Dear Veteran Community,

We know many of you are concerned about the spread of COVID-19 (coronavirus) here in the five boroughs. With half of the veterans who use VA services being 65 and older – one of the groups most vulnerable to the coronavirus – ensuring our veterans remain safe and informed is one of my top priorities.

Last week, media reports confirmed a Doctor at the Brooklyn VA hospital tested positive for coronavirus and additional reporting stated two veterans at the Bronx VA hospital have been presumptively confirmed with a coronavirus diagnosis but are awaiting CDC verification.

As a result, my office has put together guidance from the VA Harbor Healthcare System and the Bronx VA hospital on what steps are being taken to protect veterans and their loved ones.

Veterans are being asked to call their local VA medical center before going to a clinic, urgent care, or emergency room. When calling, ask your VA health care team about virtual care options, such as telehealth or the My HealtheVet Secure Messaging.

If a veteran is showing flu-like symptoms, such as fever, cough and shortness of breath, you can also call the VA’s Nurse Triage at 1-800-877-6976. This number is open 24-hours a day for virtual care and support.

All VA hospitals are now actively screening all patients, visitors and employees from 6 AM through 7 PM. Additionally, the Brooklyn VA Medical Center will have screening at their rear entrance from 7 AM to 4 PM. Please allow for extra time if you’re visiting.

For anyone visiting an outpatient clinic (CBOCs), only one person may accompany each patient to an appointment, unless an aide or assistance is required. Emergency visitors are now prohibited in Emergency Department areas but for those requiring assistance, one visitor may be permitted.

Additionally, all visitation to the St. Albans Community Living Center in Queens has been suspended and all VA nursing homes have suspended new admissions. However, they can accept resident transfers from other VA facilities once medical personnel have determined they are not at risk for infection or transmitting the infection.
The Bronx VA’s major Spinal Cord Injury and disorder center is currently closed to visitors and has limited impatient admissions to address acute clinical needs.

For the latest information regarding coronavirus, you can visit the Department of Veterans Affairs, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) or the New York City Department of Health coronavirus’ page.

Finally, self-care is very important during this time. With the spread of coronavirus and a continually evolving situation, many veterans, particularly those with PTS may experience social withdrawal or social isolation. When you find yourself demonstrating this behavior, it’s important to:

• Reach out to your friends or family members.
• Connect with fellow veterans.
• Sleep, because it’s good for your immune system.
• Eat healthy food, don’t stress-eat and get exercise.

The following precautions can help you stay healthy. You do not need to wear a face mask if you are not feeling sick, unless you are instructed to do so by your health care provider.

• Stay home. All New Yorkers — healthy or sick — need to stay home. You should only leave your home for essential tasks, such as work (if you cannot work from home), getting groceries and supplies or essential medical care. Try to use delivery services when possible.

• Wash your hands with soap and water often, for at least 20 seconds every time, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer.

• Do not touch your face unless you recently washed your hands.

• Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or sleeve when sneezing or coughing. Do not use your hands.

• Do not shake hands. Instead, wave or elbow bump.

• If you are an older adult or have any of the chronic health conditions listed above, avoid all unnecessary gatherings and events

For additional resources, visit Make the Connection, The Steven A. Cohen Military Family Center at NYU Langone or NYC Well. If you find yourself in crisis, you can talk to someone 24-hours a day, 7 days a week by calling the Veterans Crisis Line at 1-800-273-8255, press 1.

My office will continue to provide updates as the need arises and if you have any questions, please reach out. Social distancing doesn’t mean we can’t reach out to each other. We have to do that because we are all in this together.