

Good afternoon members of the City Council Veterans' Committee and Higher Education Committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify today, my name is Leora Shudofsky. I am a social worker, proud graduate of Queens College and Hunter College School of Social Work (now Silberman) and I am currently the Co-Director of PROVE (Project for Return and Opportunity in Veterans Educations) at Silberman School of Social Work. I have been part of this initiative since 2008.

My Co-Director, Dr. Roger Sherwood, is a Vietnam-era veteran and has worked with the veteran community in New York City for over 30 years. Since 1986, he has been a clinical consultant to the Veterans Administration Hudson Valley Health Care System, Montrose Campus, where he counseled veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In 2007, in response to the record numbers of veterans returning home and enrolling in higher education, an initiative was launched from the CUNY offices of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management. As a result of the initiative that year, Dr. Sherwood and University Dean of Enrollment Management, Robert Ptachik, a fellow veteran and long-time veteran advocate, established PROVE, whose mission is to enhance existing services to student veterans on select CUNY campuses and to support them in their transition from military service to college life and beyond. PROVE accomplishes this through an innovative service delivery model, utilizing graduate social work interns and experienced social work field instructors in conjunction with student veteran peer mentors working on host CUNY college campuses to assist student veterans in their transitions, academically, socially, and emotionally (see attached diagram). We are also gratified to add training the next generation of social workers to be culturally competent in serving those who serve to our mission.

PROVE started on two CUNY campuses, Hunter College and John Jay College, with 2 graduate social work interns placed at each and with a placement at the then nascent CUNY Office of Veterans Affairs (COVA) under the supervision of Wilfred Cotto, that offices first Director. PROVE started with a close collaboration with COVA which continues through today.

PROVE over the years has expanded to the CUNY community colleges, including BCC, BMCC, Hostos, LaGuardia and QCC. PROVE has been located at 7 CUNY campuses with a cohort of 14 graduate social work interns serving, on average, 1200+ unique student veterans each academic year since 2012. This year, due to serious financial constraints, we've had to take a step back and pare down to 4 campuses, from seven but our goal is to expand back to 7 campuses next year and we hope to be able to grow beyond those 7 campuses because we know the value of our model matches up with the needs of the student veterans at CUNY especially during this time of a waning of public interest and dollars in the Veterans sphere.

PROVE has been fortunate to have some consistent financial support from CUNY Central and from the individual campuses we serve and we have been able to raise funds from the Robin Hood Foundations (from 2012 through the present) and the Bob Woodruff Foundation (2014 – 2016) to help expand our program and service delivery but our support from Robin Hood will be ending in 2017 and our grant was not renewed from the Woodruff Foundation due to a change in their funding priorities and so we are at a crossroads in terms of where do we go over the next 10 years.

One of the most valuable pieces of our program is utilizing student veteran peer mentors (paid and volunteer) as well as our graduate social work veterans to help student veterans make critical social connections with other veterans on their campuses. Their shared experiences and

rekindling of a type of camaraderie that they may have had in the military and not since then is a powerful tool in helping the transition from military life to college life and beyond.

In shaping the project's service delivery model, PROVE recognized that many veterans hesitate seeking formalized mental health services. Veterans may also be wary of what motivates civilians to offer their help. On the other hand, we have observed that veterans tend to relax in the presence of other veterans, to more readily share their life experiences, and to be inspired to help fellow veterans. As a result, PROVE is co-located in campus student veteran resource centers. Sharing the space gives us a greater chance for success with fostering engagement with the student veterans, as well as for them to find the opportunity to connect socially in the company of their peers.

A trusting relationship builds the platform for PROVE to provide concrete services to student veterans that aid in their educational success—such as helping them navigate their educational benefits or offering academic support such as tutoring. Trust also allows us to offer emotional support and create linkages to other resources, when necessary. We refer student veterans to professionals (both on campus and in the community) with whom we have developed relationships over the years, and can personally recommend, whenever possible.

To that end, part of our work, to “enhance existing services on campus to student veterans”, relies on creating a synergy around the various departments on campus and the professionals who staff them, such as academic advising, counseling, accessibility/disability, registrar, and the Bursar's office. PROVE staff develops relationships with the staff in these offices, and “veteran-knowledgeable” points of contact who help streamline administrative processes to serve the student veterans' needs better and more efficiently.

In a fast-paced academic setting, we find that a strengths-based approach better serves the student veteran who is likely busy or overwhelmed, and can benefit from short-term, practical support such as coping skills development and stress reduction techniques.

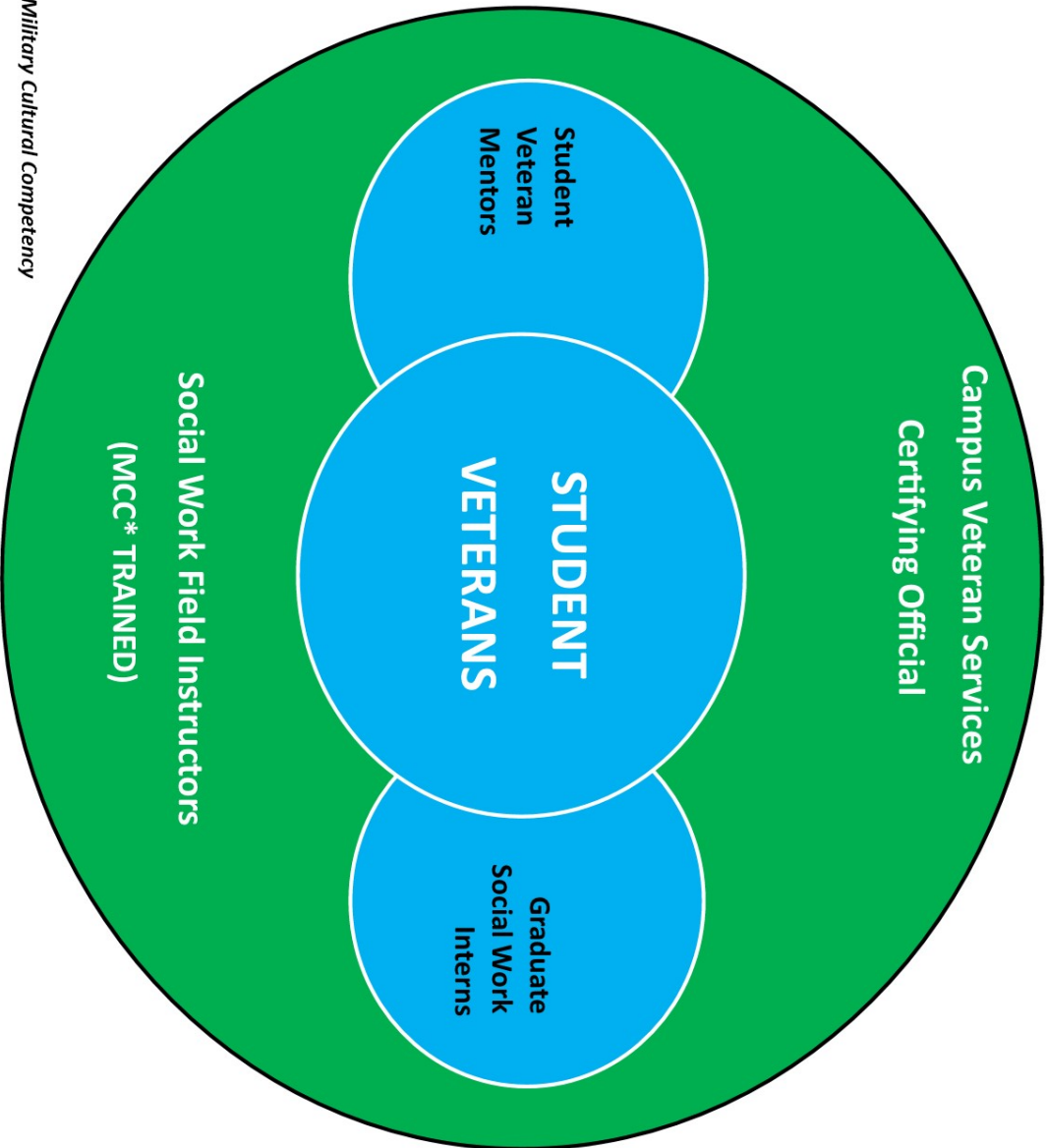
For student veterans with more extensive needs, PROVE ensures its staff is informed and poised to respond. We have mandatory, bi-weekly psycho-educational and military cultural competency trainings for our intern cohort and our social work field instructors.

As both the literature and anecdotal experiences shows, there is a continued stigma around seeking help and services for most veterans. One of the reasons that the PROVE model works is because it meets student veterans where they are, at the campus student veteran resource centers.

Our student veterans have thrived and found purpose in assisting fellow veterans (a foundation of the military culture) and thus have helped themselves in the process. Many of our graduate interns have gone on to work with veterans either in their second year internship and/or after graduation. Twenty percent of our graduate interns since 2007-2008 now work the VA, CUNY and other veteran service organizations.

As I mentioned before, the public interest and funding for organizations working with veterans is on a downward turn. We need to be creative in reshaping the future of veterans services at CUNY for the future. The fact that every CUNY campus has a staff person who is dedicated $\frac{3}{4}$ or fulltime to service student veterans is a tremendous achievement but we cannot rest on that achievement alone and we cannot afford as a community and an institution of higher learning to lessen our focus and our services. In peacetime, CUNY, as did many other academic institutions, allowed its services to veterans shrink to almost nothing because of the drop in identified student veterans on campus. In 2009, CUNY experienced a 233% jump in veteran

enrollment due in large part to the then new Post 9/11 GI Bill but also to the CUNY leadership – specifically COVA and the strong support from veterans within CUNY administration (such as Dean Ptachik). Although student veteran enrollment at CUNY may be at its peak right now (in the Post 9/11 era) we may be seeing a plateau over the next few years but not a diminshment and with this time and experience behind us, we have a better idea of what kind of services, beyond academic, student veterans need to be successful at all educational levels from an associates degree to a doctoral degree. I have been privileged over the last 8+ years to work with veterans who started at one of the CUNY community colleges and have successful completed Masters in Education, Social Work, Business, Nursing and more. I also know that some of these veterans look at their experiences on campus and the communities and resources that they found – that met THEIR needs as a unique population – invaluable in their success. Thank you again for your time.



**MCC = Military Cultural Competency*