



NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

Thursday, November 30, 2023, 10:00 a.m.

My name is Peter Kempner. I am the Legal Director of Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS). Our mission 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 VOLS 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 legal 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 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 VOLS 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. The most recent work VOLS has undertaken to support the New York City veteran community is to add a veteran focus to our Microenterprise Project. For over 20 years our Microenterprise Project has helped existing and aspiring small business owners and microentrepreneurs access high-quality free legal services. For many veterans, owning a small business is an effective path to financial stability and independence upon their return from service. VOLS aids with drafting contracts, reviewing government documents, protecting intellectual property, and advising on commercial leases.

My comments this morning focus on Int. 1237-2023 and Int. 1244-2023.

Screening for and collecting data with respect to military service is critically important. Knowing whether someone has a history of military service can be the key to unlocking benefits and services which could be life changing. Asking the question, "Have you or anyone in your family or household ever served in the U.S. military?" is a simple yet effective method of ensuring that

a veteran or family member's military affiliation is accounted for, opening up a vast number of possible benefits and solutions to problems that might not have otherwise been considered. The benefits available to veterans through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs ("VA") and other programs are extensive and often life changing. Knowing someone's veteran status can mean access to eviction prevention grants, housing subsidies, cash benefits, health care services, preferences for affordable housing, job opportunities, veteran focused social services, educational grants, and many other programs.

The New York City veteran community is incredibly diverse, and many in the community face a wide variety of challenges. Often those with a history of military service do not think of going to the Department of Veterans Services (DVS) for help and instead turn to other agencies for assistance. When these other agencies fail to screen for military service, we miss an opportunity to provide veteran specific services and care.

While we applaud the first steps taken by Int. 1237, if adopted, it is also important to note that if agencies simply collect data and do not apply that data to solutions, we will continue to miss opportunities to serve our city's veterans. Data collection can certainly shed light on the demographics of our veteran community and what social services they are seeking. But the goal should be to provide access to the best benefits and services possible. Agencies must create systems to direct veterans to targeted services and create a feedback loop with DVS to ensure that no veteran slips through the cracks. Having a single informational pamphlet, such as the one envisioned in Int. 1244, could be a useful tool that agencies and others could use to direct veterans to the right programs and services. We must all be dedicated to guaranteeing that individuals who sacrificed on behalf of our country have access to the benefits, resources, and assistance they need and have earned.

We would like to thank the City Council for holding this hearing and inviting us to testify. We hope that the city will continue to invest in services and programs that make New York City a place where veterans feel supported, welcomed, and at home.

Peter Kempner, Esq.
Legal Director