



Good Morning Chair Morano and members of the City Council. I am John Holt, the Director of the Senior Law Project at Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS). For over 40 years VOLS has partnered with community-based organizations and the private bar to provide free civil legal services to New Yorkers who otherwise cannot afford or access representation. Our five core projects serve small business owners, individuals accessing benefits, immigrant young people, incarcerated mothers, and older adults in every borough.

The VOLS Senior Law Project's focus is providing low-income aging New Yorkers with access to free, high-impact legal services that allow them to plan for death and incapacity through the execution of life planning documents, including Last Wills and Testaments, Powers of Attorney, Living Wills, and Health Care Proxies. For our clients, these documents are vital tools to help ensure that their wishes and preferences around health care decision making, end of life care, personal finances and benefits, funeral planning, and the distribution of assets after death are followed. Without these services, many of our clients would find themselves unable to safely remain in their communities, forcing them to enter into costly institutional care environments or be subject to overly restrictive protective arrangements, like Article 81 Guardianship.

Every day in our work, we see the real barriers that prevent older adults from accessing these important services, often missing the window of opportunity where advance planning can be a viable preventative tool. Lack of information or resources, social isolation, cognitive and physical decline, exploitation and abuse all contribute to aging New Yorkers being unable to effectively learn about our organization and receive services. These barriers can be even higher among older adult veterans, further reducing access and widening the justice gap. Veterans experience higher rates of disability and drug and alcohol misuse and many struggle with mental health issues and chronic housing insecurity.

Over one half of New York City's 200,000-plus veterans are over the age of 65. The Veterans Initiative of the Senior Law Project seeks to ensure that our life planning services are particularly accessible to these older adult veterans. We have set increased financial eligibility guidelines for veterans over the age of 60 to broaden the number of clients we are able to serve and have worked with the NYC Department of Veterans Services and community based organizations across the city to advertise the availability of our services and provide information and resources directly to veterans.

Since its creation, the Veterans Initiative has grown to include additional legal services offered by other VOLS projects, such as our Microenterprise Project. For over 20 years, the Microenterprise Project has helped existing and aspiring small business owners and microentrepreneurs access high-quality legal services; helping draft contracts, review government documents, protect intellectual property, and advise on commercial leases. For many veterans, owning a small business is an effective path to financial stability and independence upon their return from service. When the Senior Law Project is contacted by a veteran who presents with legal or social issues that cannot be addressed by VOLS' programs, we speak with them to better identify their needs and make a targeted referral to an organization or government agency that can provide responsive services. The Senior Law Project is also in the



process of amending its intake form to affirmatively ask self-identifying veterans if they are interested in referral to NYC DVS services.

VOLS calls upon the Council to continue to invest in programs like the Veterans Initiative that provide legal services to veterans that help them plan for their financial and personal futures and ensure they have the resources to remain a vital part of our New York City community. VOLS respectfully requests that the Council assist us in continuing to provide legal services through our Veterans Initiative by supporting our request for \$150,000 in funding for FY27 through the Legal Services for Veterans Initiative.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify and for the work of this committee in making certain that the service and sacrifices of our veteran neighbors are honored.