

***Northeastern Pennsylvania
Veterans Multi-Care Alliance
77 Water Street, Wilkes-Barre, PA 18702***

*Sam Greenberg - President
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**Testimony
To
The Senate Veterans Affairs & Energy Preparedness Committee
April 20th 2010**

The Northeastern Pennsylvania Veterans Multicare Alliance, Inc. (NEPA-VMA), a 501 (c)(3) not for profit Pennsylvania corporation, was established over three (3) years ago. At that time, "returning" Veterans and their families, as well as Veterans from previous wars and service, were experiencing a variety of problems as they attempted to assimilate back into the community. Initially, homelessness appeared to be one of the main, unresolved problems that these heroes were facing and the existing support services, for a variety of well documented reasons, were not effectively addressing this problem and the additional ones that ripple from it – vagrancy, substance abuse, domestic disturbances, violent behavior et al. So our board focused on the problem of homeless Veterans and displaced Veterans throughout Luzerne, Lackawanna and Wyoming Counties. We soon discovered that while there is never enough affordable housing, a major problem was the lack of connectivity between the available and affordable housing that was designated for veterans and the veterans who could benefit from the housing options and support services. There were a number of barriers that existed between the resources and the veterans and, in many cases, those barriers included the same entities that were established to provide the services, not directly by deliberate intent, but by the design of the programs. Long story short – the level of red tape and regulations in place to protect the interests of the veterans in many cases shut down the access by those same veterans and increased issues of distrust and disconnect within the veteran community. NEPA VMA became the bridge that helped the veterans to reach the specific agencies and community organizations designated to provide related services and to rebuild their confidence in these organizations and establish contacts with

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those they were unaware existed. Therefore, in cases where the agencies are unable to assist the veterans because of ineligibility, NEPA VMA by design has the flexibility to utilize its clearinghouse capabilities to refer the veterans to services within the private sector that ultimately address those needs. What began as a concern to get homeless veterans from "living under bridges" who were disenchanted with a system that they felt was not serving them, back into programs that would assist them with their basic necessities, expanded from the access to housing into a more comprehensive advocacy role that encompasses nutrition, career training, counseling and resource support that they richly deserved with compassion and personal attention.

NEPA VMA set out to connect veterans to all available housing options and to address any lapses that resulted from processing delays. NEPA VMA's operational objective involves identifying the full scope of the veterans' needs and outlining the plan of action that includes collaborations and referrals. Regarding the primary issue, we identified housing at the VA Medical Center with partnering support from CEO; we also identified housing in the Wilkes-Barre Housing Authority, recently funded by a HUD-VAS grant; furthermore, we outreached and identified a program at Catholic Social Services (CSS) of Lackawanna County that provides a full array of emergency housing, temporary housing and affordable housing to our Veterans. In fact, we hosted a community outreach event in 2007 to discuss our program objectives and immediate needs and it was from this event that Catholic Social Services (CSS) of Luzerne / Wyoming County began to develop a housing project for Veterans. This project was designed to refurbish the St. Hedwig's church, rectory, convent and school grounds into the Veterans Village. It would have 32 - one and two bedroom apartments that are handicapped accessible to house our Veterans. Since both CSS programs in Lackawanna

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and Luzerne Counties are under the same diocese, all of the certifications for the Veterans Village were already in place through CSS Veterans housing programs in Lackawanna County. This endeavor remains active as CSS continues to work through zoning issues that NEPA VMA has partnered with them, in the role of community advocate, to help address with outreach and referral development.

The above example is offered as evidence supporting NEPA-VMA's premise as a viable and much needed program connector that provides complementary services within the veteran community to existing services or, in cases where additional services are needed, assists in creating services for Veterans to fill the void in our community or a bridge to gap extensive delays. NEPA VMA has provided Letters of Support for the Veterans Village Program.

Collectively, we see a need in our community to create geographically accessible locations that can help Veterans and their families identify the problems they are encountering and "connect" the Veteran and family member to existing services to help manage and/or solve those problems. This can only be done with continual and compassionate follow up. This is not to suggest that our community service agencies do not have compassion towards Veterans, but more so to suggest that more intense follow up and follow through will do considerably more to help Veterans in distress, as evidenced by recent events highlighting the impact of grass roots initiatives that help to catch those veterans who have fallen through the cracks in the system or have had the initial bad experience and suffer in silence. Many of whom are too proud to engage help or trained to ignore the issue altogether, thus becoming human time bombs and driving up the disproportionate suicide rate. NEPA VMA fully embraces the concept that, efforts to address the needs of our veterans requires action on all fronts.

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For expediency and to allow the organization to maintain the flexibility to address the needs of veterans quickly and effectively, NEPA VMA is tax exempt and continues to channel donated funds through the Luzerne Foundation. However, funding streams have been minimal and the program costs generated for our services is much less than the costs to the community without our services. We track our volunteer hours and related services and will document our those activities that highlight the cost-saving nature of our model in the time and attention that we provide to the veterans that keep them within the system, gets them back into programs and services to help them make the transition from combat to the community.

Currently, NEPA-VMA is located in the Courthouse Towers, 216 N. River Street, Wilkes-Barre, PA. 18701. That space is being provided gratis by the Koury family, who own the building and believe in our mission. Their generosity and support for Veterans has been a tremendous help in getting the organization fully functional in the community.

To date, NEPA-VMA has conducted extensive presentations with follow up Q&A on the changes to the GI Bill at local Naval Reserve facility, USMC Reserve and the National Guard armories. Over 500 local soldiers were educated about their benefits and additional services available to them through the efforts of NEPA-VMA trained staff. NEPA VMA is also working with several veterans in a pilot project that would replicate a much needed program in Luzerne County that would mirror the VA's jail diversion prototype program. This initiative is in conjunction with the Luzerne County's ex-offender program and designed to keep veterans from going to jail and or to help them to get into existing rehab facilities that can get them back on track. In light of those efforts, we have been contacted by Luzerne County President Judge Thomas Burke and Judge

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Tina Polachak Gartley to provide input into developing a formal referral and treatment process for Veterans who wind up in the court system, due to service related mental health issues. This too, remains an ongoing endeavor. For example, NEPA VMA has been working with a client, we'll call "John" for several weeks. John is a veteran who is confined in the Luzerne County Correctional Facility (LCCF) in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. for a parole violation. John has a drug and alcohol problem as well as some mental health issues. We were contacted by a counselor from the LCCF seeking help for John. One of our volunteer staff contacted John and arranged for an appointment to interview him. John reported that on March 2, 2010 he was homeless and went to the Veterans Wilkes-Barre Medical Center to apply for housing. He filled out all of the necessary paperwork for the program. However, he was rejected housing because he was under the influence of drugs, and the VA policy does not allow for entry into the housing program while under the influence of drugs. With no referral location to get cleaned up, John returned to the streets and two days later was arrested for public intoxication. He was further detained due to an outstanding probation violation and housed in LCCF.

On March 22, 2010, NEPA VMA was contacted for assistance. A NEPA VMA counselor was dispatched to the LCCF on April 01, 2010. The counselor opened a case file and coordinated with John, the LCCF Counselor, the Luzerne County Probation Officer and the Ex Offender Coordinator at the VA Lebanon Medical Center (VALMC). John is pending acceptance into a D & A rehabilitation program at the VALMC. Once accepted a NEPA VMA staff member will appear before a Luzerne County Judge to request a conditional probation and work with the Commission on Economic Opportunity for a bus ticket for John to get him to treatment at the VALMC.

Upon successful completion of that program, John will be placed into temporary houseing in order to complete the available job training and placement program. Once he finds employment, the process of permanent housing will begin. In this scenario, had

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NEPA VMA been involved earlier, we could have arranged for John to be housed in a facility that would allow him to get clean in order to properly file for his rightful benefits with the VA. He would not have been put back on the streets in a vulnerable position to then become incarcerated.

One of the long-term goals of NEPA-MVA is to span out over the 19 county catchment area serviced by the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center, and we have a plan underway to realize that goal that would be a mutual benefit to all programs geared towards veterans services at a tremendous savings to tax payers. NEPA-VMA has been in negotiations with the Luzerne County Career Link at 32 Union Street, Wilkes-Barre, PA. We have spoken with Mr. Bill Dunn, the Career Link Site Manager and initially asked to enter into a Non-Financial Agreement on a six month trial bases to house volunteer staff at the Career Link. As you know, the Career Link is the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's statewide approach to Federal "One-Stop" Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Legislation that brings many of the primary social service agencies to a "One-Stop" location where for convenience and partnership of services. We know that NEPA-VMA can be an effective part of that partnership.

Furthermore, through the efforts of our Board secretary, who is affiliated with Luzerne County Community College (LCCC), NEPA-VMA met with LCCC President Thomas Leary and the LCCC Vice President of Workforce and Community Development, Ms. Susan Spry. A Non-Financial Agreement to identify a partnering relationship was presented to LCCC with the understanding that NEPA-VMA would occupy the space at the Career Link rented by LCCC and all volunteer staff would be "dual-hatted;" to work with all Veterans visiting the Career Link to "connect" them to agencies (both in and out of the Career Link) to assist the Veteran and to also provide

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information and, where appropriate, referrals to LCCC for services that the college offers to Veterans. We have run into some challenges regarding efforts to align with local facilities to assist in the area of career retraining for veterans; among them being rejection due to the unfounded concerns that NEPA VMA may be duplicating the services currently provided by the Veterans Employment Representative employed by the Commonwealth, and part of the BECS partnership. As stated, this premise is unfounded as clearly outlined by President Obama program agenda for veterans and VA Secretary Shinseki's initiatives that embrace the partnerships with community-based organizations to aid the overwhelmed VA and its related agencies to ensure that veterans are no longer left out in the cold because of delays and red tape. NEPA VMA is here to partner with all programs that are geared to serve veterans and their families and if there us a need, we have been quite effective in bringing the available resources to the table.

NEPA VMA takes the position that no duplication of effort exists since the Veterans Employment Representative seeks to match Job Ready Veterans to available jobs and may also refer Training Ready Veterans to training opportunities, when training will enhance job placement. The Veterans Employment Representative is extremely limited in providing employment services to non-job ready or non-training ready Veterans and this is where the NEPA VMA mission statement fits into the Career Link partnership.

This partnership with LCCC, being housed at the Career Link could easily become the prototype for a very effective Pilot Program. However, after a six months trial program, the NEPA VMA would need a grant to sustain operations at that location. As mentioned earlier, we are currently using volunteers to provide the "connecting" services, and if we could become fully funded and operational at the Career Link or a similar facility; we could train additional volunteers to coordinate with the existing

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partners at the Career Link; learn what they can do for Veterans (through cross-training) and teach them what NEPA VMA can do for Veterans and their families, with the highest emphasis placed on follow up.

It should be noted that the Governor's Outreach and Assistance Center (GVOAC) was invited to be a paying partner at the Career Link, several years ago, but decided to maintain current office space on Wyoming Avenue in West Pittston, PA until that program was not funded by the Commonwealth and closed its doors in December 2009. NEPA VMA immediately became the "go to" site for those veterans previously served at the GVOAC as the reputation of the organization became widespread in Luzerne and Lackawanna Counties as a problem solver. Many within the veteran services community have also realized the valued services provided by NEPA VMA and we are working diligently to expand that service base to address the immediate needs of those veterans and their families who have been "left out in the cold" with the closure of the GVOAC with no viable replacement were it not for NEPA VMA. For example, a client we'll call "Jim," a married 63 year old resident from Tunkhannock, Pa. is an Air Force, Vietnam Veteran, claiming service connection for Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus came to NEPA VMA for services.

Agent Orange, a defoliant used heavily in Vietnam at the time of the war, has been directly linked to several medical conditions that are compensated by the Department of VA. Diabetes Type 2 has been linked directly to exposure to that defoliant. Jim's claim states he feels he has diabetes because of that exposure. After several unsuccessful attempts to contact the now closed, GVOAC, Jim decided to try and file the claim on his own. Jim filed with the Department of Veteran Affairs late last year and after extensive back and forth correspondence with VA, Jim contacted Senator Lisa Baker's office. He was frustrated and confused as to what the VA actually needed to act on the claim. Senator Baker's office referred Jim to the NEPA-VMA.

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After meeting with Jim and reviewing his paperwork, we informed him how the claim process works and explained what additional information the VA required. NEPA VMA further recommended that he be represented by a Veteran Service Officers (VSO) and explained the advantages of that representation. Jim was provided a briefing on the VA Pension Program. In the event he was not successful with a service connected claim, he may be eligible for a non-service connected claim with eligibility based on Jim's income.

Finally, a NEPA VMA staff member set up an appointment for Jim with Tom Owens, Director, Wyoming County Office of Veterans Affairs. Jim was grateful for the assistance offered by NEPA VMA and felt that someone really cared about his problems and gave him valuable information and reassurance. He stated that he would contact Senator Baker's office to thank her for the direction and service provided by NEPA VMA.

Locally, it is our objective to eventually have either part time or full time staff, and volunteers located at all of the Career Links throughout the 19 county VA catchment area. However, this Pilot Program can be realized in all of the Career Links throughout the Commonwealth or for that matter can be made a part of all of the "One Stop" WIA Legislated programs throughout the nation. It has tremendous potential and the results in rebuilding the trust and confidence of our veterans is immeasurable. This concept of a specialized organization whose sole purpose is to connect Veterans to existing Federal, State and Locally funded services is sorely needed.

In addition to our efforts to partner with the Career Links, we have achieved significant outcomes with Luzerne County Community College. The college has offered NEPA VMA free office space at the Corporate Learning Center on Public Square in

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Wilkes-Barre to function as a program satellite location to assist LCCC with retention support to help them to keep veteran students on its campuses and to help LCCC to broaden its course offerings to better prepare the veterans for re-entry into the work world. LCCC has a broad range of programs and services designed to address basic skills and to assist with mental health issues, but the alliance with NEPA VMA will help them to recruit and retain veterans to achieve next level resources and career training for long term employment opportunities and possibly self-employment. This will give the veterans more stability to maintain a home and support their families and to achieve the goal we are all seeking for them – a secure transition from combat to community.

The format begins with an orientation by a NEPA VMA volunteer staff member who addresses the students in the classroom providing an overview of NEPA VMA programs and services. Following the class, veteran students are invited to the office set aside for NEPA VMA for intake to establish what their specific needs are so that we can develop a profile and begin the work of identifying their plan of action and recommended resource support. The LCCC staff has indicated that one of the issues they have identified is that a disproportionate number of Veterans who begin to attend classes using their education benefits and then drop out prior to completing the semester. There are many factors that may cause this, such as homelessness, family issues, financial support issues, etc. NEPA VMA is poised to assist these Veterans through what it is calling its “Stay in School” program and has already outlined other partners who can assist in problem solving and complementary services.

As a program partner with Catholic Social Services, NEPA VMA Board was contacted by them and advised of their interest in assisting with the “Stay in School” Program by offering housing for veterans near one of the LCCC campuses to make it easy for the veteran to attend classes. We were advised by Steve Nocelli, Executive Director in Lackawanna County that CSS had a number of available units in Nanticoke,

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PA that can be used to house Veteran students at LCCC. It is a "sliding scale" rental agreement equal to no more than 20% of the Veterans monthly income. This effort to "connect" Veterans in need of services to existing services in the community is what NEPA VMA is all about. This is not a duplication of existing services, but an enhancement of those services to improve the lives of veterans, to effectively utilize funding for veteran services and to shorten the delays that lead to destructive behaviors.

The budget for a Pilot Program is very basic as outlined below:

The budget is a simple estimate:

1. Cost of Career Link partnership rental (3 yrs)	\$6,500.00 X 3 = \$19,000.00
2. Cost of one (1) staff (supervisor) (3 yrs)	\$32,000.00 X 3 = \$96,000.00
3. Benefits of staff person, approx. (3yrs) 20%	\$96,000.00 X .20 = \$19,200.00
4. Mileage, Office Supplies, Staff Training	\$13,000.00 X 3 = <u>\$39,000.00</u>
5. TOTAL	\$173,000.00

Once the Pilot Program is deemed to be successful, with supporting statistical data, the NEPA-VMA would apply for additional Federal and State funds along with matching and in-kind funds to continue current service and expand into additional counties throughout the VA Catchment area.

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One final note, NEPA-VMA has coordinated with 60 of the Community Service agencies and grass roots organizations in the three county region, as well as approximately 59 Military Service organizations in Luzerne and Lackawanna Counties. After a formal presentation on March 9th, 2009 to over 40 people representing 24 Veterans organizations, the NEPA has enlisted eight Charter member organizations from local AMVETS, American Legions and VFWs to support our mission.

In closing, NEPA-VMA would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for all that you do for Veterans. We are extremely hopeful that you can assist our efforts to ensure that veterans receive access to all available services with the immediacy and compassion that they deserve for the service they have rendered. Clearly, as the top leadership has affirmed, it takes a concerted effort from the public and private sectors working together to aid our veterans and their families back to some normalcy in their lives. The mission of NEPA VMA is to continue to provide that bridge to those programs and services with the flexibility that government agencies lack, but veterans require. Whether your support is via short term formats or long term funding sources, the need for a NEPA VMA is clearly evident and growing. Working together we will make a difference in the lives of our Veterans and their families.