



**City Council FY22 Preliminary Budget Hearing
Committee on Veterans
March 23, 2021**

Testimony of Myung J. Lee, President & CEO

My name is Myung Lee and I am the President & CEO of Volunteers of America-Greater New York, the local affiliate of the national organization, Volunteers of America, Inc. (VOA). I would like to thank the Chair of the City Council Committee on Veterans, Council Member Chaim Deutsch, for the opportunity to submit my testimony.

VOA-Greater New York is a human services organization that serves nine special needs populations through approximately 65 programs in NYC, Westchester County and Northern New Jersey, including homeless individuals and families, veterans, those recovering from domestic violence, the poor elderly, adults living with HIV/AIDS and behavioral health issues, among others. Annually, we provide housing—transitional, emergency and permanent, supportive programs—to 11,000 New Yorkers.

VOA-Greater New York has a long history of serving veterans going back as far as the Civil War. Now, through a comprehensive continuum of care that includes outreach to veterans that are currently homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness, vocational training and placement, and permanent, supportive housing, our services impact the lives of nearly 900 veterans each year.

At one end of the continuum, Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) reaches veterans who are in crisis, providing financial assistance for housing, and leveraging the many partnerships we have in the community – including with the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and NYC Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) – to help them secure employment and address other critical issues threatening their and their family's stability. Last year, in spite of the pandemic, SSVF worked with 275 veterans and far exceeded our housing targets, all due to the dedication and determination of our housing specialists and close working relationship with DVS. Thankfully, just before COVID-19 struck, SSVF had gone paperless, uploading all client files into AWARDs, positioning us to work remotely with full access to veterans' records and continue services to them without interruption. SSVF is a CARF-accredited program, and, having passed the rigorous vetting process required to earn that accreditation, VOA-Greater New York is not required to submit the high volume of material other organizations must when the VA posts a Notice of Funds Availability (NOFA). Instead, we are given priority, a privilege for which we are appreciative that also speaks to the trust the VA has in us to deliver strong outcomes for our veterans.

At the other end of the continuum is VOA-Greater New York's permanent, supportive housing. We are the largest provider of such housing for veterans in NYC, housing nearly 638 veterans, 297 veterans in two residential settings strictly for veterans, and another 444 veterans in our general population SROs through Section 8 vouchers last year.

VOA-Greater New York is the sole provider of supportive housing in City-owned single room occupancy residences (SROs) including our two sites for veterans, East 119th Street Veterans Residence in Manhattan and Commonwealth Veterans Residence in the Bronx. As with our other SROs, these were not constructed to house older adults, and as our veterans age in place (nationwide nearly 50% of veterans are 65+) these properties simply do not meet their needs. Several years ago, we proposed to the City that they sell these properties to us for \$1 so that we could rehabilitate them into living environments our veterans deserve. The response to our request was positive but this has not yet been realized. In the meantime, one crucial upgrade – particularly with the ongoing pandemic – is to bring reliable internet access to these

sites. While we have transitioned to electronic records at Commonwealth and are in process of doing so at E 119th Street, we still need a way to capture client signatures and help our veterans access telehealth. Beyond the lack of hardware – tablets for staff and smart phones for clients – internet access is entirely inadequate. East 119th Street has been without internet for one month and service providers tell us they cannot resolve the issue because the building’s wiring is too old, in addition to connectivity in that area not being strong to begin with.

In 2015, VOA-Greater New York was one of the original nonprofits to participate on the Continuum of Care Veteran Executive Task Force whose mission was to end veteran homelessness. That mission has essentially been achieved. Tragically, the rate of veteran suicide (approximately 15 per day) still remains high.

Unique to Volunteers of America is our innovative Battle Buddy Bridge program (B3), which has two main goals: train and certify graduates to become Veteran Peer Specialists (“Battle Buddies”), a marketable certification recognized by the VA and others, and to provide a lifeline to struggling, service-resistant veterans. As one B3 graduate said so poignantly, *“Before I came to be a peer counselor, I was unemployable and suicidal. All I could think about was how much of a rotten deal I had gotten from society and how no one cared if I lived or died. Helping other vets in the program, I began to see my role as someone who could help my clients (fellow vets) find value in themselves despite their trauma. It changed my life... I still may be living in an SRO, but now when I go to sleep, I know I’ve done something to help a fellow vet...and that makes all the difference.”*

The value of peer support – both giving and receiving it – is invaluable, especially among veterans. After returning to civilian life, veterans often crave structure and a “mission” they can serve, missing the “I’ve got your back” culture they belonged to when serving alongside their military brothers and sisters. Veterans in crisis are more likely to accept help from fellow veterans than from a civilian, and typically, it does not matter in which branch of the military the peer served. It is enough that the person “wore the uniform.”

Peer-to-peer interventions succeed where civilian case managers and others have tried to help but failed. B3’s Battle Buddies have personally experienced traumas before, during or after the military. They have had their own issues with homelessness or substance use, and the veterans they are helping feel they have someone who truly understands, whom they can trust. Upon successful completion of the two-week B3 training program, participants are officially certified as Veteran Peer Specialists, are considered Battle Buddies for the B3 program, and participate in a two-week paid internship where they are assigned to a veteran to assist. Serving as community resource navigators, Battle Buddies do whatever their peers need, accompanying them to medical or benefits appointments or even meetings with their case manager or other helping professionals, referring them to training, employment, legal and suicide prevention services. Prior to the pandemic, one Battle Buddy heard that his assigned veteran had been hospitalized and, knowing he did not have a family to visit him, stayed by his side at the hospital.

While many veterans are not actively looking for employment, especially those who are older, chronically homeless, or have significant medical or behavioral health issues, there are others who want to work but have not been able to transition to civilian employment. We are in the process of leveraging our extensive experience managing our own properties to develop a workforce training program that leads to certification in the building maintenance and repairs trades, including plumbing, electrical work, and painting, among others, to meet the growing demand for skilled labor in NYC and move our clients along to financial resilience.

VOA-Greater New York is at the forefront of developing purpose-built affordable housing and has the relationships to bring developments effectively and efficiently to market. Within the next few weeks, VOA-Greater New York will bring its newest affordable housing program for low-income seniors with set-asides for chronically homeless seniors, online. East Clarke Place Senior Residence is a direct response to the housing crisis in New York City and the need for subsidized housing for older adults with all the services and accessible features they need to be able to “age in place”. These features were designed with the unique needs of seniors in mind — to help ensure that they are safe, healthy, and connected to a caring community.

Financing sources for this \$69 million development project included Reso A grants from Council Member Vanessa Gibson and Bronx Borough President Ruben Diaz, HPD's Senior Affordable Rental Apartments (SARA) Program, HDC's Extremely Low- and Low-Income Affordability (ELLA) Program, NYS Energy Research and Development Authority Funds, and tax credit equity.

I thank you for your support of the men and women who have served our country through military service and urge you to advocate for funding in these areas that would significantly impact their lives:

1. Fund a Benefits Coordinator position in every supportive housing program for veterans to ensure they are aware of and access all benefits for which they are eligible;
2. Fund Veteran Peer Specialist positions in each veterans residence who can serve alongside civilian case managers who are having difficulty engaging at-risk veterans;
3. Expand funding for SSVF to include after care, so that we can remain in contact with veterans and their families once they are stable and in permanent housing and can become aware of impending crises and intervene before it is too late to do so;
4. Fund Battle Buddy Bridge (B3), with the eventual goal of establishing a network of trained Battle Buddies to leverage the unique bonds of military culture to connect with hard-to-reach veterans who lack support, services and are at risk of suicide;
5. Fund a workforce training program to train and certify homeless men and women, including veterans, who want to work, in trades like plumbing, tiling, painting, etc. for prevailing wage jobs;
6. Finalize the transfer of E 119th Street Veterans Residence and eventually, Commonwealth Veterans Residence, to VOA-Greater New York's ownership so that we can convert these city-owned properties into ones that our veterans deserve, in particular as they age in place.

Respectfully submitted by:

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