



**Testimony before the NYC Council Committee on Health
June 26, 2025**

Introduction and Thanks: My name is Catherine Trapani, and I am the Assistant Vice President for 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 Schulman and members of the Committees for the opportunity to testify at 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, impacting more than 12,000 adults and children annually through 70+ programs in New York City, Northern New Jersey, and Westchester.

VOA-GNY operates 6 emergency and one Tier II domestic violence shelter. We also serve a large proportion of survivors on our general homeless family and women's shelters and are launching a rapid rehousing program for survivors later this fall.

Addressing Brain Trauma:

In 2022, in partnership with Dr. Edie Zusman and Safe Living Space, Volunteers of America-Greater New York (VOA-GNY) began a groundbreaking initiative, implementing routine brain injury screening for all survivors of domestic or intimate partner violence at our seven domestic violence shelters.

Using a trauma-informed approach and protocols developed in consultation with Safe Living Space, staff assess all heads of household arriving at VOA-GNY domestic violence shelters for history and symptoms of brain injury. Those with positive signs are connected to brain injury specialists at partnering hospitals who are able to provide diagnostic services and treatment. So far, 400+ heads of household have been screened, and 57% report having had at least one injury to the head or neck within the last year. Given the prevalence of brain injury we have found amongst survivors, it is clear to us that a broader screening protocol would help many more survivors understand their injuries and get the care they need.

Majority Leader Farias' bill [Intro 29](#) would require New York City to provide training to first responders and service providers about the connection between domestic violence and traumatic brain injury. Trainings would include education on the prevalence of TBI among domestic violence survivors, how to identify symptoms of TBI, how to respond to the needs of individuals with TBI, and the long-term health impacts of repeated brain injuries. It would also require the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene and the Mayor's Office to End Domestic and Gender-Based Violence to conduct a public awareness campaign on the connection between DV and TBI.

This bill serves as an important legislative first step in the vital effort to bring awareness to the connection between domestic violence and traumatic brain injury, improve services for survivors, and

equip them with the information they need to seek care and get back on their feet. Detecting these injuries earlier in a survivor's journey will allow us to better tailor services to meet their needs and help them confront the impacts of the brain trauma to support their healing.

We have built a coalition of domestic violence survivors, service providers, doctors, attorneys and others that support this approach. I am submitting a letter of support from these advocates to the committee for the record and hope you will move this bill forward quickly.

Closing:

We are grateful for the opportunity testify and look forward to working with the Council and Administration to improve screening and awareness of brain injury in survivors of abuse.

Respectfully submitted by Catherine Trapani, Assistant Vice President of Public Policy, Volunteers of America-Greater New York

June 26, 2025

Dear Chair Schulman and members of the City Council Committee on Health,

We, the undersigned organizations are unified in our support for the passage of Intro 29 (Farias), a Local Law to amend the administrative code of the city of New York, in relation to requiring a training program for first responders and an awareness campaign regarding domestic violence-related traumatic brain injuries. We come together in gratitude for your having scheduled a hearing on this critical piece of legislation and urge you and your Council colleagues to pass it.

1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men in the United States have experienced some form of physical intimate partner violence/DV in their lifetime, including shaking, strangulation and blows to the head, neck, or face which can cause traumatic brain injury (TBI).[i] Because over 75% of DV survivors suffer injuries consistent with single or repeated TBIs,[ii] their chances are double that of the general population to have sustained a TBI.[iii]

Improving First Responder Procedures

As calls relating to DV constitute up to 50% of all calls to police,[iv] officers are often the first contacts for survivors of DV-induced TBI.[v] However, TBIs typically go unrecognized in these situations due to a lack of awareness among both survivors and first responders on what to look for. Further, due to the tendency of survivors to attempt to minimize the harm caused by intimate partner violence to avoid escalation or adverse impacts on their children and families, they may underreport symptoms and injuries. TBI symptoms can resemble the effects of severe emotional distress or intoxication, leaving survivors disoriented and ill equipped to self-advocate while misleading officers to view victims as simply traumatized or even disorderly or noncompliant with directions.[vi] Even if police officers do identify the possibility of TBI, they are unlikely to intervene out of fear of doing more harm than good, feeling undereducated and underequipped to handle these situations.[vii] Furthermore, due to an absence of professional training for healthcare workers on TBI secondary to DV, 72% of domestic violence victims are not identified as such when presented to the emergency department .[viii]

In the status quo, the DV survivors who are able to eventually access appropriate brain injury screening likely struggle with TBI alone for months – if not years – often suffering multiple brain injuries before receiving the medical attention they need. Volunteers of America-Greater New York conducts screening for likely TBI in domestic violence shelter residents and found 60% of survivors reporting a timeframe of 6 months or more between the infliction of TBI-related injuries and being screened.[ix] Only 1.5% received a TBI within the past 24 hours of screening.[x] We must disrupt this pattern of delayed identification and treatment and make sure that first responders like EMS and police receive the training and support they need to identify TBI when the violence is first reported so that survivors can access the care they need.

Improving Care for Survivors

By recognizing and addressing TBI, existing brain trauma screening initiatives have been able to support survivors and validate their experiences. Recipients of screening have been given better care, including medical treatment to mitigate the long-term impacts of brain injury, which improves their ability to more

successfully navigate court, child welfare and other systems to move on from the abuse they suffered.

The Impact to the City

Int. 29 would enable first responders to identify brain injuries in domestic violence cases and refer survivors to appropriate care expeditiously. By making TBI identification and treatment standard procedure for DV-related incidents, first responders and healthcare providers can shorten the amount of time survivors suffer from the debilitating and isolating effects of TBI and help interrupt the cycle of violence preventing further injury.

Call to Action

TBI is far too common and damaging to continue to be overlooked as an “invisible injury.” It is vital that the Council respond to this crisis with all available tools, and Int. 29 would significantly enable the people and systems that serve domestic violence survivors to understand how to properly recognize and respond to traumatic brain injuries.

We urge you to support Int. 29 and work to pass it. Thank you for your leadership and support. For further information, please contact Catherine Trapani, Assistant Vice President of Public Policy, Volunteers of America-Greater New York at ctrapani@voa-gny.org.

Signed,

Volunteers of America-Greater New York
Anonymous Survivor
Citizens’ Committee for Children of New York
Crime Victims Center, Inc.
CSH
Day One
Dr. Kathleen Monahan, Doctor of Social Welfare
Hear Our Voices
Homeless Services United
New Destiny Housing
New York Legal Assistance Group
Safe Horizon
Safe Living Space
The Health and Housing Consortium
Violence Intervention Program
Win

[i] Brain Injury Research Center of Mount Sinai. “Traumatic Brain Injury and Intimate Partner Violence.” Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

https://www.brainline.org/sites/default/files/IPV%20TBI%20Fact%20Sheet_BIRC.pdf

[ii] American Brain Foundation. “Domestic Violence and Traumatic Brain Injury: The Chilling Truth of This Hits

Home.” Jun. 2023, <https://www.americanbrainfoundation.org/domestic-violence-and-traumatic-brain-injury-the-chilling-truth-of-this-hits-home/>

[iii] Brain Injury Research Center of Mount Sinai. “Traumatic Brain Injury and Intimate Partner Violence.” Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

https://www.brainline.org/sites/default/files/IPV%20TBI%20Fact%20Sheet_BIRC.pdf

[iv] Logan, TK, and Rob Valente. “Who Will Help Me? Domestic Violence Survivors Speak Out About Law Enforcement Responses.” National Domestic Violence Hotline. Washington, DC (2015).

<http://www.thehotline.org/resources/law-enforcement-responses>

[v] Costello, Kellianne, and Brian D Greenwald. “Update on Domestic Violence and Traumatic Brain Injury: A Narrative Review.” Brain sciences vol. 12,1 122. 17 Jan. 2022, doi:10.3390/brainsci12010122

[vi] Costello, Kellianne, and Brian D Greenwald. “Update on Domestic Violence and Traumatic Brain Injury: A Narrative Review.” Brain sciences vol. 12,1 122. 17 Jan. 2022, doi:10.3390/brainsci12010122

[vii] Costello, Kellianne, and Brian D Greenwald. “Update on Domestic Violence and Traumatic Brain Injury: A Narrative Review.” Brain sciences vol. 12,1 122. 17 Jan. 2022, doi:10.3390/brainsci12010122

[viii] Costello, Kellianne, and Brian D Greenwald. “Update on Domestic Violence and Traumatic Brain Injury: A Narrative Review.” Brain sciences vol. 12,1 122. 17 Jan. 2022, doi:10.3390/brainsci12010122

[ix] Volunteers of America-Greater New York, Edie E. Zusman, and Safe Living Space. “Traumatic Brain Injury Screening for Survivors of Domestic Violence: Pilot Update 2023 VOA National Conference.”

[x] Volunteers of America-Greater New York, Edie E. Zusman, and Safe Living Space. “Traumatic Brain Injury Screening for Survivors of Domestic Violence: Pilot Update 2023 VOA National Conference.”

Slide 16 – 0.91% of 219 = 2 clients, 58% of 223 = 129 clients, 2 clients/129 clients = 1.55%.