatest difference.

The findings highlight the breadth of services provided by county veterans service offices, the challenges they face in meeting growing and evolving needs, and opportunities to strengthen their capacity through additional resources, partnerships, and policy reforms.

Service Demand and Outreach

County Veterans Service Offices serve as a critical point of contact for veterans and their families seeking benefits, assistance, and connections to essential services. Survey responses illustrate the substantial number of individuals who rely on these offices each year: 37% of respondents reported serving more than 2,500 veterans and family members in the past 12 months, and another 26% reported serving between 1,000 and 2,499 veterans and family members.

Respondents identified younger and recently separated veterans as particularly difficult to reach, as well as aging veterans and those living in rural areas. This points to a need for outreach strategies that reflect local demographics, geography, and how different generations seek information about available benefits and services.

Some CVSOs provide additional services unique to the needs of their areas, including:

- transportation service to VA Medical Centers
- in-home visits to assist the housebound with claims for entitlements
- satellite offices for the convenience of their constituents
- assistance and training for veterans' organizations
- information to community service organizations
- local veterans' cemetery programs
- notary service
- assistance in obtaining legal documents (marriage, birth, military, etc.)
- cooperative programs with other agencies (employment, welfare, etc.)
- assistance with community affairs (memorial services, job fairs, etc.)

Veterans turn to county veterans service offices for assistance navigating a wide range of benefits, programs, and services. The most commonly reported reasons for contacting a CVSO included:

- VA benefits, claims, and appeals;
- Healthcare and mental health services; and
- Survivor and dependent benefits.

Staffing, Funding, and Access



While county offices play an essential role in connecting veterans to these services, respondents identified several significant barriers to meeting the needs of the populations they serve. The most frequently identified operational challenges were limited staffing and administrative capacity, transportation barriers, and insufficient funding.

When asked what additional resources would most improve their ability to serve veterans, respondents overwhelmingly identified additional funding and staff, followed by greater support for outreach and public awareness. These findings suggest that strengthening county veterans' services will require not only adequate financial resources and staffing but also strategies to improve accessibility and awareness of available services.

Employment and Transition to Civilian Life

Transitioning from military service to civilian employment can present unique challenges for veterans. These may include difficulty translating military experience into civilian qualifications, misconceptions among employers, automated resume screening processes, and limited workplace accommodations or specialized employment services for veterans with disabilities.

County veterans service offices help bridge this gap by connecting veterans with employment resources and opportunities in their communities. Survey respondents identified three common approaches:

- **Workforce referrals:** Connecting veterans with local workforce development agencies and the New York State Department of Labor.
- **County coordination:** Working with county human resources departments to identify employment opportunities.
- **Employer partnerships:** Building relationships with local businesses and employers to connect veterans with available positions.

These connections can help veterans access training, job-search assistance, and employment opportunities without requiring CVSOs to duplicate the services of specialized workforce programs.

Local Initiatives and Partnerships

NYSAC's survey also asked respondents to identify county programs, partnerships, or initiatives that have been particularly successful in supporting or recognizing veterans. Responses reflected the diversity of local approaches to veterans' services, with counties developing programs and partnerships tailored to the needs of their communities.

Counties are responding to the diverse needs of veterans and their families through initiatives that include:

- Peer support and mental health: Local chapters of the Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program provide opportunities for veterans to connect with peers and access support.
- **Cross-agency collaboration:** Partnerships between county veterans service agencies, county human services departments, and community organizations to avoid duplication and extend the reach of limited resources.
- **Transportation assistance:** County-supported van, shuttle, and other transportation programs help veterans access appointments and essential services.
- **Food and nutritional assistance:** Programs such as FreshConnect Checks for Veterans help eligible veterans access fresh, locally grown food.

Counties also shared examples of local initiatives that are making a difference for veterans and their families:

- **Greene County** hosts a monthly Veterans Roundtable and partners with local Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and American Legion posts to strengthen coordination and community outreach.
- **Madison County** brings veterans and their families together through events such as Veterans Outreach Breakfasts, an annual Veterans Family BBQ at Delphi Falls, and a Veterans Awareness Hike.
- **Dutchess County** supports veterans transitioning to civilian employment through a grant program that helps them obtain professional credentials, including commercial driver's licenses.
- **Cattaraugus and Allegany Counties** have partnered to address transportation barriers through the Cattaraugus-Allegany Joint Veteran County Council Volunteer Van Service, which provides transportation assistance to local veterans.

These initiatives demonstrate how counties are developing creative, community-based approaches to meet veterans' needs and offer examples that other communities can learn from and build upon.

Issue Areas Identified for Further Work

Survey respondents identified three leading areas for the Presidential Task Force to address:

1. **Strengthening funding and resources** for county veterans service offices to ensure they have the capacity to meet the needs of veterans and their families.
2. **Addressing housing, healthcare, and mental health needs** to improve veterans' access to essential services and support.
3. **Advocating for state and federal policy changes** that strengthen county veterans services and remove barriers to effective service delivery.

Taken together, these priorities highlight opportunities for state and federal policymakers to build on the work counties are already doing and ensure that veterans and their families can access the services, resources, and support they have earned.

NYSAC Priorities

The survey findings underscore the need for stronger state and federal partnerships to ensure that county veterans' service agencies have the resources and flexibility to meet the evolving needs of veterans and their families. Building on the work already underway across New York State, NYSAC has identified several priorities to strengthen local service delivery, address gaps in access, and support the counties and community partners serving our veterans.

Increase State Funding for the Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program

NYSAC supports a $15 million increase in state funding for the Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program, joining veterans service organizations in advocating for greater investment in this important initiative. The program connects veterans through peer support, social activities, and community-based services that help address isolation and promote mental health and well-being. Increased funding would allow counties and their community partners to expand existing programs, reach more veterans, and develop initiatives that respond to local needs.

Strengthen Direct Funding for County Veterans Service Agencies

County veterans' service agencies are responsible for helping veterans and their families navigate complex federal and state benefit systems, yet their ability to provide timely assistance depends heavily on local resources. NYSAC supports expanding state and federal funding opportunities that directly strengthen county staffing, training, outreach, and service delivery. At the federal level, Congress should fully fund Section 302 of the Senator Elizabeth Dole 21st Century Veterans Healthcare and Benefits Improvement Act, which authorizes competitive grants to states to support county veterans service officers and similar local entities. Ensuring these resources reach county agencies would help strengthen the local infrastructure that connects veterans with the benefits and services they have earned.

Expand Local Options for Veterans' Property Tax Relief

Recent amendments to Real Property Tax Law § 458-a(11) authorize counties, cities, towns, villages, and school districts to provide a full property tax exemption for the primary residences of eligible veterans who are permanently and totally disabled as a result of military service. NYSAC supports amending the law to expressly authorize independent special districts, including fire districts, to adopt the exemption. Providing these districts with the same local option would allow communities to extend property tax relief to eligible veterans while preserving local decision-making authority.

Expand Federal Transportation Assistance for Rural Veterans

Transportation remains a significant barrier for veterans in rural communities, where access to public transportation and nearby VA facilities may be limited. NYSAC supports passage of the federal Rural Veterans Transportation to Care Act (S.784), which would expand eligibility for federal transportation grants to include county veterans service

organizations and veterans in additional rural communities. The legislation would help counties and their partners develop transportation options that better connect veterans with medical appointments and other essential health care services.

Fund a State Transportation Pilot Program for Rural Veterans

NYSAC calls on the Governor and State Legislature to provide funding for a rural veterans' transportation pilot program, to be developed by the New York State Department of Transportation in partnership with the Department of Veterans' Services and county governments. The program could build on successful county initiatives, support coordination among existing transportation providers, and explore flexible approaches to connecting veterans with medical appointments, benefits assistance, and other essential services. Dedicated state funding would allow participating counties to test innovative transportation solutions, evaluate their effectiveness, and identify successful models that could be expanded to other communities across New York State.

Recognizing Veterans Through Operation Green Light

As counties work to strengthen the services available to veterans and their families, they are also leading efforts to ensure that those who have served our country feel recognized, appreciated, and supported in their communities.



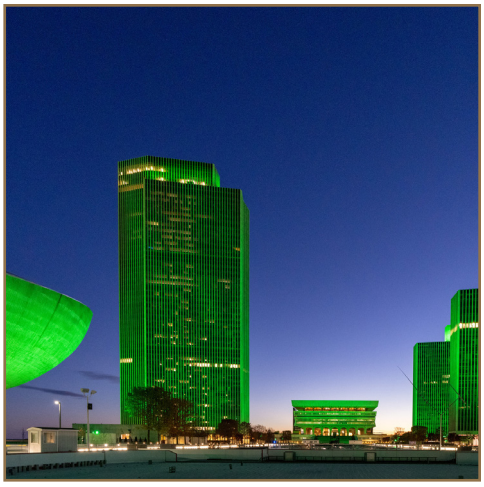
In 2021, NYSAC joined with county government and veterans service partners to launch Operation Green Light for Veterans, an initiative encouraging governments, businesses, and residents to illuminate buildings and homes green in recognition of veterans and their service. What began in New York has since grown into a nationwide campaign through NYSAC's partnership with the National Association of Counties (NACo), with hundreds of counties across the country participating each year.

Now in its sixth year, Operation Green Light continues to bring communities together around a shared commitment to veterans. From November 4 through Veterans Day on November 11, NYSAC and NACo are encouraging counties across New York and the nation to illuminate public buildings and landmarks green as a visible expression of gratitude and support.



But Operation Green Light is about more than illuminating buildings. The campaign also raises awareness of the important role counties play in supporting veterans and the resources available to help them navigate civilian life. It provides an opportunity for local governments to highlight their veterans service agencies, connect residents with available programs, and encourage community members to learn more about the challenges veterans face.

The continued growth of Operation Green Light reflects the collective commitment of county governments to those who have served. By pairing this visible expression of appreciation with stronger services, meaningful partnerships, and sustained advocacy, counties can help ensure that support for veterans extends well beyond Veterans Day.



Conclusion

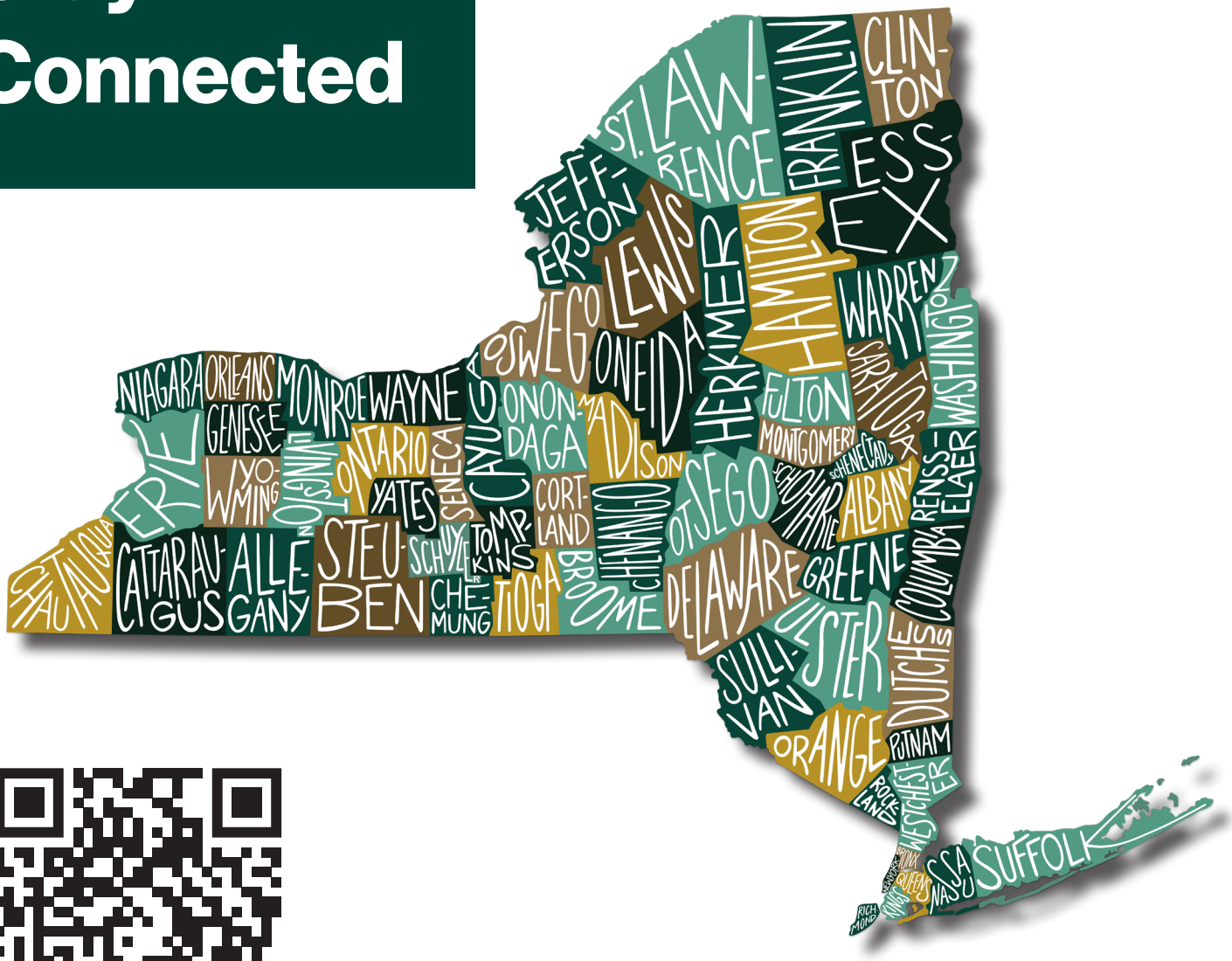
New York's counties play an essential role in connecting veterans and their families with the benefits, services, and opportunities they have earned. NYSAC's preliminary survey findings demonstrate both the breadth of this work and the challenges county veterans service agencies face in meeting the needs of their communities.



Strengthening this system will require continued collaboration among county governments, state and federal policymakers, veterans service organizations, and community partners. Investments in local service capacity, expanded transportation assistance, and policies that give counties greater flexibility to respond to local needs can make a meaningful difference in the lives of veterans and their families.

As NYSAC's Presidential Task Force on Veterans Services and Support continues its work, these findings provide a foundation for identifying practical solutions and advancing policies that strengthen the support available to veterans across New York State. Our shared responsibility is to ensure that every veteran, regardless of where they live, can access the care, benefits, and assistance they have earned through their service.

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