

Strengthening Support for Veterans: New York State Department of Veterans' Services

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Abstract:

This paper analyzes the transformation of the New York State Division of Veterans' Services into a standalone Department in 2023—the state's first new agency in over 50 years. It explores how this shift has impacted budget allocations, service delivery, and outreach to New York's diverse Veteran population. Drawing on national best practices and data-driven insights, the paper evaluates whether the department's expanded resources are effectively addressing Veterans' needs. It also highlights opportunities for innovation, collaboration, and improved support systems to better serve those who have served.

Executive Summary

On April 1, 2023, New York State elevated its Division of Veterans' Services to the New York State Department of Veterans' Services, marking the creation of the state's first new agency in over 50 years. Originally founded in 1945 to help World War II veterans transition to civilian life, the Division previously operated under the New York State Executive Department, which oversees services not assigned to other departments. Now a standalone department, it functions as a one-stop-shop for the state's veterans. This initiative involved an additional budget to increase access to resources as well as innovative programming. Despite having one of the largest veteran populations in the country, New York allocates only about \$26 per veteran from its \$220 billion budget, compared to hundreds of dollars per veteran in smaller states. As New York strengthens its commitment to providing comprehensive services for veterans, it is crucial to assess whether public investments are effectively addressing the needs of this population.

Introduction

Veterans make up a small but significant portion of the U.S. population, with approximately 6.4% having served in the military. Each year, around 200,000 servicemembers transition from military to civilian life, bringing with them a wealth of skills and training that can greatly benefit the civilian workforce. Despite their capabilities, the challenges many veterans face after service are deeply concerning, particularly in areas such as access to care, mental and physical health, homelessness, and employment. The need for expanded support is gravely highlighted by the National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report of 2022, which reveals that an estimated 17 veterans die by suicide each day. Alarmingly, around 60% of those who died by suicide in 2020 had no prior contact with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), underscoring significant gaps in outreach and accessibility to vital mental health services.

Furthermore, research shows that over 30% of veterans live with a disability—a rate twice as high as the general civilian population—compounding the difficulties they face in reintegration and access to support systems.

Recognizing these pressing issues, New York State has made expanding its services for veterans a priority. While veterans receive a majority of their care and benefits from the federal Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), it is clear that more needs to be done to connect veterans to the resources they have earned with their military service. By addressing critical gaps in outreach, enhancing access to benefits and resources, and implementing innovative programs, the state is taking significant steps to ensure that veterans receive the comprehensive support they need to thrive in civilian life. This paper examines how New York State is transforming its approach to supporting veterans.

Population

New York State is home to a significant and diverse veteran population, ranking fifth in the nation with approximately 790,000 veterans in 2018. This represents a substantial portion of the 20.3 million veterans across the United States at that time. While the vast majority of New York's veterans are male (92%), the proportion of female veterans is steadily rising and is projected to surpass 10% by 2025. The veteran community in New York reflects the broader trends of increasing diversity seen nationwide. In 2018, minorities accounted for 23% of New York's veteran population, a figure expected to rise to nearly 30% by 2030. Among these groups, Black or African American veterans comprised the largest segment, numbering approximately 91,000 or 12% of the total. Hispanic veterans made up the next largest group, with 67,000 individuals, or 9% of the veteran population. (New York State Health Foundation, 2021)

This evolving demographic landscape underscores the need for targeted services and programs that address the unique challenges and opportunities faced by New York's veterans. The New York State Department of Veterans' Services plays a critical role in meeting these needs, advocating for and delivering comprehensive support to those who have served the nation.

Literature Review

The report, "Innovation in State-Level Veterans Services: A Comprehensive Review, Case Highlights, and an Agenda for Enhanced State Impact," provides an in-depth analysis of state-level veterans affairs agencies across the United States. While it does not specifically focus on New York, the insights offered are significantly relevant to enhancing the New York State Division of Veterans' Services. The study identifies several key factors of success for state Departments of Veterans Affairs (DVAs) that are applicable to New York. Organizational arrangement is highlighted as important, with the report outlining criteria for high-performing DVAs, also including leadership continuity, directors with diverse work experience, funding stability, agency independence, political engagement, financial stability, and service delivery. Financial stability is emphasized as essential, with diverse and reliable funding sources enabling long-term planning and alignment with other state service providers. Additionally, service delivery is noted as a key factor, requiring coordination with state and nongovernmental service providers, specialized communication strategies, and strategic planning. The study concludes with a management agenda that New York can adopt to enhance its services. These recommendations include stable and effective leadership, a clear understanding of veterans' needs, improved collaboration across sectors and agencies, active engagement with policymakers, adequate and diversified funding, logical role allocation among stakeholders, a revised strategic plan with specific performance goals, tailored communication and outreach

strategies, and the adoption of innovative practices from other states. By leveraging these findings, New York can strengthen its support for veterans and their families, by empowering its leadership and allocating funding to create sustainability for supportive programs and resources.

The chapter "Exploring Veteran Success Through State-Level Administrative Data Sets" discusses the critical role of state-level longitudinal data collection in understanding and improving student veteran success in higher education. It highlights the advantages of data systems, which provide comprehensive insights into student veterans' educational trajectories, financial needs, and outcomes. These systems enable tracking of students across multiple institutions and sectors, offering a perspective on the experiences of nontraditional students like veterans and can inform data-driven decisions such as funding and resource allocation. The authors emphasize the importance of data-informed policymaking, institutional enhancement, and advancing broader statewide educational goals, as well as identify substantial barriers to effective data collection, including restrictive policies and insufficient resource allocation. Using Virginia as a case study, the chapter illustrates how even well-established systems may fail to gather critical information on student veterans due to narrow legislative mandates and funding constraints. This chapter underscores the importance of data-driven decision making when allocating resources to support specific populations, such as student veterans, and drive systemic improvements in higher education. To continue supporting New York's expansion of Veterans' Services, it should include a plan for a data collection and analysis to ensure it meets the needs of its veteran population.

The 2019 report, Strategic Roadmap for the New York State Division of Veterans' Services (DVS), identifies critical areas for improvement, including organizational structure, financial stability, and service delivery, advocating for DVS to evolve into a standalone

department. While the DVS was already an independent agency with cabinet-level representation, the report emphasized the potential for more direct reporting to the Governor. It also highlighted a significant disparity in financial support, with New York spending only \$26 per veteran compared to the \$189 national average for independent DVAs, underscoring the need for increased and diversified funding sources (Birnbaum et al., 2019). Regarding service delivery, the DVS was primarily focused on benefits and claims assistance but needed to enhance coordination with state and non-governmental service providers, develop specialized outreach strategies, and adopt innovative practices from other states. The report pointed to successful models for consideration: Ohio's departmental reorganization for structural improvements, Texas's cost-sharing approach to support local services for financial sustainability, and Michigan's coordinating body strategy for more effective service delivery. Best practices from each of these states appear to have been considered when establishing the New York Department of Veterans' Services in 2023.

The RAND report "Understanding Veterans in New York" offers insights from a survey of 1,122 recently discharged or separated service members living in New York State. The study examined veterans' needs, health, well-being, and obstacles to accessing services. Notable findings included significant mental health challenges, with 25% experiencing probable depression and 26% probable PTSD. Physical health concerns were also common, with around 20% rating their health as "fair" or "poor." Food insecurity affected about a quarter of respondents. Although 97% had health insurance, many faced unmet healthcare needs, especially in mental health services. While veterans generally viewed VA healthcare positively, many did not fully utilize available benefits. The report recommends expanding access to mental health care, prioritizing suicide prevention, and improving outreach to increase awareness of benefits

and services (Phillips et al., 2024). As DVS looks to its future of developing and implementing innovative programming, these needs should be addressed in its planning.

To effectively address the needs of New York's veterans, a stronger state-level effort has been necessary to bridge service gaps left at the federal and local levels. The New York State Department of Veterans' Services plays a vital role in linking veterans to benefits and services that enhance care and quality of life. Their outreach efforts are critical in engaging veterans within their communities and guiding them through the often complex processes of accessing local and national benefits and services.

New York State Department of Veterans' Services

The New York State Department of Veterans' Services provides a wide range of programs and resources to support veterans and their families. DVS assists with accessing federal, state, and local benefits, including healthcare, education, housing, and employment opportunities. The department helps veterans navigate the complexities of the national VA claims and appeals, ensuring they receive the benefits they have earned, while also educating veterans about additional benefits and resources they may be eligible for. DVS offers programs to address mental health and wellness, advocates for veteran-friendly policies, and fosters community engagement through events and partnerships. Additionally, the department oversees initiatives like the Veterans Cemetery and capital improvement grants for veteran service organizations, demonstrating its commitment to honoring and empowering the veteran community. Connecting veterans to care and benefits provides the support that can play a critical role in reducing the poor outcomes seen in veteran populations across the country.

Budget Analysis

The following table shares the population and New York State budget for Veterans' Services 2019 – 2023.

	NYS Division of Veterans' Services				NYS Department of Veterans' Services
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Number of Veterans in NY State	718,000	737,765	714,107	688,611	663,437
DVS Offices	55	55	52	50	52
VA-Accredited DVS Employees	95	76	87	87	88
Administration	\$480,000	\$480,000	\$480,000	\$490,000	\$1,006,000
Veterans Benefits Advising Program	\$6,242,000	\$6,242,000	\$6,242,000	\$7,646,000	\$8,077,000
Veterans Education	\$2,025,000	\$2,025,000	\$2,025,000	\$2,118,000	\$2,154,000
Veterans Cemetery				\$4,900,000	\$1,800,000
Aid to Localities	\$12,004,000	\$12,284,000	\$10,859,000	\$13,979,000	\$14,224,000
Special Revenue - Federal	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000	\$500,000
Special Revenue - Other					\$1,100,000
State Operations Reappropriations	\$4,882,000	\$4,627,000		\$5,293,000	\$5,208,000
Aid to Localities Reappropriations	\$11,920,000	\$12,813,000		\$18,304,000	\$23,110,000
Capital Projects					\$9,000,000
Agency Total	\$38,053,000	\$38,971,000	\$19,626,000	\$53,230,000	\$66,179,000

When Veterans' Services transitioned to a standalone department, administrative costs more than doubled, even though the number of employees and offices remained nearly unchanged. Despite a decline in the veteran population, New York has continued its commitment to enhancing and expanding support services for veterans. An exception occurred in 2021 when

much of the state's funding was redirected to address the COVID-19 pandemic. One significant new initiative is the Veterans Cemetery, whose initial costs covered land acquisition and the establishment of the cemetery, which officially opened in 2023. After these initial expenses, ongoing maintenance will require less funding, enabling the DVS to reallocate resources to other priorities. For example, the Capital Projects program has provided \$9 million in grants to veteran membership organizations, such as the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, for facility improvements, reflecting the state's dedication to supporting its veteran community, and encouraging more localized services for connecting veterans to care and community.

From 2019 to 2021, the budget for DVS, specifically allocated for Veteran Benefit Advising, remained unchanged at \$6,242,000. This stagnation may reflect fiscal constraints or the prioritization of maintaining existing advising services during a challenging economic period, including the statewide response to COVID-19. In 2022, the budget increased significantly to \$7,646,000, a 22.5% growth, demonstrating a prioritization of advising programs to assist veterans in accessing benefits such as healthcare, housing, and education. This growth continued in 2023, with the budget rising to \$8,077,000, a 5.6% increase. While this growth was more modest than the previous year, it highlights ongoing efforts to strengthen the Veteran Benefit Advising Program, ensuring that veterans receive the support needed to navigate available resources effectively.

The overall budget for the New York State Department of Veterans' Services experienced significant fluctuations from 2019 to 2023, reflecting both the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to strengthen services for veterans through innovative programs. From 2019 to 2020, the budget saw a modest increase from \$38,053,000 to \$38,971,000, a growth of approximately 2.4%. This increase suggests a continuation of the department's existing priorities

and gradual expansion of services. In 2021, however, the budget dropped dramatically to \$19,626,000, representing a 49.7% decrease from the previous year. This reduction was likely a result of the fiscal challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, as state governments across the country reallocated resources to address public health emergencies and economic recovery efforts. The budget began to recover in 2022, when it grew to \$53,230,000, an increase of 171% compared to 2021. This rebound reflects a renewed commitment to supporting veterans, potentially through the restoration of previously scaled-back programs and the introduction of new initiatives. In 2023, the budget grew even further to \$66,179,000, marking a 24.3% increase from 2022. This continued growth highlights an investment in innovative programs designed to address the evolving needs of veterans, such as mental health support, job training, housing assistance, and modernized benefit delivery systems.

Conclusion

The establishment of the New York State Department of Veterans' Services represents a significant effort in addressing the unique needs of the state's veteran population. By transforming into a standalone agency, DVS is better positioned to deliver comprehensive services, expand outreach, and close critical service gaps left at the federal and local levels. Analysis reveals persistent challenges, including underfunding relative to other states and a growing demand for supportive services, as well successes with the allocation of additional funds to new programs. To maximize the impact of this initiative, New York must prioritize data-driven policymaking, diversify funding sources, and enhance collaboration across government and non-governmental organizations. By adopting proven strategies from other states and leveraging its new departmental structure, New York can ensure its veterans receive the care, resources, and opportunities they have earned with their sacrifices and military service. Strengthening these

efforts will not only improve quality of life outcomes for veterans but also reinforce their vital contributions to the state's communities and economy.

Resources

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