

Testimony by the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG)
Before the New York City Council Committee on Veterans regarding:
Preliminary Budget Hearing – Veterans

March 5, 2020

Chair Deutsch, Council Members, and staff, good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Veterans Committee about the Fiscal Year 2021 budget. My name is Ryan Foley, and I am the Supervising Attorney of the Veterans Practice at the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG), a nonprofit law office dedicated to providing free legal services in civil matters to low-income New Yorkers. NYLAG serves military veterans, immigrants, seniors, the homebound, families facing foreclosure, renters facing eviction, low-income consumers, those in need of government assistance, children in need of special education, domestic violence victims, people with disabilities, patients with chronic illness or disease, low-wage workers, low-income members of the LGBTQ community, Holocaust survivors, as well as others in need of free legal services.

Understanding the unique needs and challenges that exist among the diverse group of veterans that call New York City home, NYLAG operates two veteran specific programs. NYLAG's LegalHealth Veterans Initiative holds weekly legal clinics within the Bronx and Manhattan VA Medical Centers, as well as at the Northport VA on Long Island. These clinics provide an opportunity for NYLAG attorneys to work closely with medical professionals to address the nonmedical needs of low-income veterans with serious health problems.

Among the legal clinics operated by the LegalHealth Veterans Initiative is the nation's first

legal clinic focused on women veterans. Women veterans are the fastest growing veteran population and currently comprise 20% of the active-duty armed forces and 10% of the total veteran population. Women veterans experience higher rates of military sexual trauma (MST), are the fastest growing segment of the veteran homeless population, and have a significantly higher rate of suicide than civilian adult females. NYLAG's clinic for women veterans aims to provide a comfortable space for this often-overlooked segment of the veteran population to receive legal assistance that can help veterans and their families achieve stability and security.

In addition to the medical-legal partnership NYLAG has with the Department of Veteran Affairs, we also have a community-based veteran program. NYLAG's Veterans Practice, which is funded by the City Council's Legal Services for Veterans Initiative, provides comprehensive services to veterans and their families, regardless of whether they use, or can use, the VA Healthcare System. With only 30% of veterans seeking care from a VA medical facility and approximately 15% of veterans receiving a less-than-honorable discharge, which can impact eligibility for VA Healthcare access, NYLAG's Veterans Practice looks to reach this large population of underserved veterans by working with other agencies and community-based organizations focused on assisting veterans.

NYLAG's Veterans Practice holds regular offsite clinics at locations like Samaritan Daytop Village's 43rd Street Veterans Program, a Manhattan-based residential addiction and mental health treatment program often utilized by non-VA eligible veterans; Core Services Group's Beach House, a shelter in Rockaway providing temporary housing and social services to veterans and their families; and American Legion Post 213 in Park Slope, a leader among veteran service organizations in Brooklyn. We also have close referral relationships with dozens of other non-VA organizations and offices of elected officials, are a network provider within VetConnectNYC, and accept direct

referrals through phone and email requests. Recognizing that it can be very difficult for individuals to seek help, especially veterans, NYLAG provides multiple avenues to receive that request and answer the call.

Veterans deal with all the same legal issues as civilians, but also run into issues unique to their veteran status. Both of NYLAG's veterans programs place their main focus on those veteran-specific issues, but legal issues rarely fall neatly into one category. This makes NYLAG's team of nearly 300 attorneys, paralegals, and financial counselors a powerful resource for every veteran we touch. A veteran seeking help accessing medical care will not only be screened for VA healthcare eligibility, but also for Medicaid and Medicare, which are crucial to obtaining long term care for New York City's aging veteran population. A veteran seeking help with an eviction will work with attorneys who have been provided trainings not only on housing benefits specific to veterans, but also on military and veteran cultural competency. And veterans seeking help obtaining VA disability benefits are screened for all available public benefits, including Social Security and Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, to ensure they are receiving all the resources they are entitled to. It is this combination of experienced veteran attorneys both inside the VA and in the community, working within a large and knowledgeable organization dedicated to social justice, which enables NYLAG to provide the highest quality assistance to the veteran population.

One such veteran is James, an 89-year old Korean War veteran who was facing eviction in a nonpayment proceeding. James had been living in the same apartment for over 43 years, but, as a result of unexpected healthcare expenses, did not have enough income to pay his rent. When his son initially contacted NYLAG's Tenants' Rights Unit, he was screened for veteran status and was immediately connected with the Veterans Practice. While one Veterans Practice attorney started

working on his housing case, another began looking into maximizing his income. James was eligible for VA non-service-connected pension based on his age, dates of service, and limited income. NYLAG gathered the necessary supporting documents and filed the application on his behalf. He was quickly awarded the benefit, and this additional income proved crucial in the negotiation of a settlement agreement with his landlord. James was not only able to stay in his home, but with the veterans pension he now has greater financial stability. NYLAG is continuing to work with James to connect him with non-VA healthcare options for more comprehensive care, as well as putting together advance planning documents to ensure his future health care treatment is consistent with his wishes. Many of our veteran clients, like James, need assistance with multiple legal issues, and greatly benefit from having qualified and experienced attorneys to assist them with the complexities surrounding their veteran-specific legal issues and other associated legal needs.

The crucial and comprehensive work that NYLAG does on behalf of veterans would not be possible without the Legal Services for Veterans Initiative funding. As such, NYLAG strongly urges the Council to continue and expand the Legal Services for Veterans Initiative to allow us to help even more New York City veterans.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We look forward to engaging in further discussions about serving our veteran communities and improving their access to critical legal services and other resources. I would be happy to answer any questions.

Respectfully submitted,

New York Legal Assistance Group