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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **COMPTROLLER MYCHAJLIW PROPOSES PROTECTIONS FOR MILITARY FAMILIES & VETERANS**

*Comptroller asks Charter Revision Commission to strengthen commitment to protecting military families and the county's more than 62,000 veterans*

(Buffalo, New York) –Erie County Comptroller Stefan I. Mychajliw will present recommendations to the Erie County Charter Revision Commission that will strengthen services the county offers to veterans and active duty military service personnel.

Comptroller Mychajliw's top two reforms will lengthen and increase pay for county employees that serve our nation here at home and abroad. This offers financial stability to active duty service members and their families. Another charter change Comptroller Mychajliw will propose is to remove politics from the process of choosing the Director of Veterans Services. This allows veterans to continue to receive benefits and services if a new County Executive replaces the existing Director.

"The county charter is only reviewed every ten years. Over the last decade it has become apparent that it has failed veterans and county employees that bravely defended America. We need to fix that. The men and women that wear the uniform of our great nation deserve better," said Mychajliw.

"I will propose a charter change that extends the pay of county employees who are deployed in military service to our country for the duration of their deployment. Families left behind should not have to worry about paying the bills. Loved ones of those serving our nation and our allies struggle with enormous stress. The last thing they should have to worry about is whether or not they can afford to eat and live," added Mychajliw.

Currently, Erie County's policy only offers service members 30 days (176 hours) of full, paid leave. After the 30 days are exhausted employees are required to use their vacation and personal time to maintain their rate of pay. To soften this hardship, the Legislature approved a resolution in 2002 that allowed the Department of Personnel to adjust the employee's county pay to provide them the difference between their county and service pay.

In order to take advantage of this, an employee must submit their monthly armed services pay check to the county, and they will be reimbursed the difference in lost pay in a subsequent pay period. Comptroller Mychajliw wants to eliminate this bureaucratic red tape and pay employees that serve what they deserve. This would maintain full time, budgeted pay for county employees while they are deployed in service to our country.

"Forcing our veterans to jump through bureaucratic hoops to maintain pay and burn through their vacation and personal time is insulting. Military service members get paid monthly. For Erie County to put a burden on them to submit pay stubs only to wait another two weeks to get their full pay back is absurd," said Comptroller Mychajliw.

Comptroller Mychajliw proposes and will strongly encourage that the county change its charter that deployment pay extends for the duration of the deployment, not just 30 days.

"Under my reform proposal, families left behind will not have to worry if their next paycheck will come on time, let alone cover their expenses. Our veterans already leave their families and put their lives on the line in service to us and our freedoms. Now the county politicians and bureaucrats repay them with hurtful concerns of how they will take care of their family financially while they are gone. It is wrong and must change," said Comptroller Mychajliw.

Comptroller Mychajliw was joined by Dr. Patrick Welch, a retired member of the United States Marine Corps, a Senior Mentor in the Buffalo Veterans Treatment Court and a former Erie County Director of Veterans Services. "Making this charter change would protect the county employees who volunteer to serve our nation and their families from possible financial ruin. Over the many years of the current wars there have been cases of reserve and guard personnel losing their homes because of lower wages while in the military. With many dual income families today, deployment of a spouse means in many cases the remaining spouse must leave work to care for their children. No one who serves this nation should ever have to worry about losing their home or providing for their family while they are away," said Dr. Welch.

The Comptroller will also propose that the Commission amend the charter as it relates to the appointment of the Office of Veterans Services Director. Comptroller Mychajliw wants to include a transition period between administrations and guarantee a five-year term to the appointed Veteran's Service Officer, similar to the longer terms of Social Services and Personnel Commissioners. A new five-year term will exceed the current four-year term of the County Executive that appoints them.

"This reform will protect veterans and guarantee the continuation of their critically important and ongoing claims that the Veterans Service Agency Director manages. Under my initiative, services for veterans will not abruptly stop just because elected officials change," said Comptroller Mychajliw.

One of the primary functions of the Department of Veterans Affairs is to manage the individual cases of veterans before State and Federal Departments, as well as the local VA Hospital. In order to do so, the County Director needs to be a certified Veteran's Services Officer. Currently, the charter allows for the new director to obtain this certification while "on the job." Obtaining the certification takes at least six months and most of the classes don't commence until August.

"Right now when administrations change, our veterans may be left without a Veteran's Service Officer that can handle their claims for upwards of an entire year. That bureaucratic gap leaves the office almost useless and many of our veterans helpless. We have more than 62,000 veterans in Erie County. Our duty is to guarantee their needs are met long before petty politics gets in the way of the county's service to them," concluded Comptroller Mychajliw.

In addition to the term of office that will transcend administrations, the Comptroller also proposes giving the County Executive chartered authority to fund two directors in the office for a period of six months, giving an outgoing director the opportunity to train their successor and educate them on all of the pending cases already submitted by the office.

"This charter change would serve the veterans of Erie County very well and avoid potential lapses in filing of benefit claims. With each change of a County Administration there is a loss of coverage at the Veterans Office when a new appointee is nominated for the position of County Director. The problem with the current appointment process is that the County Director of Veteran's Services must be an Accredited Service Officer with the General Counsel of the Department of Veteran's Affairs, and often times a newly elected County Executive appoints someone without that necessary accreditation," said Dr. Welch. The average time it takes for a non-accredited appointee to earn the accreditation is a minimum of six months.

"I am in support of the Charter Change that makes the Director of Veteran Services a termed position of 5 years. This position needs the respect of consistency because it serves the people who have defended our freedoms; our veterans and their families. This position needs to be apolitical, as the very people it serves deserve to have representation uninterrupted by political shifts in the County. This action would help in that goal," said Marlene Roll, Commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) for New York State.

The Comptroller will formally submit these recommendations, and others, in writing to the Charter Revision Commission at their public meeting on Thursday, April 21, 2016. In order to become law, the Commission will recommend them to the Legislature who will have to approve them as part of a package that will go to the County Executive for approval. Ultimately, the approved recommendations for charter revisions will go before the voters as a referendum this fall.

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