



**THE CENTER FOR POLICY, ADVOCACY, AND EDUCATION
OF THE MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK CITY**

SUPPORT A VETERANS' MENTAL HEALTH AND CHEMICAL DEPENDENCY ACT

Testimony by Michael B. Friedman, LMSW
At a Hearing of the New York State Assembly
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My name is Michael Friedman, and I am the Director of the Center for Policy, Advocacy, and Education of the Mental Health Association of NYC. I am also Co-Founder and Facilitator of the Veterans' Mental Health Coalition of NYC and of the Veterans' Action Committee of NYC, on whose behalf I am speaking today.

We urge you to sponsor a Veterans' Mental Health and Chemical Dependency Act in New York State. John Jarvis and Wendy Brennan have already noted the great need to address the mental health and chemical dependency problems of service members, veterans, and their families. I just want to emphasize that a small portion of these needs will, or can be, met by the Federal Veterans' Administration. Only 25% of veterans use the Federal VA for health or mental health care. More would if the VA had more resources and thereby provided greater access, but many veterans prefer to return fully to civilian life and turn to local providers when they need health, mental health or chemical dependency services. The responsibility to improve access to, and quality of, local services lies with the state. That is why we are calling on New York State to enact the Veterans' Mental Health and Chemical Dependency Act.

Because we understand the fiscal crisis in New York State, we are proposing a modest bill and asking for just \$1 million to implement it. That's \$1 per veteran. Surely a state that will find many millions of dollars that are needed for education and health care, can find \$1 for each of the veterans who have served their country so selflessly and often at great personal cost.

Here in a nutshell is what we propose.

- The development of **COMPREHENSIVE** veterans' mental health and chemical dependency plan (Details attached.)
- Open communication with the public about progress serving veterans and their families
- A priority for veterans in New York State's suicide prevention efforts
- A program to educate the general public about mental health and chemical dependency, their treatment, and where to find resources. This program should be designed to reduce the stigma that is so damaging to service members, veterans, and their families.
- A far more extensive training initiative for professionals and paraprofessionals who serve veterans with mental health and/or chemical dependency problems and their families
- Inclusion veterans' mental health funding and policy improvements on New York State's federal lobbying agenda.

Are these proposals the only way to take a step forward in NYS? Certainly not. We believe that they are both achievable and potentially valuable. But we are open to alternatives and stand ready to work with you and the administration to shape an act that brings us all together to more fully address the mental health and chemical dependency needs of New York State's brave veterans and their families.

Thank you.