



To: The New York City Council Committee on Veterans
Date: Monday, December 15, 2014
From: Submitted by the Military Families Speak Out Metro Chapter

Honorable Sirs and Ladies:

MFSO Metro Chapter NYC Supports S.1702, and asks the Governor to sign S.1702. There are currently no public housing preferences afforded to veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, or to service-connected disabled veterans and their families under any existing public housing laws; and Senator Anthony Avella introduced S.1702, in 2013, an Act to amend the public housing law, in relation to veterans' eligibility for public housing.

MFSO's slogans are: Bringing the Troops Home Now and Taking Care of Them When They Get Here, and the best Christmas present for any military family is to see their loved one come home. Some do not have a home to come back to; for example, if the family was living in a base abroad. MFSO was involved in passing Senate law 6279 in 2009, giving recent veterans preferential admission to Mitchell Lama coops, and found that after NYS legislature passed it unanimously, the main problem was getting it enforced. Coop boards would claim their lists were too long and close their lists. Careful oversight is necessary if this is not going to happen again. Perhaps the city laws for city buildings will have less loopholes.

Housing is the most important factor in stabilizing the veteran population. It has been found on the west coast that veterans who got a place to live were able to improve mental health, cure PTSD, substance abuse, and improve veterans' mental and physical health and that of their families. We should have no resistance to democratic, republican or independent initiatives to ensure that veterans have a home. Then if they have any problems the nexus of services necessary to cure these problems can be made available to them. A person cannot get a job without an address; they cannot even necessarily bathe to go to the job interview.

Respectfully submitted,

MFSO Metro Chapter NYC

**New York City Council Hearing
Monday, December 15, 2014, 1:00 p.m.**

Testimony re: Resolution calling upon the New York State Legislature to pass and the Governor to sign S.1702, an Act to amend the public housing law, in relation to veterans' eligibility for public housing

Good afternoon. My name is Peter Kempner. I am the Coordinator of Veterans Litigation and a Senior Staff Attorney with the Veterans Justice Project (VJP) at 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 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 a few years ago, we have provided free legal services to thousands of New York City veterans, active duty service members and their families.

Based on our experiences, the number one civil legal issue affecting our veteran clients is housing. And the most common housing need affecting veterans is the threat of eviction for the non-payment of rent. Veterans with housing problems are often underemployed or are disabled and their sole source of income are VA Service Connected Disability Benefits or disability benefits from the Social Security Administration.

In New York City, where rents continue to climb at an astronomical pace, veterans receiving service connected disability benefits from the VA, often find that these funds are insufficient to find affordable housing. For instance, a veteran with a 50% disability rating only receives \$822 per month from the VA, while a veteran with a 60% disability rating receives \$1,041 per month. Even if a veteran has a 90% or 100% disability rating, receiving income of \$1,714 or \$2, 858 respectively, most rents for apartments on the private market are still unaffordable for veterans.

With the exception of the Federal government's HUD-VASH program, little is being done to ensure that veterans have long term affordable housing options. One obvious solution is to provide veterans preferences for placement in public housing developments.

New York State uses veterans preferences in many unique and effective ways to ensure that those who served in our military are given advantages to successfully reintegrate into civilian life. There are veterans' preferences for vending licenses, veterans' preferences for civil service jobs and preferences

for Mitchell-Lama housing eligibility. When the Mitchell-Lama housing preference was created in 2007, the State Legislature amended the Private Housing Finance Law to include a preference for disabled veterans. Then in 2010 the statute was amended to include all veterans who served in a time of war, thereby expanding this housing preference to veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts.

In justifying the 2010 amendments the sponsors of the bill stated:

Many New Yorkers have volunteered and continue to volunteer their service to our country to promote and protect freedom around the world. It is important for our State to honor and recognize the sacrifices of these brave men and women, and to support them when they return home. The Mitchell-Lama housing program is a way for people to find affordable housing in communities throughout New York State. Unfortunately, the current law only makes veterans' preferences available to a subset of all those who have served in time of war. This bill would broaden the standards to extend such a preference to all combat veterans. This is one way to ensure that our fellow New Yorkers who are serving in the military know that they will always be welcomed home.¹

The state's approach to Mitchell-Lama housing can be effectively replicated in the public housing arena. The proposed amendment to Public Housing Law Section 156 not only extends the income cap exception to veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, it also expands the existing veterans' preference to veterans receiving service connected disability benefits.

It is clear that veterans who rely solely on disability payments from the VA for income will continue to struggle to pay rent in New York City and will need to look for alternative housing solutions. Applying for an apartment through NYCHA is not a reliable solution to the homelessness problem amongst veterans because veterans wanting a NYCHA apartment are frequently on the NYCHA wait list for years before getting access to an apartment. A veteran's preference for disabled veterans as proposed by S.1702 will ensure that veterans seeking public housing actually have a home without having to worry about being able to afford rent on the private housing market or whether to feed themselves.

We thank the Committee and the Counsel for seeking innovative ways to address the housing crisis for our city's veterans and look forward to working with you to ensure that New York City's veterans can find safe and affordable housing.

Peter Kempner
Coordinator of Veterans Litigation and a Senior Staff Attorney
Veterans Justice Project, Legal Services NYC

¹ NY Spons. Memo., 2010 A.B. 9501.

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Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____
 in favor in opposition

Date: 12/15/14

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Peter Kemper

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Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

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Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. 1702
 in favor in opposition

Date: 12/15/14

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Name: Lionelle Hamanaka

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