



Testimony on behalf of Volunteers of America-Greater New York
The New York City Council Committee on Education and Committee on Finance
Joint Executive Budget Hearing on Education
May 20th, 2025

Introduction and Thanks

My name is Eric Lee, Director of Public Policy for Volunteers of America-Greater New York (VOA-GNY). We are the local affiliate of the national organization, Volunteers of America, Inc. (VOA). I would like to thank Chair Joseph and Chair Brannan and the members of the Education and Finance Committees for the opportunity to submit written testimony for this hearing.

About Us

VOA-GNY is an anti-poverty organization that aims to end homelessness in Greater New York through housing, health and wealth building services. We are one of the region's largest human service providers, serving more than 12,000 adults and children annually through 70+ programs in New York City, Northern New Jersey, and Westchester and thousands more via our Operation Backpack[®] initiative. We are also an active nonprofit developer of supportive and affordable housing, with a robust portfolio permanent supportive housing, affordable and senior housing properties—with more in the pipeline.

Thank you, Chair Joseph and members of the Council, for your unwavering leadership and support of students in temporary housing. **VOA-GNY greatly appreciates Chair Joseph and the Council's support for Operation Backpack[®] by inclusion of \$250,000 for it in the Council's Preliminary Budget Response.** It is our signature service campaign which partners with the DOE and our sister organizations to provide grade-specific school supplies to every school-aged child in the shelter system prior to the first day of school. **Given the anticipated need for the coming school year, we welcome the Council's continued leadership in urging the NYC Department of Education (DOE) to resume its donation to Operation Backpack[®] for FY26 with an allocation of \$500,000 dollars. We are also seeking the support of Council Members throughout the city (Discretionary Request Ref #179272) to offset the rising cost of this campaign as DOE participation remains uncertain** and ensure that we can continue to help homeless kids get their school year off to a strong start in the 2025-26 school year.

In 2024, in response to historic budget pressures, the DOE stopped financial support and in-kind donations for Operation Backpack[®]. By cobbling together private support to cover this shortfall, **VOA-GNY was able to successfully provide backpacks and school supplies to 19,000 students living in shelter last year** but still shy of the need as the City's family shelter population surged in part due to the influx of recently arrived New Yorkers. Adding to our disappointment that we couldn't reach every child, VOA-GNY later learned that despite the record need, the DOE actually left money on the table for Students in Temporary Housing by the end of the school year for lack of an efficient way to coordinate spending to get those students what they needed. To right that egregious wrong, it is critically important that the DOE partner with us so that we can lend our expertise in coordinating with DHS and HRA at the shelter level before the first day of school, matching supplies to students instead of schools who don't yet know what their actual enrollment of homeless students will look like.



Background on Operation Backpack®

Beginning in 2003 as a small initiative to provide gently-worn backpacks and supplies to children living within our own shelters, it has grown to be one of the largest school drives in the area, helping students in VOA-GNY shelters and more than 200 others across the five boroughs. Operation Backpack® prioritizes respect for the child by ensuring that backpacks and supplies are distributed within shelters prior to the start of the school year to avoid inadvertently being singled out as “in need”. We purchase a variety of backpack brands and designs commonly worn by students today and filled with supplies based on requirement lists from 30+ public schools and adjusted based on feedback from parents, teachers, and of course the students who are at the heart of Operation Backpack®.

Our program works both on the human level – by taking away the stigma and preparing children early – and, on the operational efficiency level – by taking the guesswork out of which schools these children may enroll in on the first day and matching the supplies directly to the student alleviating principals of the burden of projecting need. This approach ensures that every dollar is put to good use and every child has what they need.

With the number of homeless families reaching an all-time high in FY25, the significance of Operation Backpack® has never been greater. **As the Committee well knows, helping children succeed in school is critical to interrupting the cycle of intergenerational poverty.** Ensuring students are well-equipped with school supplies leads to increased rates of homework completion, class participation, and, ultimately, graduation.

VOA-GNY would greatly appreciate the Council’s leadership in urging the Department of Education to re-establish support for Operation Backpack®, and we graciously welcome Council Members to support the work of this critical campaign through our Member Item Request to help students in temporary housing succeed in the coming school year.

Thank you to the Committee on Education and Committee on Finance and the entire Council for your continued leadership and advocacy for students in New York City. Through ensuring that students within our communities have the resources and support they need to achieve, we can continue to build a thriving City for future generations. Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony.

Testimony respectfully submitted by Eric Lee.