

*Streamlining Veterans' Services: Providing the Collective Compass for the
Returning Veteran and their Family*

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Today across New York State nearly 1,066,000 Veterans and their Families rely upon local, county, and state government to connect them to their earned benefits. In point of fact, New York is the fourth most populous state when it comes to its Veteran population, outpaced only by California, Texas and Florida. 734,000 are wartime Veterans and about 150,000 hail from the Gulf War (which includes Iraq and Afghanistan). With such a large number of Veterans and their Families, the need to deliver cohesive Veterans' services is more critical today than at any other point in modern history.

Connecting our Veterans and their Families to their earned benefits requires a team of "doers" from all levels of government across the state – in communities where Veterans live and work – to ensure they receive all their earned benefits. Through cooperation and teamwork among County Veterans Service Agencies, the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs and Veteran Service Organizations – all "doers" - we have the best opportunity to serve the greatest number of Veterans and their Families.

The New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs works very hard every day with its partners in County Veterans Service Agencies and Veteran Service Organizations to ensure our state's heroes receive all the benefits that they deserve for their service to this country. Our core mission - to provide quality

service and advocacy for New York State Veterans, Armed Forces members, their dependants and survivors – is receiving greater scrutiny today due to the demands placed by returning Veterans from OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM and OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM.

To better meet their needs, and to meet the needs of all Veterans and their Families, the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs has placed greater emphasis on working with its county and municipal partners to ensure that our Veterans and their Families get and stay connected to their benefits. We have embraced the philosophy that we all work best when we work together. And no where is that more evident than in our role in helping to train and educate newly-assigned County Veterans Service Agency Directors and Staff. Since Veterans' Day 2007, the Division has hosted numerous joint training and education seminars, in-person and via webinars, for Veteran Service Providers and Staffs. All are designed with a singular purpose: to streamline the flow of information and resources to better serve our Veterans and their Families across New York. Our role as the State's Veterans' resource center is evolving daily to the point where our County Veterans' Service Agency Directors seek and receive timely and relevant information to better serve Veterans and their Families.

Changes in federal law affecting veteran health care, disability and pension programs administered by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs come quickly this day and age to keep up with the needs of returning Veterans and their Families. As Director, I view it as the Division's mission to assist our counties with disseminating and operationalizing the information to ensure we get

it right locally to serve our Veterans and their Families. We are in the business of helping our counties make sense of it all by serving as the collective “compass” for the Veteran and Family; to serve as the means used to navigate the complex maze of benefits, programs and applications needed to secure earned benefits today.

In order to better assist Veterans across New York State, the Division maintains counseling offices in virtually every county, from Suffolk to Erie, and all points in between. Unfortunately, even with these offices across the state, we still do not reach all Veterans and their Families. For this reason, the Division has formed (and continues to form) positive relationships with county and municipal Veterans’ Service Agencies throughout New York State in an attempt to streamline the delivery of services. The approach is simple: where we can not have a State Veterans Services Counselor presence we will ensure the County Veterans Service Agency is armed and equipped with everything they need to help Veterans and their Families.

The Division is proud to work with Veterans’ organizations that contribute their time and effort to help our Veterans. In order to maintain a cooperative relationship with our county and municipal partners we will continue to offer any and all training in order to maintain this cooperative relationship.

In perhaps the most effective demonstration of cooperation between state and county governments, the Division of Veterans’ Affairs updated its website recently (www.veterans.state.ny.us) to include the contact information for all County Veterans Service Agencies. Today, as Veterans or their Family

Members visit the website for services and benefits they have the means to search for their “local Veterans’ counselor”. What they’ll find after entering their zip code is contact information for both county *and* state Veterans counselors nearest them. Our approach, as stated before, is that we all work best when we work together. We only want the Veteran in need of services to find their nearest resource, regardless of source of authority (County or State). While this may seem unusual to some, it’s absolutely essential to streamlining services for Veterans and their Families. As far as we’re concerned, both entities are equal; an alliance of full cooperation exists between our County Veterans Services Agencies and the New York State Division of Veterans’ Affairs. Our shared commitment to serve Veterans and their Families can only grow from the foundation being built through such cooperation.

Along with the Division’s county partners, we also have forged strong relationships with Veteran Service Organizations which include, but are not limited to, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, and Vietnam Veterans of America. Information is shared across the board between the groups, as each organization is an avenue of outreach to our Veterans and their Families. Veteran Service Organizations are one of the vital and efficient ways to inform Veterans of upcoming events, new benefits, or changes to existing benefits. Together, Veteran Service Organizations, County Veterans Services Agencies, and the New York State Division of Veterans’ Affairs are poised to work

cooperatively to provide the best services, programs and benefits for all New York Veterans and their Families.