

FY 2026 Executive Budget Testimony
Health and Human Services Budget
Wednesday, February 12, 2025
At 9:30 A.M., Legislative Office Building, Hearing Room B

Good morning, Chairs Krueger and Pretlow, and esteemed members of the Senate and Assembly.

I am Viviana DeCohen, Commissioner of the New York State Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) and a proud United States Marine Corps Veteran.

It is an honor to provide testimony on Governor Hochul's Fiscal Year 2026 Executive Budget as it relates to Veterans' Services.

The mission of our department is to connect Veterans, members of the armed forces, and their families to the economic, medical, and social benefits and services they have earned through active-duty military service and assist with their transition back to civilian life.

Governor Hochul has been a true friend – and strong ally – to Veterans and Military Families, prioritizing the policies, programs, and services so vital to their wellbeing and success.

The Governor increased funding to local Veterans' service agencies, expanding investment in Veteran peer-to-peer support programming that is critical to Veterans' mental health and wellness.

Under Governor Hochul's leadership, and with the support and partnership of the Assembly and Senate, DVS has continually advanced that mission, successfully expanding our reach, statewide visibility, and partnership with the Veterans' community.

Through our "Operation Find and Serve," focused on getting out across the state to reach Veterans where they live, work, and play, we have successfully connected more New York Veterans with the state and federal benefits that they have earned through their military service.

DVS builds relationships and earns the trust of all who have served – we do not assume the Veterans' voice, but instead listen and learn their needs, so we can best advocate and deliver for them.

2024 was an especially impactful year for our department.

We launched our Veterans Emergency Housing Program, as well as three Mobile Outreach Units, and continued our innovative partnership with HelloFresh that will, in just a few weeks, reach the marvelous milestone of providing the two millionth meal for Veterans, Service Members, and Military Families!

Additionally, we continued promoting our Veterans Welcome Center Digital Kiosks to continue innovative pathways that connect Veterans with benefits and services, expanded our partnerships to ensure that no Veteran or their family goes without essentials, and organized outreach events statewide participating in an incredible one hundred and fifty four special events during November for Veterans Month, and five hundred and forty three in-person and virtual outreach events throughout the year. These efforts complement our department's impactful claims work.

Our accredited Veterans Benefits Advisors (VBAs), all former service members themselves, secure substantial annual federal VA benefits for New York State Veterans and dependents – and the numbers speak to our successes.

For 2024, DVS assisted ten thousand six hundred and ninety-two Veterans seeking to submit benefits' claims to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs and, as a result, submitted twelve thousand and sixty-nine claims for these Veterans.

In 2024, appellants represented by our department have received over four million dollars in retroactive payments from the VA.

As the leading Veterans claims accreditation training entity in New York State, DVS accredits and trains partners to file Veterans claims on the department's behalf via our Power of Attorney (POA).

Any entity officially accredited by DVS, including county partners and nonprofits, can submit such claims and these filings help measure the effectiveness of their Veterans' advocacy work.

By prioritizing Fully Developed Claims, DVS significantly reduced waiting times, ensuring swift access for Veterans to deserved benefits.

I would like to pivot from my departmental overview to the Governor's 2026 Fiscal Year Executive Budget and share my perspective as DVS Commissioner and as a Veteran.

The Governor's Fiscal Year 2026 Executive Budget builds upon and strengthens this steadfast commitment to Veterans, in particular the budget includes three key initiatives for Veterans and Military Families which, if adopted, would be well received with great praise from the Veterans and Military Families.

The first focuses on expanding the Gold Star Parent Annuity to encompass the families of Service Members who give their lives for their country in both non-combat and combat theaters.

While New York State honors families of fallen service members, the current Gold Star Parent Annuity Program, which DVS administers, provides benefits to parents of Service Members who died in combat but excludes spouses, children, and families of those who die during non-combat active duty.

Governor Hochul proposed legislation to expand this program to now include ALL immediate family members of Service Members who die while on active duty.

The second initiative focuses on building upon the track record of success achieved by New York State's delegation to the federal Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide for Service Members, Veterans, and Military Families.

Governor Hochul proposed a one-million-dollar investment to expand suicide prevention initiatives for Veterans including enhanced risk assessment training, outreach tools, gun safety programs, and improved access to tele-mental health services for Veterans statewide.

I cannot overstate the life-saving importance of this initiative and investment.

As you know, tragically, suicide rates for New York's Veterans are significantly higher than the general population, driven by high rates of post-traumatic stress and depression.

Through the national Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and Military Families, New York has developed innovative approaches to reducing veteran suicides.

The third initiative allocates three hundred and fifty thousand dollars for Military Family Relief Fund, equipping our department to augment existing programs and promote new endeavors to meet frequent needs of Military Families across our state and improve the quality of their lives.

Collectively, if adopted, these measures would be universally acclaimed by the Veterans and Military Families of New York, positively change lives and, in some instances, save lives.

In closing, Governor Hochul's 2025 State of the State proposals and Fiscal Year 26 Executive Budget reinforce her administration's unwavering dedication to Veterans' well-being and serving and honoring the men and women of our armed forces.

DVS looks forward to assisting in every way that we can to help bring these initiatives to fruition during the State Budget process and continuing to work with you, and all stakeholders, in meeting Veterans' needs.

This concludes my testimony. I look forward to answering any questions you may have.