



**Testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Women and Gender Equity  
Oversight – Barriers to Accessing Survivor Services in NYC  
February 22, 2022**

**Introduction and Thanks:**

My name is Patrick Boyle, and I am the Assistant Vice President for Public Policy at Volunteers of America-Greater New York (VOA-GNY). We are the local affiliate of the national organization, Volunteers of America, Inc. (VOA). I would like to thank Chair Cabán and the members of this Committee for the opportunity to submit the following testimony.

**About Us:**

VOA-GNY is an anti-poverty organization that aims to end homelessness in Greater New York by 2050 through housing, health and wealth building services. We are one of the region's largest human service providers, impacting more than 11,000 adults and children annually through 66 programs in New York City, Northern New Jersey, and Westchester County. We are also an active nonprofit developer of supportive and affordable housing, with a robust portfolio of award-winning permanent supportive housing, affordable and senior housing properties—with more in the pipeline.

**Oversight – Barriers to Accessing Survivor Services in NYC:**

First, we thank the Chair and this Committee for so early in the session calling this hearing about such an important and overlooked topic. At VOA-GNY we have a long history of service to women in vulnerable situations, and currently run seven residential facilities for women and families escaping domestic violence (DV).

Our staff are hardworking and dedicated professionals who are trained in the kind of trauma-informed care that is necessary to best serve the unique and challenging circumstances of this population. Our staff have informed the following feedback on some of the barriers to accessing services and seeking help:

Better Training for Initial 'Touchpoint': The first step in the process of a women escaping a DV situation is often an interaction with law enforcement or a medical professional. Our staff has seen time and time again that a positive interaction here is facilitated by proper training, including an ability to understand the signs of DV and how to properly refer the individual to service options. Unfortunately, this does not always occur. Insensitivity, an aggressive tone or other failures to take the situation seriously lead to the client not getting on the right path and can discourage further attempts to seek help. We need to examine training requirements for professionals who encounter DV.

Length of Stay: The maximum length of stay for a residential DV program is 180 days. The feedback we have gotten is that it is often simply not long enough. Trauma-informed care is a patient process that is often seeking to address years of trauma and start a true rebuilding process that often includes needing to get on stable footing financially and a search to find safe, permanent, affordable housing.

Housing Issues: As with so many different populations, access to affordable housing is a major challenge. Our clients face source of income discrimination and long odds through the Housing Connect lottery process. We need to add significantly to our housing supply; unfortunately, the mayor's proposed budget reverses a campaign promise to add \$1.5 billion to the HPD capital funding. Constrained housing supply keeps women in unsafe situations for longer.

Undocumented Status: Our DV clients who are undocumented face some of the biggest barriers to safe and independent living. This is due to the benefits they are not eligible for, which are critical to the financial security needed to leave a violent situation. Their housing options are also more limited, with housing placement being the most challenging part of the process.

The Referral Process: Our programs and the clients we serve would benefit from a more transparent and streamlined process of referrals. Referrals from City agencies alone would not fill the vacancies we have across various sites, which are filled due to our staff's close relationships, established over time, with the local police precinct, hospitals and District Attorneys offices. Additionally, a more streamlined process from moving a client from an emergency shelter to one of the tier 2 shelters it operates would be beneficial in establishing a relationship with that client across one provider. Instead, the client goes through a centralized recertification that may move them to another provider.

Chair Cabán, we thank you again for this hearing and are happy to continue the conversation with this Committee to make improvements in this process.

*Respectfully submitted by:*  
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