



NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

Tuesday, April 4, 2023, 1:00 p.m.

SUBJECT: Oversight - The State of Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion Halls, as well as Other Veterans-Services Organizations with Physical Locations.

Good afternoon. My name is Peter Kempner. I am the Legal Director and Senior Law Project Director at Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLTS). VOLTS 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.

The Veterans Initiative of the VOLTS Senior Law Project strives to empower older New Yorkers who served in the military to age in place with dignity, access their legal rights, and live without fear of homelessness. Our free services assist low-income older veterans in making key decisions about incapacity and end-of-life care by providing Last Wills and Testaments, Powers of Attorney, Health Care Proxies, Livings Wills, and other advance directives. These documents enable our clients to ensure that their dying wishes are fulfilled and that they are able to maintain income and services during their lifetime. We also enable our clients' caregivers to access care and services necessary for our clients and make medical decisions in line with their beliefs. Our guides, fact sheets, workshops, and training are aimed at overcoming confusion about planning for the future. Through this work, we empower older veterans to take charge of their finances, property, and medical care, helping them continue to live in their communities. We provide home and hospital visits for limited mobility clients to ensure that all eligible veterans are able to access our services.

The VOLTS Veterans Initiative also provides legal advice on a range of other civil legal issues including landlord tenant matters, access to benefits, consumer matters, and other civil legal needs.

Through our strong community partnerships, the Veterans Initiative also provides support and trainings to social workers, health care professionals, and family caregivers. We work closely with older adult centers and other community-based organizations with physical locations to hold educational workshops, in-person and virtual clinics, and generate referrals.

The availability of service providers and other organizations with physical locations is critical to New York's veteran community because of the demographics of our veteran population. According to the National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics¹, approximately 50% of New York State's veterans are over the age of 60. When you add in veterans who are aged 50 and over, we are looking at 2/3 of New York's veteran population. About 43% of our veterans served in either the Vietnam War, the Korean War, or in World War II. Just this past week on

¹ https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp

March 29, 2023, we marked the 50th anniversary of when the last U.S. troops left Vietnam. Which means that the youngest Vietnam era veterans will turn 68 this year. These numbers are why the VOLS Veterans Initiative focuses our work on providing free legal services to New York City's older veterans.

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed a stark digital divide in our city. When the pandemic forced physical locations to close and providers moved services online, many of the most vulnerable New Yorkers were left behind because they lacked access to or did not have the comfort with the technology needed in order to access services. A key group that fell victim to the digital divide was older New Yorkers. Not only were many older New York veterans unable to access services during the height of the pandemic but they were also socially isolated.

According to the National Council on Aging², COVID-19 driven social isolation may have increased the risk of depression, cognitive decline, and dementia. In addition, social isolation may also have an impact on physical health and the ability to conduct activities of daily living. All of these factors will impact an older veteran's ability to continue to live a healthy life in the community.

If we are concerned about the mental and physical health of our aging veteran population we need to ensure that they have access to services in physical locations where they can connect with other members of their community and to critical services.

For some veterans this means attending meals and other programming at their local New York City Department for the Aging funded older adult center. For others this means connecting with their fellow veterans at Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion Halls. Some will go to the Vet Center in their borough or to other veteran services organizations with physical locations. Wherever our older veterans choose to connect with their community, it is important that New York City's older veteran population has a wide range of options that meet their needs and desires. We know the problems that social isolation can cause, and we should all be invested in ensuring that older veterans do not fall victim to those harms.

We would like to thank the City Council for holding this hearing and continuing to invest in services and programs that make New York City a place where veterans feel welcomed and at home. The many organizations and services that are supported by the Council's Veterans Initiative are critical to this shared goal.

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² <https://www.ncoa.org/article/covid-driven-isolation-can-be-dangerous-for-older-adults>