



**TESTIMONY OF VOLUNTEERS OF LEGAL SERVICE
New York City Council Veterans and Small Business Committee
Hearing on Veteran Entrepreneurship and Public Contract Opportunities
October 13, 2022**

Good afternoon. My name is Andrea Tan. I am the Microenterprise Project Director at Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS). VOLS was established in 1984 and our purpose is to leverage private attorneys to provide free legal services to low-income New Yorkers to help fill the justice gap. For over 20 years the VOLS Microenterprise Project has helped existing and aspiring small business owners access high-quality free legal services from our dedicated staff and our network of pro bono attorneys. For many New Yorkers, owning a small business is an effective path out of poverty and into financial stability and independence. VOLS helps with entity formation, drafting and reviewing contracts, protecting intellectual property, among other transactional small business legal needs. We partner with community and economic development organizations to connect with clients who would benefit from our legal assistance, focusing on minority, women, immigrant, and veteran-owned businesses.

Our Microenterprise Project works together with our Veterans Initiative to connect with veterans' services organizations to help identify and serve veteran entrepreneurs and small business owners. We then help veteran entrepreneurs identify their legal needs and create an action plan to address them. By providing our clients access to high caliber pro bono attorneys at our partner law firms, we strive to level the playing field for veteran small business owners who are otherwise unable to pay the prohibitive cost of a lawyer.

VOLS recognizes New York City's efforts to better identify veteran businesses, support their growth and prepare those businesses for City procurement opportunities. The present proposed bill is an example of these efforts. The Department of Small Business Services, with the City's Chief Procurement Officer, would enable veteran owned businesses to identify as such when registering to do business with the City; and the City would create a Veteran Leadership Advisory Program to educate veteran owned businesses about city procurement opportunities. While this commitment to support veteran entrepreneurs is significant, it is also crucial that we focus on the implementation of this proposal, specifically on how the City would provide small businesses an opportunity to self-identify as "veteran owned" on the city website or in any other means of registration.

In working with individuals who have prior military service experience, we have observed that there are many variations in veteran identity that result from such factors as discharge status, serving in a politically controversial war, such as Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan; serving during peacetime; participating in combat; or having had an at least partly negative military experience associated with trauma or discrimination. Gender, race-ethnicity, sexual orientation, being born outside the United States, and other person-level characteristics may also affect veteran identity. Therefore, the City should consider how variation in veteran identity may affect participation in the proposed programs; and how to carefully assess veteran identity so that this vulnerable population does not get lost in the process.

The key to effectively screen for military service is to properly ask the question. Given the many variations in veteran identity shaped by an individual's unique military experience, it is not as simple as asking "Are you a veteran?" Many individuals may not consider themselves "veterans" or may believe that their military experience does not "count." For these reasons, it is important to screen in a manner that captures as many individuals as possible who served our country and are now business owners.

Our City's veterans represent the best of what we have to offer, and we should continue to strive to provide them with all the support they need upon their return home and as they build their economic futures. Thank you for allowing us to submit this testimony and for supporting the needs of New York City's veteran entrepreneurs.

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