

Testimony of Loree Sutton, M.D., Brigadier General, U.S. Army, Retired

Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Veterans' Affairs New

York City Council Committee on Veterans Oversight -

#### **Veterans Liaisons at City Agencies**

1:00 pm, Wednesday, April 29, 2015

Good afternoon, Chairman Ulrich and members of the City Council Committee on Veterans. My name is Loree Sutton, and it is my privilege to serve as Commissioner, Mayor's Office of Veterans' Affairs (MOVA.) Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this hearing concerning oversight of the veteran liaisons at City agencies.

To recap MOVA's mission, we provide services and connect veterans, active duty military and their families to the vast New York City, state, and federal programs, as well as public/private resources which are available throughout the city of New York. There are over 225,000 veterans who live in New York City, coupled with military families and over 20,000 retired veterans, bringing the population to over 500,000 who call New York home.

In addition to MOVA's role with respect to policy coordination, direct services, referrals, and community engagement, we are co-located with a dozen Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), including the American Legion; Veterans Are Still Warriors; Marine Corps League; Montford Marines Association; United War Veterans Council; Catholic Veterans; Haitian-American Veterans; Rakkasan Big Apple Chapter; Jewish War Veterans; Vietnam Veterans of America; VFW NYPD; and Southwestern Asian Veterans. Known as Veterans' Hall, this collaborative sharing of office resources, work space and meeting room facilities provides frequent interaction and fosters MOVA's ability to support these VSOs and the veterans they represent.

I commenced duties on September 1, 2014, when Mayor Bill de Blasio appointed me as Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Veterans' Affairs. I completed my initial assessment of MOVA, local community needs, and government and not for profit services and resources available throughout the city, in December of 2014.

During the assessment, MOVA engaged and visited over 250 city offices and agencies, veteran service organizations, veteran membership organizations, health care programs, educational institutions, and public / private organizations, on a tour of the five Boroughs.

Mayor de Blasio's vision, informed by my assessment, resulted in new strategic priorities.

The top tier includes:

End Veteran Homelessness – During his State of the City address in January, Mayor de Blasio promised to end veteran homelessness by the end of 2015 as part of the Mayors Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness. The city has placed 200 veterans in homes so far this year. Further, the city has established housing plans for 96 percent of the remaining veterans; thus, the best available housing options have been identified for approximately 950 veterans. MOVA serves as a member of the Continuum of Care Veterans Task Force and is working with City and community agencies to engage real estate developers and landlords as part of this strategy.

Mental/Behavioral Health for Vets – MOVA is partnering with Chirlane McCray, the First Lady of New York City, to incorporate veterans and their families as a component of her Mental Health Roadmap community-based strategy. Having hosted a recent 2-day 'sampler' tour of holistic programs supporting veterans and their families in NYC, MOVA is working with the First Lady's team, DOHMH and other City agencies to facilitate cultural transformation and implementation of a community-based public health approach.

City Employment/Recruitment Initiative – MOVA will soon begin helping agencies to adopt best practices in recruiting veterans for City career opportunities. Efforts will include adopting standard intake questions to help veterans and their family members identify themselves and apply for available career and other opportunities.

These strategic priorities are strengthened through collaborative City inter-agency partnerships, many of which have developed since last September. These partnerships include the Veteran Business Roadmap/Improving Contract Performance (SBS/MOCS); Thwarting Financial Predators (DCA); Behavioral Health Task Force (MOCJ/DOC); IDNYC Veteran Designator(MOIA); Ending Veteran Homelessness (DHS/ HRA/HPD/NYCHA); MOVA website improvements(TDC/DOITT); and Mental Health Community Roadmap (DOHMH.)

In conducting my assessment and while formulating MOVA's key policy and programmatic priorities, I have learned that the critical day-to-day role shared between veteran liaisons in their interactions with MOVA's team is impressive indeed. I am delighted to share how MOVA works in close collaboration and partnership with our agency liaisons during today's hearing.

The veteran liaisons at City agencies are an integral resource for MOVA, whose staff members draw upon liaison expertise and knowledge within their respective agencies across City

government to support the needs of veterans and their family members on a regular basis. In a reciprocal supportive role, MOVA is a trusted resource for City agency liaisons. MOVA's relationships with Agency liaisons form the bedrock foundation upon which MOVA, with our expertise concerning veteran-specific needs, and liaisons, with their expertise in agency-specific resources, build alliances and keep each other informed of emerging developments.

In accordance with Local Law 42 of 2013, the head of each city agency shall designate an employee to act as a liaison to veterans within that agency. The roster of veteran liaison names is posted on the MOVA website as required by the legislation; liaison contact information remains on file with MOVA. The role of agency veteran liaisons is three-fold: 1. to advise veterans employed by their respective agencies of benefits and services available to veterans at each agency and employee personnel policies applicable to veterans at such agency; 2. to assist veteran employees employed by their respective agencies in accessing non-City benefits, resources and services to which they are entitled; and 3. to confer and collaborate with MOVA, who works with agency liaisons to resolve issues and make referrals as needed in support of veterans who are not City employees and who require assistance.

As noted above, the veteran liaisons are primarily responsible for helping to support veterans within their own agencies. For example, the veteran liaison at the Department of Investigation (DOI) has developed an effective program for supporting DOI's veteran employees during deployments. Designated DOI mentors and colleagues are assigned to maintain regular email contact, providing agency updates as well as maintaining support for issues that inevitably arise while deployed. This is but one example of many supportive actions that agency liaisons develop and implement to support their veteran employees.

To better understand the inter-relationship between MOVA and Agency liaisons across Mayoral offices, departments and agencies, the following example may be useful. When a veteran staffer is activated on active duty for training or deployment, agency liaisons are responsible for verifying the employee's military orders. The liaison might call MOVA to assist with the verification of the actual order. MOVA then communicates with the Department of Defense to confirm if the order is covered under a valid and current operation. If necessary, MOVA will also communicate with the actual military command in which the activated military member is assigned. Further, if the employee is away on a pre-approved training, and that training is extended while the member is deployed, MOVA is called upon to ensure that the veteran deployment status is accurately accounted for to protect the rights of veteran employees.

Veteran agency liaisons assist City employees within their agencies who also deploy as members of the Reserves and National Guard. Specifically, agency liaisons are responsible informing

veteran employees about the City's Extended Military Benefits Program as well as enforcing compliance with the Federal Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994 (USERRA), ensuring that military and veteran employees receive all benefits and services to which they are entitled. In performing this first role – supporting the veteran employees within their own agencies – liaisons provide crucial assistance to secure benefits, services and support.

In fulfilling their second role – supporting the non-City needs of veterans employed by their respective agency -- veteran liaisons frequently consult with MOVA to determine the best course of action for a given challenge. MOVA is ideally suited for this role, given its extensive knowledge base concerning local, state and federal resources, as well as MOVA's longstanding relationships with veteran service organizations and others who serve the veterans' community.

For example, if a veteran employee seeks help with using the GI Bill, a situation which requires additional support beyond the City's services, the agency liaison may contact MOVA for assistance. MOVA will research the case, advise the veteran employee, intervene with the education system if necessary, and provide direct support and follow-up with the liaison. Thus, agency liaisons and MOVA work together as a team, addressing whatever City veteran employee issues or needs they are called upon to support.

Regarding their third role – responding to MOVA queries regarding the needs of veteran constituents who are not City employees -- liaisons are readily available for consultation to resolve issues pertaining to the needs of constituent veterans who contact MOVA for assistance.

MOVA fields a broad variety of constituent concerns on a daily basis, thanks to the dedicated service provided by Latisha Russaw, Military Community Liaison; and Ines Adan, Director of Human Services. These two professionals are invaluable resources whose knowledge is matched only by their perspicacity and compassion. In reviewing their respective caseloads, the top five constituent issues are queries regarding 1) City & Federal benefits; 2) Employment; 3) Housing/ Homelessness; 4) Education; 5) Vendor space allocation/enforcement issues.

MOVA is also frequently contacted by individuals seeking to gain eligibility criteria and other information regarding the New York State property tax exemption to veterans. In addition to veterans, others eligible for this benefit include military spouses or unremarried widow/widower of a veteran, or Gold Star parents (the parent of a child who died in the line of duty). Administered locally by the NYC Department of Finance (DOF), this exemption varies according to era of service; deployment in a combat zone; and disability status.

MOVA assists veterans in compiling their military records required to establish eligibility (which in some cases involves replacement of military records) and MOVA consults regularly with the DOF agency liaison. Working together as a team, MOVA's veteran experts and DOF's veteran liaison assist veterans by providing information related to filing for the exemption, checking their filing status, addressing their concerns and providing additional resources, if needed.

MOVA also works closely with DHS, NYCHA and HPD liaisons to resolve issues related to housing placement vouchers and referrals; pending evictions; utilities arrears and other concerns related to veteran housing. For example, Iris Rodrigues, DHS liaison, testified with MOVA last fall and has continued to play a vital role in fulfilling Mayor de Blasio's pledge to end veteran homelessness. Actions supporting the Mayor's pledge range from senior leadership weekly strategic meetings hosted by the First Deputy Mayor; weekly case management and task force meetings to coordinate actions across City agencies, the VA, and service providers; and close collaboration between Commissioners of DHS, NYCHA, HPD, HRA and MOVA.

MOVA provides support that applies to all agencies, hosting an annual training session for veteran liaisons. This two-hour training was last held in February 2014. To date, this training, provided by the New York State Department of Labor, has focused on USERRA legal requirements, providing a forum for addressing updates and issues. MOVA has expanded this training in 2015 to include working as a collective group to share agency-specific ideas and practices to inform strategies related to employee veteran support and veteran recruitment to join the New York City workforce; update agency liaisons on MOVA's key strategic imperatives; and to provide direct veteran community resource support as needed. This training session is a follow-up to the individual communication MOVA has with agency liaisons and the group teleconference outreach sessions, both of which precede the in-person annual training.

The annual face-to-face training gives agency liaisons an opportunity to identify and share city-wide resources which could be of benefit to veterans. The next veteran liaison training session, increased to 3 hours, is scheduled in May 2015. MOVA will provide a commissioner update on MOVA top tier strategic priorities and will focus the veteran liaisons on identifying New York City services and resources, provided by their respective agency, to facilitate access to resources and services for veterans and their families. This information will inform MOVA upcoming initiatives and will be featured on MOVA's website.

MOVA is broadening and deepening its relationship with City agency veteran liaisons, whose role we regard and value greatly as a strategic force-multiplier. Accordingly, we are proactively engaging with the liaisons to identify current and emerging agency programs and resources

which would be of interest to veterans and their families as well as best practices for supporting existing City employees who are veterans and/or members of the Reserves and National Guard.

In closing, MOVA will continue to work closely with agency liaisons to find solutions for veteran employees and their families as well as to ensure that veteran employees receive all benefits, services and entitlements pertaining to their service status. Agency liaisons and veterans who are employed by the city of New York, assist MOVA in determining needs, so that it can better serve all veterans and their families, who live and work in New York city.

Thank you again for your interest in this important area. I look forward to your comments, ideas, thoughts and questions.

#### Written Submission to the New York City Council Committee on Veterans

Amanda M. Spray, PhD April 29, 2015

#### Chairman Ulrich and members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting testimony from our organization today at the NY Council Committee on Veterans. I am Dr. Amanda Spray, Psychologist and Liaison to the VA Medical Center at the Steven and Alexandra Cohen Military Family Clinic at NYU Langone Medical Center. I am here today to provide testimony on behalf of the leadership and staff of the Military Family Clinic in support of veterans liaisons at city agencies.

The Steven and Alexandra Cohen Military Family Clinic at NYU Langone Medical Center was founded to provide high quality mental health treatment accessible to veterans, active duty service members, and their families. Our organization has had tremendous success by utilizing a liaison to interface with governmental agencies, the most notable of which has been the VA. As a result of using a liaison model, we have a single point of contact for veterans coming from all VA providers. This leads to a smooth transition for each veteran and provides them the special treatment they each deserve as a veteran.

We believe that it is essential for the city veterans liaisons to partner with non-governmental organizations, such as ours, to best serve the many needs of veterans. Our organization would be interested in presenting to the veteran liaisons regularly on the services that we provide. This would allow the liaisons to be aware of the variety of private services that may be able to assist the veterans that they are working with. For example, our organization can provide free mental health treatment to not only veterans but also to their families, a crucial component to supporting a military family's transition to civilian life. These services are provided regardless of discharge status and do not require the veteran be legally married for their significant others to receive services. Our services can work in tandem with additional public services to help with veteran's unique and diverse needs. If the private and public sectors work together, we can best serve this city's veterans.

Thank you for the opportunity to present our testimony on this important issue.

#### Testimony of *Robert Piechota*, Director of the Brooklyn Small Business Development Center-Brooklyn, NY

#### New York City Council

#### April 29, 2015

"Resolution calling upon the New York State Legislature to pass and the Governor to sign legislation requiring the SUNY and CUNY boards of Trustees to adopt policies requiring system universities and colleges to award college credit based upon military service"

Thank you Chairman Ulrich and members of the Veterans Council. Your concern on such matters is refreshing, noble and indicative of a City that should be leading the Nation with initiatives that *meaningfully* celebrate the men and women that have defended our nations against all enemies foreign and domestic. While we do a wonderful job in New York City validating our veterans with parades, proclamations and photo-ops, the thrust of Committees such as this with "out of the box" thinking and common sense will no doubt lead to meaningful policy changes and process that will aid the NY City Veteran population and their families. However, overcoming inertia is not easy. I am here to add just one small voice to the growing chorus of veteran advocacy in meaningful and life-changing ways. It is my hope that NY City and NY State will again become places where veterans will want to transition out of the military "to", not "from". I offer my testimony in part as a Veteran myself, and as one of many veteran advocates in NY City.

As the Director of the Small Business Development Center, ("SBDC") I cannot offer ironclad metrics to prove that the military experience should be rewarded by academic credits at the college level. I can offer reasons of an empiric nature that justify significant credit be given for documented military service.

From the perspective of one who provides technical assistance to aspiring and existing business owners, approximately 25% of the assistance that SBDC's provide comes in the way of "education" of some type. Most clients of Small Business Development Centers are seeking or need help in one of four major areas: "Business Concept", "Customer Relations", "Operations", and "Organization". Having assisted veteran entrepreneurs over the past five years, I can unequivocally state that veterans display superior skills when it comes to subsets of the four categories above: Networking, Sales/Service, Communications, Production, and Leadership. Whether through formal military occupational skill training, ("MOS"), Leadership development training, or collateral socialization learning....Veterans come to the business world advanced in many key characteristics that make them extremely effective as business owners, (many of the same skills that make them very effective employees).

As an SBDC Director, my staff does not have to spend as much time helping with skill sets such as those mentioned above in order to move the novice or transitional entrepreneur from baseline to goal.

It is not a stretch to believe the same is true of veterans returning to academic pursuits following their military commitments. Military experience gained through the many phases of formal training and on-the-job-training cannot be ignored as a metric of analytical, technical, and soft-skill learning. How to measure and codify this learning is beyond the scope of my testimony today. However it would be unwise to ignore the wisdom of assigning credit to the knowledge base veterans bring to their higher education. Any veteran with at least two years of time in the military has spent countless hours in a classroom or a formal training environment. With the upgrade of aligning Military Occupational Specialty, ("MOS") and Skill Qualification Testing, ("SQT") to civilian NAICS codes, ("North American Industry Classification Codes"); assigning the proper credit to the appropriate curriculum credit should be without challenge.

CUNY, SUNY and New York State have taken strides in supporting Veterans and military family members. The very campus that hosts the Brooklyn SBDC- NY City College of Technology was created in part because of the influx of Veterans shortly after World War II. I cannot imagine why the will to implement such an initiative would not be embraced by our City and State institutions of higher learning. Not only is it in keeping with veteran advocacy which the Governor demonstrated last May with his approval of the "Service Disabled Veteran Owned Business Act", but it is the right thing to do for our selfless veterans who have sacrificed so much.

'Robert J.'Piechota

Director-Brooklyn SBDC



Tuesday, April 29th, 2015

Written testimony respectfully submitted to NYC Committee on Veterans, by Avi Leshes, Director of Neighborhood Business Services, and Staff Liaison for Veterans Business Council at the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce.

Hon. Eric A. Ulrich, Chair, NYC Committee on Veterans

Good afternoon Chair Ulrich, other members of the Veterans Committee and guests.

My name is Avi Leshes and I serve as the Director of Neighborhood Business Services and Staff Liaison for the Veterans Business Council at the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce (BCC). I am delivering testimony on behalf of Carlo A. Scissura, Esq., President and CEO of the BCC.

BCC is a membership-based business assistance organization which represents the interests of over 2,000 member businesses, as well as other businesses across the borough of Brooklyn. The Brooklyn Alliance is the not-for-profit economic development organization of the Chamber, which works to address the needs of businesses through direct business assistance programs.

We applaud this committee for convening today's hearing to address oversight on veteran liaisons within city agencies.

In 2014, BCC started a much-needed discussion on veteran's needs with the launch of the Brooklyn Chamber Veterans Council. The goal of the council is to create a business and job searching support system that can help make sure veterans get the services they need to grow economically. The core group of participants include representatives from the office of the Brooklyn Borough President; veteran groups such as Operation Wellness Warrior, David Lynch Foundation, Hope for the Warriors, and Team Hevo; Brooklyn Bridge Rotary Club, and Small Business Services.

More specifically, the Council has been focusing on building a platform where veterans can go for assistance pertaining to starting or expanding a business; job placement and career development; working with elected officials to pass legislation that will create procurement opportunities with the city for veteran-owned businesses; free legal assistance and business advice; and making referrals to mental health specialists and programs.

Veteran entrepreneurship provides an opportunity for New Yorkers to contribute directly to the economic development of their communities by increasing revenue and hiring both civilians and other veterans. Recently, the Chamber, in partnership with NYU Poly and Assemblyman Joseph Lentol, launched a 10-week intensive veteran entrepreneurship course that will begin in late June. This is one of a number of initiatives that the Chamber and its partners within the veteran community are working on, and which we hope will help to provide the much-needed resources that veteran-owned businesses and veteran entrepreneurs need.

BCC supports the creation and expansion of veteran liaisons in every city agency. The Chamber feels that it is important that these veteran liaisons be able to not only advise the agency they work for on the needs of the veteran community, but to advise on the issues facing veteran business owners, while also providing assistance to those who need it.



Strengthening the functionality of the veteran liaisons in city agencies will ensure that the needs of all veterans are being adequately met.

Thank you again to the NYC Committee on Veteran Affairs for facilitating today's hearing.

CAS/mc/al



# New York City Council Hearing Committee on Veterans Wednesday, April 29, 1:00 p.m. Testimony re: Oversight – Veterans Liaisons at City Agencies.

Good afternoon Chair Ulrich and members of the Veteran Committee. My name is Peter Kempner and I am the Director of the Veterans Justice Project at Brooklyn Legal Services, a project of Legal Services NYC. Legal Services NYC is the largest provider of free civil legal services in the nation with offices in all five boroughs where we serve over 60,000 New Yorkers annually. The Veterans Justice Project represents low-income veterans, active duty service members and their families who are in need of civil legal services in the areas of housing law, public benefit eligibility, employment law and with other essential needs. Our attorneys and paralegals answer calls on our city wide legal hotline for veterans and staff multiple legal clinics at VA facilities throughout the city. Since launching this project just four years ago, we served or represented over 4,000 New York City veterans, active duty service members and their families. I am here today to testify and offer suggestions regarding Local Law 42 which created veteran liaisons at city agencies.

As a legal services attorney who works with veterans on a daily basis, I welcome any attempt to establish relationships between veterans in need and those government agencies that can fulfill their needs. As we all know, there is a large population of New York City veterans who have hit upon hard times, and need assistance with various aspects of life. Many times, the process of obtaining such assistance is long and difficult to navigate.

Although the establishment of veteran liaisons at each government agency is helpful in theory, it is not clear that its implementation has fulfilled the goals of the legislation. Unfortunately the legislation is not widely known, therefor limiting its reach and effectiveness. Also the contact information for each liaison is almost impossible to find, and, based on my experience, when I contacted a liaison, they were unhelpful.

As one of the founders of the Veterans Justice Project in 2011 and an advocate for veterans, I consider myself well-versed in veterans' benefits and am current on what resources veterans can utilize. However, when advocating for veterans with city agencies I have never been directed to a veteran. Because of this I have not until recently affirmatively attempted to tap into this resource. I wonder how many other professionals who assist veterans are unaware of existence of the veteran liaisons. I also wonder how many veterans are aware they can contact a liaison when they have a simple question or complex problem. For instance, not one veteran I have helped has mentioned contacting or speaking with a veteran liaison at a city agency. If the resource was better advertised, I believe it could reach a larger number of veterans and, as a result, do even more good in the veteran community.

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Raun J. Rasmussen, Executive Director
Michael D. Young, Board Chair

Even though the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs (MOVA) publishes a list of veteran liaisons for each city agency on their website, the website does not provide contact information for the liaisons. There is no phone number, email address, or professional title listed for any liaison. The only information the list provided on the website is the name of city agency and the liaison's name. A further Google search for contact information also yields no results. How are veterans expected to use this service if they are unable to get in touch with those who are supposed to help them? Further, when clicking on the "Contact us" link on MOVA's website, one is directed to a form email. Even if the email is answered within 24 hours, this may be too late for some of our veterans facing an emergency or a filing deadline.

We called MOVA to get a full list of the phone numbers and email addresses for the veterans liaisons but were told by a MOVA staff member told us that they would not provide us with a full list of the contacts because MOVA wants to minimize the number of phone calls to the liaisons who are often employees of higher position within their agencies. This reasoning defeats the purpose of creating of the liaisons. We were able to obtain the phone number and email address for a single liaison only.

To try out the liaison process and in order to assist one of my client I decided to contact the New York City Housing Authority veteran liaison for assistance with a case. Mr. S is a 66-year-old disabled veteran who lives in a NYCHA apartment in Brooklyn. He receives a VA Pension as well as "aid and attendance" benefits from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. In order to qualify for a VA Pension, a veteran must be either elderly or totally and permanently disabled, extremely low income and have served our nation during a time of war. The base VA Pension amount is fairly low. Therefore, as a supplement to the Pension, the VA awards "aid and attendance" benefits to veterans who are so "significantly disabled as to need or require the regular aid and attendance of another person."

The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development has determined that these "aid and attendance" benefits qualify as funds received specifically for medical care. As a result, NYCHA must exclude the "aid and attendance" benefit from Mr. S's income when calculating his rent for his NYCHA apartment. However, we have discovered that NYCHA has been including the "aid and attendance" benefits as countable income on Mr. S's case since February 2010, thus overcharging him for more than four years. Recently, Mr. S has fallen into arrears and is facing evicted due to non-payment of rent.

This case is relatively complex, as it is currently being litigated in housing court and through NYCHA's grievance process. In addition, we were informed by HUD that they contacted NYCHA to seek the recalculation of Mr. S's rent, but this information has not trickled down to either the hearing office or to the NYCHA staff pursuing the non-payment proceeding.

To streamline and hasten this case, I contacted the NYCHA's veteran liaison for help. As I mentioned earlier, simply getting her contact information was a long process. After finally receiving the NYCHA liaison's contact information, I wrote her an email detailing the facts of Mr. S's case and asked for her assistance. Even after a follow-up email and phone call, I have yet to receive a response from the veterans liaison at NYCHA. As a result, Mr. S is still litigating his case on two fronts and continues to suffer hardships due to NYCHA's miscalculation of his rent.

In theory Local Law 42 is an excellent resource. However, until there is transparency and open information about who the veteran liaisons are and how to contact them at each city agency, the lack of information and the fact that veterans are unaware of this resource means that it provides little, if any, help to veterans and veteran advocates.

Peter Kempner

Director - Veterans Justice Project, Brooklyn Legal Services

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