



Testimony of Loree Sutton, M.D., Brigadier General, U.S. Army, Retired
Commissioner of the New York City Department of Veterans' Services
New York City Council Committee on Veterans
Oversight - Veterans Advisory Board Update

250 Broadway--Committee Room 14th Floor
1:00pm, Tuesday, February 7, 2017

Good afternoon, Chairman Ulrich and the members of the Committee on Veterans. My name is Loree Sutton and I am honored to serve as the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Veterans' Services. Thank you for the opportunity to meet and address today's oversight hearing on the Veterans Advisory Board.

I would like to thank all of you for your commitment to continually pushing forward the needs of our veterans and their families. As you know, it was through collaboration between this City Council, the Mayor of the City of New York and veteran advocates that made 2016 such a historic year for members of our military transitioning into productive and fulfilling post-service lives. It bears repeating that our veterans and their families are extraordinary civic assets whose continued leadership and service on behalf of others strengthen the social fiber of our city.

Most notably, New York City has transitioned the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs into a full citywide agency specifically devoted to the well-being and support of veterans and their families, now known as the New York City Department of Veterans Services. Since the passage of historic legislation by the New York City Council and the subsequent signing of Local Law 113 by Mayor de Blasio over one year ago, the Department of Veterans' Services has grown in vision, scope and capacity as we build the strongest foundation possible for connecting veterans and their families with high quality services across a variety of needs and strengthening their capacity for and commitment to continued service within our city.

Looking back, 2016 was a year of collaboration, engagement with veterans and families from all generations, constructive partnership, and historic achievement for DVS. These efforts are briefly summarized below:

- Facilitating enhanced access to services and benefits specifically for veteran New Yorkers by being the first city in the nation to honor the service of our veterans by adding a Veteran Designator to our municipal ID card program (IDNYC).
- Improving access to veteran benefits by placing Community Outreach Specialists to serve as a direct link between the community in each borough and DVS by providing the human element of one-on-one support.
- Working with the First Lady's mental health initiative, ThriveNYC, to erode stigma, foster engagement, and connect individuals to community resources and professional services. Our CoreFour whole health model aims to address the full impact of war –

mind, body and spirit – for our veterans and their families by applying a peer-based community approach that increases engagement and lowers stigma and cost.

- Formulating DVS' strategy for recruiting and connecting Veterans and their Families to City Careers, Services and Resources through a phased action plan aimed at upgrading the DVS website for direct access to City job opportunities, collaborating with DCAS City-wide Recruitment/WorkForce 1 and the public/private sectors to identify HR best practices, standardizing City-wide intake forms to promote self-identification of veterans & families, and exploring ways to engage with the veteran business community to enhance business and procurement opportunities for veteran business owners and entrepreneurs. This initiative is ongoing and will be formally launched later this year.
- Launching VetConnectNYC, a digital platform/portal and coordinated service network connecting veterans and their families with comprehensive referrals, counseling, and benefit support, across a growing constellation of service providers. Currently, we are in the final phases of completing the procurement requirements for this negotiated acquisition; launch is anticipated in Spring 2017.
- Collaborating with the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York to establish and maintain strategic partnerships with private entities, non-profit organizations and foundations to generate support and foster bold investment designed to: plug gaps in service; test, pilot, and scale innovative new programs; and leverage the flexibility of the private sector to support our public initiatives—all aimed at empowering NYC veterans and families of all generations.
- Working towards "Functional Zero" by ending homelessness for veterans currently in shelter and developing a rapid rehousing system for housing new veterans within 90 days of entry, while also mitigating recidivism by bolstering 'aftercare' services through a dedicated coordinator who will drive assessment priorities and fully leverages the vital veteran peer coordinator role.
- Continuing DVS collaboration with the Mayor's Office of Special Projects and Community Events, the Mayor's Office of Citywide Event Coordination, and Management & Veteran Service Organization partners to assist and organize major veterans' commemorative ceremonies and special events that honor service.

It's truly extraordinary how far our City has come. At times I find it surreal and truly humbling, at not only the level of support we have seen from veterans, the City Council, the Mayor, and veteran service organizations – but how that support has materialized in some very real gains for our transitioning service members and their families.

The aforementioned initiatives in progress are just the beginning, as we are embarking upon the next chapter of our historic journey, advocating for and enfranchising NYC veterans and their families. I want to take a brief opportunity to thank Mayor de Blasio, Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito, Chair Eric Ulrich and members of the Committee on Veterans; family members of our military service members and veterans, with special recognition for our Gold Star families; civic leaders and concerned citizens who embrace the social and moral contract to serve those who have served us; members of Team DVS as well as so many friends of DVS serving in City Hall and across the government; city officials, agency leaders, service providers and lastly, the NYC veterans' advocates, whose pioneering voices of the NYC veteran community has afforded our veterans a distinct and tangible connection to government, such has never been seen before.

As the New Year 2017 rolls on, I eagerly look forward to renewed partnership in this inaugural year for DVS. I applaud you all.

Most germane to this hearing, I would like to address the work of the Veterans Advisory Board, whose counsel and advice I have come to rely upon as a finger on the pulse of the veterans'

community. Appointed by Mayor de Blasio and Speaker Mark-Viverito, the Veteran Advisory Board (VAB) was strategically selected to sustain a diverse range of service backgrounds, community engagement interests, and professional expertise to help facilitate dialogue with the New York City veterans' community.

Since its inception in 1987 under Local Law 53, the VAB's role has evolved considerably in ways that have strengthened their credibility, outreach and impact.

In 2002 we witnessed changes to increase their membership, from an initial five to nine members. In 2006, annual reporting requirements as well as official board leadership structure and meeting frequency rules were adopted. We have seen remarkable leadership of the VAB since its inception – the first Chair being General Richard Colt in 2007, followed by Vince McGowan, who was elected in 2008 and remained in this position until April 2015. We are happy to have his successor Todd Haskins assume the Chair since his departure, and I am grateful to former Chair McGowan for his continued willingness to share his expertise and informal guidance wherever needed. Chair Haskins has done an amazing job, working with his fellow VAB officers and members; we look forward to his continued leadership.

In keeping with the core values and strategic vision of the Mayor as well as the Speaker, the appointed and reappointed VAB members represent a diverse range of service experiences across several eras of service; a broad expanse of occupational domains and life experiences, to include the public, private and social profit sectors, spanning academia, business, arts, health and entrepreneurship.

The current membership is:

Todd Haskins, *Chair*
Samuel Innocent, *Vice Chair*
Joe Bello, *Secretary*
Patrick Devine
Charles Greinsky
Charles Hernandez
Mariel Juarez
Jules Martin
Wendy McClinton
Anthony "Tony" Odierno
John Rowan

In March of 2015, Mayor de Blasio signed Local Law 24, expanding the Board to eleven members and required that each have an email address for Board activity. In the same year, the Mayor signed Local Law 25 to require the Board to meet a minimum of five times per year and to hold at least one meeting in each borough. This law also requires that a notice of each public meeting be provided in accordance with the public notice requirements of the public officers law, recording/broadcast of each public meeting in accordance with the New York City Charter, and inclusion of VAB policy and legislative recommendations for the Mayor's Office and the City Council in the VAB annual report which is available on the DVS website.

In 2016, the VAB held four meetings in the Borough Halls of Queens, Brooklyn and Staten Island, and one at DVS HQ at 1 Centre St, New York NY. These rotating VAB meetings throughout the Boroughs has enabled the VAB to provide increased access and advice to DVS on community issues of importance, as well as provided an invaluable clearinghouse for borough-specific veteran needs. The VAB's decision to post its annual schedule months in advance will enable Veterans Affairs to provide advance notification to the community to maximize public engagement and transparency.

DVS and the VAB enjoy a relationship of support and communication. As DVS Commissioner, I have regularly engaged with the VAB and its Chair Todd Haskins on a number of issues, including the transitional process establishing the new Department of Veterans Services; key community concerns and interests; best practices in recruiting and retaining veterans in the City workforce; general regularly scheduled consultation sessions between me and the VAB Chair; and collaboration on identifying VAB agenda items and access to executive briefings as requested.

While the VAB is an independent entity, we are proud to work with its members in support of their functional needs and infrastructure in whatever ways they may request. In addition to hosting documents, board information, minutes, videos and past reports & publications on the DVS website, we are pleased to provide whatever technical and administrative support necessary. This assistance also includes review of the inaugural bylaws created by the VAB in 2016, as well as guidance, upon request, about best practices for smooth and efficient implementation of Board and Public Meetings.

I encourage everyone to access the VAB 2016 End of Year Report and meeting minutes available on the DVS website. This end-of-year report provides a series of 2016's veterans' highlights at the City level, as well as some policy and information gathering recommendations to the City Council and City of New York.

As DVS is already making strides with some recommendations proffered, I look forward to evaluating and discussing those recommendations with all partners involved, whether it be across agencies or with the New York City Council. I greatly appreciate the work which went into this document, as it reflects the passion and deep commitment towards moving forward the interests and improving the lives of NYC veterans and their families.

Team DVS and the VAB have worked intensively over these past several months of transition and implementation of the VAB legislative reforms to establish clear rules of engagement; two-way channels of communication and mutual roles and responsibilities. Whether figuring out the logistics concerning VAB meetings, consulting on questions of policy and potential legislation, discussing the factors involved with standing up a separate agency, collaborating at community meetings aimed at providing quality permanent housing to veterans, or participating in community events of local and national scope. The VAB has also provided guidance and support for DVS' efforts on ending veteran homelessness.

Off to a strong and promising start, DVS and VAB are poised to achieve even more in 2017. In closing, I would like to again thank Todd Haskins for his leadership in taking the reigns as VAB Chair, flanked by Vice-Chair Samuel Innocent and Secretary Joe Bello and all members of the Board for their dauntless enthusiasm and passion in advocating for our veterans. New York City veterans and their loved ones deserve our best, and they are truly well represented in the Veterans Advisory Board.

Chairman Ulrich, and Members of the Committee on Veterans -- thank you again for your leadership and for this opportunity to meet with you again in this new year. At this time, I am pleased to address your comments and questions. Thank you.



NYC Veterans Alliance

www.nycveteransalliance.org

www.ourveterans.nyc

Testimony by

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Veterans Advisory Board Oversight Hearing

NYC Council Committee on Veterans
Council Member Eric Ulrich, Chair

February 7, 2017

My name is Adrienne Brammer, and I am a veteran of the United States Air Force. I served as a photojournalist on combat patrols in both Iraq and Afghanistan. I am here today to testify on behalf of the NYC Veterans Alliance, a member-supported, grassroots policy advocacy and empowerment organization serving veterans, servicemembers, and their families across the New York City metropolitan area.

We appreciate the effort that went into the latest End of Year report of the Veterans Advisory Board (VAB), but I am here to discuss one particular recommendation that has potential bearing on the work I have been doing over the last year and a half, which is for the NYC Department of Veterans' Services to produce its own online community calendar.

We agree on the concept that an online community calendar is needed—which is why the NYC Veterans Alliance created one in August 2015, and why I have diligently maintained and expanded it since October 2015. Because our calendar has been so successful, we moved it from the Alliance website to its own domain at OurVeterans.nyc, where we host not only an extensive list of upcoming events for veterans and their families across the five boroughs, Long Island, North Jersey, and Westchester—we've also added a Bulletin Board of new and short-term opportunities for veterans and their families that aren't currently listed elsewhere online. We have posted almost 1,000 community events since its inception, and right now our calendar lists more than 50 upcoming events for veterans and their families in the New York Metro area. OurVeterans.nyc currently averages 3,000 unique visitors each month, and our audience continues to grow by the day.

I have served as the Administrator for our community calendar for more than sixteen months, and I can tell you from firsthand experience that the work is painstaking. Dozens of local veterans organizations, private individuals, and service providers email their event information, services, and opportunities to me every week, and in a variety of digital formats. My work involves a lot of coordination with these organizations and careful vetting of events to ensure that we are posting the most correct and up to date information available. We include events from every local veteran organization that sends us information. It takes time, attention to detail, and sometimes many interactions to ensure our calendar listing delivers the quality of information our community has come to expect from us.

We post events not just in the five boroughs, but also from across Long Island, North Jersey, Westchester, and even from more distant areas within commuting distance to NYC. We

do this because we've found that demand for our calendar spans across the entire Metro area, and we often turn away requests from organizations located even further away. All events in our area are welcome on our calendar, from a backyard barbecue for wounded warriors or a small theater production by veteran performers—to the Veterans' Day Parade and even VAB meetings. We are a trusted source of critical information for our community, and we also hear from organizations and agencies that they use our calendar regularly to not only see what's happening, but also as a planning tool to deconflict their events from the other myriad events, which most vital during Fleet Week and Memorial Day, and the entire month of November. This is all a service we provide at no cost to our users, and at no cost to city taxpayers.

Our online community calendar has been a key project of the NYC Veterans Alliance as part of our mission of connecting, informing, advocating for, and empowering our community. We are a startup nonprofit organization, and our funding has come from our more than 220 dues-paying members, and more than 200 additional individual donors. A significant portion of our organization's time and treasure have been put toward building and developing our community calendar, and we continue to actively solicit the input and participation of our community partners and users as we grow and develop this in partnership with our city's best and brightest civic tech innovators at Civic Hall, where the Alliance is based. Later this year, we plan to make our information transportable to other websites using RSS feed, and to build in search capabilities and other user-friendly tools. To the best of our knowledge, we are the only organization in the country that provides this service to veterans in any large metropolitan area.

We hope that VAB members will take the time to use [OurVeterans.nyc](#) as our community already does. We have publicized every VAB meeting that has occurred since our calendar has existed, and we would be pleased to include more information about these meetings, as well as any information relevant to veterans and their families across the New York Metro area. Anyone can submit events or information to us at ourveterans@nycveteransalliance.org. Our members and donors have made a tremendous investment in what we have already created, and that investment should not be supplanted to duplicate something that already exists, and that is more expansive than what a city agency is chartered to provide.

On behalf of the NYC Veterans Alliance, I thank you for the opportunity to testify today. Pending your questions, this concludes my testimony.

07 February 2017

Testimony: New York City Council Committee on Veterans Affairs

Topic: 2016 Annual Report of the New York City Veterans Advisory Board

By: Dan McSweeney, President, United War Veterans Council

Members of the City Council, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today on the 2016 Veterans Advisory Board Annual Report. I will keep my remarks short.

From the outset, I'd like to congratulate VAB Chairman Todd Haskins and his 10 fellow VAB members for their dedication and professionalism in revitalizing this important body.

Their 2016 Annual Report goes a long way toward organizing and addressing issues relevant to the veterans community in New York.

The minutes of the VAB's 2016 meetings at the back of this report clearly demonstrate the Board's improvements in organizing its work and expanding its relevance and reach.

Of particular note are the VAB's seven recommendations to the mayor and City Council. These span a wide array of issues and are based on critical thinking on how municipal government can meaningfully improve the lives of our city's veterans and their families.

I want to commend NYC Department of Veterans Services Commissioner Loree Sutton and her team for their coordination with the VAB. This also applies to the City Council and its Veterans Affairs Committee.

The NYC VAB is an important forum for discussing issues relevant to our community. It well reflects our diverse constituency, and should be viewed as an important convener and coordinator of the wide array of entities and perspectives active in the local veterans population. A solid and simple example of this is the ongoing effort to include members of the VA's Community Veterans Engagement Board in VAB meetings.

We're at a point where coordination and collaboration will be the value-add for us, not the introduction of new structures. The VAB is an effective way for this to occur and the United War Veterans Council, which follows similar principles in the non-profit space, is glad to support this effort.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak and congratulations to the VAB for their yeoman's work on behalf of New York City's veterans.

Oversight Hearing: the Veterans Advisory Board - February 7, 2017

Testimony of Todd M. Haskins, Chairman

New York City Veteran Advisory Board

Chairman Ulrich, Council Members Cohen, Cabrera, Vallone, Maisel and Borelli, Commissioner Sutton and attendees of today's hearing, let me start by thanking this Committee both for holding this hearing today, but more importantly for having the vision and foresight to sponsor and drive the creation of the legislation which paved the way for the establishment of the Department of Veteran Services, the first new City agency in nearly a quarter of a century. You should all be very proud of what you have achieved on behalf of the people of New York City. I would also like to acknowledge the roles of the Speaker and the Mayor as well as the advocate community for their role in both the legislation and in establishing and resourcing the Department of Veteran Services.

Background

Let me take a step back to provide a bit of context around how we at the VAB interpret our mandate: **we believe that our obligation is to ALL NEW YORKERS, not just to veterans.** This is a critical point as it colors the lens through which we evaluate policy - we are not here to simply advocate for resources for veterans.

We have established a vision for New York City to have the **most effective local veteran policies of any large city in the United States**. We are judicious in our recommendations. In partnership with the DVS we have concluded that our policies will be most effective if prioritized based upon how they **support**

veterans continued services as citizens - this is a our guiding principle. As a result, all New Yorkers benefit from investments in our veterans.

It is logical to question how these programs, which are clearly targeted at veterans, impact all New Yorkers. To understand this, it is critical that everyone understands the following point: **whether you like veterans, they are unique compared to every other demographic group.**

- First, they have chosen to put themselves in harm's way for the benefit of their fellow citizens and that in its own right merits our admiration and support. Ensuring that future generations of this country's best and brightest continue to serve is critical to our national security and our collective success. For validation of this concept look no further than to the words of our first President who said *"the willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by our nation."*
- Second, veterans as a population have a variety of attributes which attract federal spending and tourism to the City. For example, events like Fleet Week and America's parade and venues such as the Intrepid are all connected to veterans and all generate tourism for the City. Also, the federal government has a variety of programs which are targeted at veterans and which bring federal spending directly into our City. The most well-known of these programs is the GI Bill but many other programs exist. The direct impact of these programs are the easiest to quantify.
- The last benefit to the city is a bit more difficult to evaluate. A wealth of demographic data suggest that veterans make great citizens. Post transition they are more civically active, have lower unemployment, higher

wages, higher education, lower incarceration rates, higher average earnings and ultimately pay more taxes. These attributes combine to have a compounding beneficial effect over time if we attract more veterans to our City.

Let me give a clear example of how New York City's veteran policy has undeniably provided a great benefit to all New Yorkers. Mission Home is New York City's campaign to end veteran homelessness. Since its inception, veteran homelessness has dropped by over 90% despite an increase in the City overall. While the City and its many partners have made significant investments, the simple fact is that the majority of the direct costs to achieve this were funded by the federal government. So, whenever a qualifying veteran was placed in permanent housing, federal dollars were paid to his or her NYC landlord which was spent here in our City. Further, the cost to service that otherwise homeless veteran, which was a great burden on the city, is then removed. Lastly, that veteran who was once on the street and likely without a job can now return to being a contributing member of society and continue his or her service as a citizen.

Sometimes the cost / benefit analysis of programs can be difficult to assess, but for those which we are prioritizing today, the returns are obvious and immediate.

Recommendations

I will highlight the six recommendations in the report which I believe are the most pressing and will have the highest return on investment. The Commissioner has built a great team and is ready to design and implement programs, **but the next big test of our commitment is the 2017 budget process.**

1. Contracting Capability: Contracting capability must be added to the DVS and it is not provided for in the current budget. No department can rely on outside services for something as critical and complicated as contacting. First, they will always be at the whim of whoever controls that capability. Second, there are unique attributes that members of the veteran community hold such as Veteran Service Organization designations. Contracting bodies are not always familiar with the documentation of these organizations which are not 501(c)(3)s. It is imperative that these resources be funded through the budget process.
2. Program Evaluation: Resources for program evaluation are critical. We simply cannot have the **most effective local veteran policies** if we have no resources to measure effectiveness. With these resources in place we will be able to minimize waste and also quantify the value of our programs. Proving effectiveness will allow us to attract more resources to the City by demonstrating that we are good stewards. We can also use federal money to perfect programs among our veteran population and then apply best practices to ensure that our NYC tax dollars are spent more efficiently. This is another way that all New Yorkers benefit from effective veteran programs.
3. Communications: Communications are the single most urgent area of improvement where resources have already been provided. Some additional funding needs are likely, but DVS needs to make this a priority. This should include both communicating within the City and also communicating our successes beyond the City's borders. Effective external communications will ensure that all of our partners know of our effectiveness and attract more resources to the City.
4. VetConnect: VetConnect is an innovative platform through which all of New York City's veteran services will be coordinated. We believe that we have identified the right partners but it will be critical that the funding needed to

complete the program is provided. This is the backbone of our delivery model and if it is not done right unnecessary waste will result. Note that the partners are identified BUT the contracts are not yet complete. This highlights point 1, why establishing contracting authority is so important.

5. Veteran Owned Business Preference: Extend the Minority and Women Owned Business Enterprise Program to Veteran Owned businesses. Literally all that has to be changed is the definition of "minority owned" to include veterans, so the cost of the program is essentially zero. This leads to an almost infinite return.

6. Vets on Campus NYC: I want to highlight an exciting opportunity for what is probably the highest return program yet to be created, Vets on Campus NYC. New York City is the largest exporter of post secondary education of any city in the nation. We have tremendous educational institutions here, both public and private and vocational, colleges and universities. Few opportunities to improve the lives of Americans are so widely celebrated and noted as post secondary education - and this is very much aligned with our guiding principle of supporting veterans continued service as citizens. What is even more amazing is the fact that the federal government will pay for all of this. Let me say this again, **the federal government will pay for veterans to go to school.**

What does this mean for New York City? For every qualifying veteran who completes a four year degree here, the federal government will spend ~\$200,000 directly in New York City. If he or she chooses to stay in the City upon graduation, that could literally be worth millions of dollars of economic benefit over the life of the veteran. **Why every city in the nation is not clamoring to attract veterans I have no idea, but New York should be the first.**

We should work with all New York City based schools and create a comprehensive program to attract veterans. This would include an ad campaign encouraging transitioning veterans to study in New York City. Such a campaign could tap into the spirit of adventure which caused many service members to join the military in the first place. This will have the added benefit of branding the City as veteran friendly and the leader in veteran policies which will attract more federal spending and tourism. Once we attract these veterans to study here, we must be prepared to support them so additional resources should be added particularly to public institutions to ensure that veterans are supported on campus. We should offer a housing voucher to veterans receiving the GI Bill who agree to serve as mentors supporting other veterans - this will also reinforce our guiding principle of supporting veterans continued service as citizens. A program such as this will set New York City apart from all others as a magnet for transitioning veterans. **Our belief is that all of this will be more than paid for by the commerce generated by the GI Bill monies spent here.**

There are a number of other initiatives highlighted in the report each of which stand on their own, but these are the six highest return items which will have the greatest impact on New York City and its veterans.

That concludes my planned remarks, I am happy to entertain any questions.

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

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Date: 2/7/17

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: LOKE SUTTON

Address: 1 CENTRE STREET #2208

I represent: DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS SERVICES

Address: 1 CENTRE STREET #2208

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