**Statement of**

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Chairman DenDekker, Chairwomen Hunter, and members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for the opportunity to address you today on the topic of veteran unemployment – with a specific focus on the effectiveness of employment programs that assist transitioning servicemen and women obtain gainful employment following their military discharge.

More broadly, I would like to say – as a military veteran myself – that I appreciate the ongoing efforts of this committee and subcommittee, in support of those men and women who have shouldered the burden of our nation’s defense.

I’ll begin my remarks by highlighting to the Committee, that September 12th of this year marked a dubious milestone, in the story of our nation’s longest sustained period of military conflict. Specifically, September 12th represented the date upon which an American citizen born after 9/11, could enlist in the U.S. military, and subsequently join the ranks of the now more than 4-million Americans who have shouldered the burden of America’s post-9/11 wars. In this regard, it’s important to recognize that our post-9/11 wars represent the first sustained conflict in U.S. history, to be carried out by a military composed entirely of volunteers.

I recognize this fact to also highlight that one of the foundational assumptions of the all-volunteer military is the proposition that military service will confer – to those who volunteer – very specific post-service advantages in exchange for service to the nation. Some of those advantages include access to educational opportunity, subsidized medical care, and certain types of specialized training that might otherwise be inaccessible to broad segments of the population.

However, the most critical assumption of the all-volunteer military – the narrative central to most military recruiting campaigns – is the proposition that voluntary military service will create and accelerate pathways to civilian jobs and careers. In fact, post-service employment ranks among the most pressing concerns expressed by military members, veterans, and their families. This is because for many Americans, military service stands out as one of the last accessible pathways to socioeconomic mobility.

Given this fact, after 17 years of sustained war, has the nation – and New York State – delivered on the ‘promise’ that military service experience aligns with and enhances employment opportunities after service?

On the whole, the story told by data suggests that throughout much of the past decade, the rate of unemployment experienced by veterans has exceed that of the non-veteran population. In some cases – for our youngest veterans, Native American veterans, women veterans, and those with disabilities – the differences have been extreme.

In 2017, the national veteran unemployment averaged 3.7% – a positive trend. It’s also true that there is ‘more to the story.’ For example, it’s also the case that roughly one third of veterans who found work after service, are at the same time underemployed at a rate 15% higher than their non-veteran counterparts. When considering the impact of employment on the family, it’s also important to consider that the current unemployment rate for military spouses is [approaching 10%](https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Military-Spouses-in-the-Labor-Market.pdf). According to a recent study conducted by the Syracuse University’s Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) and the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) – as many as [90% of active duty military spouses](http://www.moaa.org/Content/Publications-and-Media/MOAA-Blog/Military-Spouse-Employment-Report.aspx) are underemployed.

What story does that data tell about veterans in New York State?

According to the most recent data from the American Community Survey, just over 5% of New York State residents are military veterans (789,533 total veterans). That same dataset highlights that the rate of unemployment among New York Veterans exceeds the national average, and that of other states across the Northeast. Further, the State’s youngest veterans – those 18-34 – are unemployed at a rate of 13%. This situation is particularly problematic.

Unemployment, particularly among the youngest veterans, has been linked by research to a host of troublesome social and wellness outcomes, including troubling suicide rates among veterans. Over the past five years, approximately 22 veterans each day die by suicide. A recent study released by the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs highlights that the rates of suicide among young veterans have – somewhat unexpectedly – spiked over the past two years.

I know that particularly salient to this committee are issues related to women veterans. A [research brief published by Syracuse’s IVMF](https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/article/women-military-service-civilian-life-infographic/) highlights how and why women in the military face barriers to post-service employment that are substantively different as compared to their male counterparts. Sixty-seven percent f women veterans described their financial transition as difficult, compared to 47% of men. Throughout much of the past decade, women veterans have experienced unemployment at rates significantly higher as compared to men, and also as compared to non-veteran women.

Given all of these facts, I’d like to frame the remainder of my remarks in the context of actionable opportunities, positioned to benefit our State’s veterans, and more broadly all those who call New York State home.

First, it has long been true that the most reliable pipeline of volunteers to serve the cause of the nation’s defense, originates from those families who are already serving. To that end, we must ensure that the career aspirations and economic well-being of our military-connected families are a top priority – because this is how New York State contributes to our nation’s defense. New York State is home to a significant population of military families, assigned to our various military installations. That said, most of the State’s military-connected employment programs are not inclusive of military spouses. The opportunity associated with creating access to such programs for military spouses, serving in New York State, is strong. It is also the ‘right’ thing to do.

Related to this opportunity, it’s important to note that state-level policy issues impacting occupational licensing requirements disproportionately affect both veterans and spouses. Fifty-percent of military spouses aspire to employment in careers that require occupational licensing, which is most often not easily transferable between states. New York State recently passed a law that allows military spouses a waiver for some occupational licensing requirements, which is an excellent start. However, more can be done on the issue of job portability for military spouses.

I also want to speak to the opportunity to better leverage the State’s educational institutions as both an opportunity to better serve New York veterans and create an important economic development opportunity.

Veterans of the post-9/11 generation have access to the most generous educational benefit afforded to veterans since World War II. The ‘Forever GI Bill” will fully fund a degree at any SUNY institution, and provide significant funding toward a degree at any of New York State’s private colleges and universities. Currently, there are 31,000 veterans in New York State utilizing the GI Bill. However, [VA data shows 16%](https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill/comparison_tool.asp) of those users attend an online, for-profit institution, as opposed to traditional option in New York State. Not only does this fact highlight a missed financial opportunity for New York State’s colleges and Universities, it also speaks to a missed opportunity related to workforce development.

New York State’s colleges and universities represent a natural talent pipeline for the State’s employers, and veterans and military spouses represent a unique talent pool. [Veterans are](https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-Business-Case-for-Hiring-a-VeteranACC_2.21.18.pdf) entrepreneurial: they show high levels of trust; they are adept at skills transfer across tasks; they have and leverage advanced technical training; and they are comfortable in discontinuous environments. Military [spouses typically demonstrate resilience](https://ivmf.syracuse.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/ForceBehindtheForce.BusinessCaseforLeveragingMilitarySpouseTalentACC_02.21.18.pdf), adaptability, and an entrepreneurial nature. Bridging the educational pathways available to veterans and military spouses in New York State, to the State’s employers, should be a priority. To realize this end, New York State’s colleges and universities must embrace the State’s veterans and military family members.

In this regard, I’d suggest that the efforts on my own University might represent a blueprint for others. In November, the *Military Times* – the most influential publication in the military community – named Syracuse University the #1 ranked private University in America for veterans. We’ve opened our doors widely to the nation’s veterans, and today count almost 1,300 military-connected students. Next year, Syracuse University will open the National Veterans Resource Center, a state-of-the-art facility that will serve as a center of excellence for the State and the nation, related to advancing the social, economic, and wellness concerns of veterans and their families. In that regard, I’d like to acknowledge Governor Cuomo and the Legislature, for supporting this groundbreaking project. The National Veterans Resource Center is one-of-a-kind facility in America, and represents a project that will distinguish New York State.

Finally, I’ll conclude by highlighting that State Legislatures, and state Departments of Veterans Affairs, are underutilized tools in the fight to serve our military-connected community. In the coming year, the IVMF will release the nation’s first comprehensive assessment of all state level departments of veterans’ affairs. Through our research, it’s clear that – while much good work has been done – there is plenty yet to accomplish. I look forward to sharing that report with this Committee. That said, in advance of that report, I would like to highlight some of what we’ve learned from that effort.

Specifically, we’ve come to recognize the key role that state governments can play in delivering ‘boots on the ground’ services to the veterans, as it pertains to unemployment. The most forward-leaning states focus on smart, high impact programs and legislation like interstate compacts for military spouses, who move in and out of the state and work in licensed occupations. The most forward-leaning states continue to find ways to provide veterans with the highest quality education, providing affordable and attainable alternatives to for-profit colleges. The most forward-leaning states are relentless in their efforts to promote veteran and military spouse employment to the state’s employers, and opportunities to grow and support veteran-owned business, with some states providing incentives to that end. Syracuse University and Syracuse University’s Institute for Veterans and Military Families is eager to be a partner with New York State, to make help our state the best place or veterans.

To conclude, I return to where I started. Our post-9/11 wars represent this nation’s first extended test of the all-volunteer force. Importantly, the assumption most central to sustaining the all-volunteer force is the proposition that military service will create and accelerate pathways to civilian jobs and careers. Unfortunately today, many veterans continue to struggle to find work at rates comparable to their civilian peers. In this regard, New York State has an opportunity to be visionary in its approach to promoting the economic well-being of our military-connected community. We must pay close attention to the data, and focus our efforts through evidence-based employment programs. We must take the initiative to ensure that New York State’s veterans and military families are empowered act on the American Dream that they defend while in uniform. This, is our moral obligation.