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A RESOLUTION TO BE SUBMITTED
BY LEGISLATORS GRANT, MAZUR, MILLS, HOGUES, MARINELLI, LOUGHRAN, McCRACKEN, DIXON & LORIGO

RE: Facilitating Higher Utilization of Earned Federal Benefits by All Veterans

WHEREAS, the Erie County Office of Veteran's Affairs is mandated by New York State Executive Law, Section 357, to counsel and assist veterans and their dependents to ensure that they receive all the benefits available to them under federal, state and local laws; and

WHEREAS, this office in Erie County government serves as an advocate for veterans and their families, seeking to empower all veterans to take full advantage of the government benefits and programs established on their behalf; and

WHEREAS, these benefits and programs include, but are not limited to, the GI Bill that fully funds a college education for veterans who qualify, VA compensation and pension benefits, small business development assistance for entrepreneurs who are veterans, job training and placement and access to medical care provided by the Veterans Administration Medical Center; and

WHEREAS, federal agencies report that only 30% of veterans actually utilize their federal and state educational benefits; and

WHEREAS, high-quality medical care is another benefit earned by veterans through their service and sacrifice, and is not limited to physical health care, but also mental health care; and

WHEREAS, the month of June is known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Month and recognizing this medical diagnosis raises the awareness of our entire community, state and nation of the acute mental health, suicide prevention and substance abuse treatment and counseling needs of returning combat veterans; and

WHEREAS, according to data from official sources, 1.5 million veterans access treatment provided by the VA health care system by 21,000 mental health professionals, which averages out to about 72 veterans per mental health professional; and

WHEREAS, anecdotally, local human service agencies, academic institutions and other organizations that play a veterans' advocacy role have been advised by their clients that the actual caseloads may be as high as 100 per mental health professional – a full 25% above official reports; and

WHEREAS, it is fitting and proper for this legislative body, as the locally elected representatives of every veteran in our community, to ascertain the availability of mental health services from the VA system, to advocate for increased services and to provide a safety

net among mental health providers in the general community for veterans who may not be able to access services from the VA in a time frame that meets their urgent needs; and

WHEREAS, in order to clarify Erie County's supporting role in the provision of mental health treatment services for returning veterans, an on-going conversation should be established among federal, state and county stakeholders and the veterans they serve; and

WHEREAS, the Erie County Legislature is in the position to bring together veterans advocates, the Erie County departments and offices that serve veterans including and beyond the Office of Veteran's Affairs, New York State veterans' service officers and representatives from the VA to embark on this important dialogue; and

WHEREAS, forward progress in this community education and advocacy endeavor on behalf of our veterans can best be achieved by an ad hoc committee to air concerns and to work in a coordinated, collaborative manner to achieve the goal of empowering all of Erie County's veterans as they transition from their service to our nation to their integration into our community as a whole; and

WHEREAS, this inter-governmental and inter-agency cooperation, informed by the experiences of veterans, will facilitate optimal utilization of federal benefits by veterans and will enable service providers outside of the federal system to be better prepared while the federal system is expanding capacity to serve the growing population of returning veterans.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT

RESOLVED, that this Honorable Body convey its full support for an open dialogue among the government, academic and human service agencies that serve Erie County's veterans and their families; and be it further

RESOLVED, that this dialogue should take place regularly at the Erie County Legislature and be facilitated by the formation of an ad hoc committee on veterans empowerment comprised of both legislators, representatives of veterans service agencies and community volunteers; and be it further

RESOLVED, that certified copies of this resolution be conveyed to the Erie County Executive, the Director of the Erie County Office of Veteran's Affairs, the VA [Brian Stiller, Medical Center Director, VAMC – Buffalo, 3495 Bailey Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14215], the Director of the Buffalo Office of the NYS Division of Veterans Services, and all others deemed necessary and proper.

FISCAL IMPACT: None for resolution.