



**New York City Council
Committee on General Welfare/Committee on Veterans
Hearing
10 am Oct. 21, 2026**

Good afternoon, Council Members. My name is Jean Stevens and I am the Director of the Benefits Law Project at Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS), based in lower Manhattan. Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony to the October 21, 2026 joint Committee on General Welfare and Committee on Veterans hearing. To reduce veteran homelessness, VOLS strongly encourages **greater Council support for public benefit programs CityFHEPS and the Disability Rent Increase Exemption, both crucial to allow veterans to remain in their homes and communities.**

Since 1984, VOLS has sought to ensure that every New Yorker has access to justice by mobilizing pro bono and community partnerships to provide free civil legal services that protect rights and expand opportunities. Our goal is to ensure New Yorkers can overcome barriers to access legal support for their civil legal challenges. To that end, VOLS provides high-quality, free legal advice, representation, and legal education to older adults and veterans, incarcerated mothers, immigrant young people, small business owners, and individuals seeking public benefits that help meet basic needs. Our programs reach communities across all five boroughs of New York City, inclusive of racial, gender and LGBTQIA+ identity, ability, immigration and veteran status. To do this work, we recruit, train, and mentor an active network of 1,800 pro bono volunteer attorneys from 83 law firms and companies. We have historical partnerships with 150 community-based organizations to ensure our services are accessible and meet local legal needs. Our clients live at or below 200% of the federal poverty level.

VOLS Benefits Law Project assists New Yorkers eligible for public assistance programs through various legal clinics. Our volunteer attorneys work closely with hundreds of low-income tenants citywide each day. We have observed firsthand how these benefits are vital to maintaining housing stability by stabilizing rent costs over time.

Many of New York City's 129,000 veterans are ineligible for standard rental vouchers provided by the federal VA. They rely on New York state and city rental subsidies. We assist people with disabilities and veterans to apply and maintain two of them: the Disability Rent Increase Exemption (DRIE) and the City Fighting Homelessness and Eviction Prevention Supplement (CityFHEPS). Together, DRIE and CityFHEPS are the city's most valuable existing tools to protect against veteran homelessness. DRIE recipients pay the same frozen rent year to year as long as they remain enrolled. To be eligible for DRIE, an applicant must have a government recognized disability. CityFHEPS recipients only pay 30 percent of their income in rent. For CityFHEPS, the city has designated veterans facing homelessness as a specific category of eligible individuals. Because one-third of all veterans have a disability, thousands of New Yorkers would qualify for either or both of these programs.

However, despite the importance and effectiveness of these programs, they remain vastly out of reach for most veterans. First, many veterans do not realize they exist. While certain initiatives of the Department of Veterans Services have helped, DRIE and CityFHEPS are not widely advertised to veterans. Second, most veterans cannot navigate the application processes on their own and require significant assistance. Applicants must produce voluminous supporting documents, including some that are challenging to obtain, and must jump through administrative hoops that they do not understand. They often feel confused by all of the application components. Many veterans also struggle with email, the internet, and other technology needed to comply. In particular, CityFHEPS is quite difficult to obtain. The program currently requires that an applicant be either currently homeless or facing eviction in housing court in order to apply. Those facing eviction must apply through Homebase. Homebase is understaffed and overworked. It is not uncommon for Homebase to take three to 10 months to put together an application. It also loses documents, makes repeat, patchwork requests, fails to communicate exactly what's needed, and does not keep tenants sufficiently updated as to what is going on. Homebase staff are also not consistently trained in what is required for an application.

For all these reasons, our advocates need to intervene. We assist in completing applications, gathering documents, and escalating to city agencies to ensure for troubleshooting and approval. Without these efforts, veterans would absolutely fail to be enrolled and find themselves at much greater risk of homelessness.

We strongly encourage the Council make every effort to bolster these existing, vital programs. The Council should create and pass legislative efforts to expand outreach, increase staffing and training in programs that assist with applications, streamline the application process, and provide far more resources for veterans to apply. Thank you for your time and consideration.



Jean Stevens
Director, Benefits Law Project
Volunteers of Legal Service
jstevens@volsprobono.org
Phone (347) 521-5734