

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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Monday, April 28, 2025

Start: 1:06 P.M.

Recess: 3:01 P.M.

HELD AT: 250 Broadway - Committee Room
16th Floor

B E F O R E: Hon. Robert F. Holden, Chair

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Joann Ariola
Kristy Marmorato
Sandy Nurse
Vickie Paladino

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS
A P P E A R A N C E S

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James Hendon,
Commissioner, New York City Department of
Veterans' Services

Lamarr Wheeler,
Senior Executive Director for Housing and Support
Services, New York City Department of Veterans'
Services

Michael Bocchini,
Senior Director of Veterans' Support Services,
New York City Department of Veterans' Services

Amy Hozer-Weber,
Director of the Civil Practice at the Veteran
Advocacy Project

Jane DaCosta,
Executive Director and Founder of Metropolitan
Equestrian

Joseph Bello,
Advocate/Founder, NY MetroVets

Armando Crescenzi,
Founder of Put Veterans First

Rabah Belkebir,
U.S. Army-Connected Disabled Veteran; Street
Vendor

George Singleton,
President of Disabled Veterans New York

Christopher Leon Johnson, Self

Sharon Brown, Self

Timothy Pena,
Owner of Veterans Justice Project

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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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A P P E A R A N C E S (CONTINUED)

Michael Matos,
Veteran; Veteran Advocate

SERGEANT POLITE: Testing one, two, one, two.

Today's date is April 28, 2024 (sic) (***Transcriber Note:** April 28, 2025). Today's hearing is the Committee on Veterans – being recorded on the 16th Floor by Kieth Polite.

SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good afternoon, welcome to the New York City Council Hearing on the Committee on Veterans. To minimize disruptions, please place all electronic devices to vibrate or silent mode.

At no time during this hearing is anyone to approach the dais.

Chair, Holden, we are ready to begin.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Sergeant.

[GAVEL] Good afternoon. I'm Council Member Robert Holden, Chair of The Committee On Veterans. Welcome to our Oversight Hearing on: Implementing Recommendations from the City Council's Report Card Initiative.

The Department of Veterans Services was chosen as one of the first three agencies to be reviewed as part of the City Council's City Agency Report Card Initiative. City Council Speaker, Adrienne Adams, first introduced the initiative at her twenty 2024 State of the City Address, noting that the Council

would be conducting its own evaluations of city agencies in order to judge their delivery of services to New Yorkers.

The Council's compliance division conducted an assessment of DVS' operation and performance between June 2024 and March 2025 using three sources of information: DVS staffers, advocates for veterans in New York City, and independent research, including on the DVS website and in DVS produced documents, as well as in documents produced by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

The assessment looked at seven pillars of the agency's structure and operations:

1. Leadership, Strategy, and Direction
2. Service Delivery for New Yorkers
3. Relationships and Collaboration partners
4. Workforce Development
5. Financial and Resources Management
6. Digital Government
7. Measurement, Analysis, and Knowledge Management

The findings and recommendations regarding DVS's operation and performance were published in a report earlier this month. The report notes that DVS is now

celebrating its tenth anniversary, which is an appropriate time to look back and evaluate its work in its first decade, as well as to look forward for its work for the next 10 years.

Based on the analysis presented in the report, DVS was awarded a grade of C for its current level of performance.

A grade of C is defined as—"adequate performance and capability; some evidence of continuous improvement activities; sufficient evidence of internal assessments of performance and/or capability gaps; internal processes need improvement".

The report also offers these seven key findings:

1. "DVS makes an effort to meet Veterans where they are likely to be."
2. "DVS has tried to use its resources wisely, while recognizing that it cannot do it alone."
3. "There is a gap between [DVS's] reported practices and the experiences described by Veterans and advocates."
4. Continuity of care is critical to the long-term health, stability, and financial well-being of Veterans."

5. "DVS has created various support channels for Veterans to access its services and also collaborates with several government and non-profit agencies on a number of initiatives."

6. "DVS needs to rebuild trust with the New York City Veteran community."

7. "DVS must do better in leveraging other NYC agencies to reach and serve more Veterans."

Finally, the report provides 15 recommendations. They cover short-term plan and long-term planning; the operations of the Veterans Resource Centers; and communication methods to use with veterans; continuity of care; call tracking and monitoring; relationships with veteran advocates and veteran service organizations; DVS staffing; contracting; digital strategy, and more. I look forward to hearing the Commissioner's response to the 15 recommendations at this hearing.

At this time, I would like to acknowledge my colleagues who are here: Council Member Ariola to my left; Council Member Nurse, who is far-right; and Council Member Marmorato to my right.

I would like to thank the Committee staff who worked on preparing this hearing: Regina Paul, Senior Policy Analyst, to my right, and Phariha Rahman, Financial Analyst.

And finally, I would like to thank my Chief of Staff, Daniel Kurzyna, sitting over to the far right.

I would like to now turn it over to Regina Paul to administer the oath to the Administration.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Please raise your right hand.

Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, before this committee, and to respond honestly to council member questions?

PANEL AFFIRMS

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. As a reminder to all of our witnesses, please state your name prior to your testimony for the record.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you. My name is James Hendon; I serve as Commissioner of the New York City Department of Veteran Services. And in the interest of time, I'll be reading selections from a broader written testimony, which has been formally submitted to the Council.

Good afternoon, Chair Holden, members of the Veterans Committee, other City Council Members, and

all who are here today. My name is James Hendon; I serve as Commissioner of the New York City Department of Veterans Services. Joining me today Lamarr Wheeler, our agency's Senior Executive Director of Housing Support Services, along with Michael Bocchini, Senior Executive Director for Veterans Support Services.

We are happy to join you to discuss the Speaker's State of The City Report Card Program, specifically the inaugural report that was least released about DVS.

I want to start by saying thank you for taking the time to put this analysis together. A great deal of consideration, diligence, and care went into drafting this document. We appreciate the report card, and to its creators, we appreciate you.

Now to get into it, the Speaker released a 76-page written report – a document that was roughly one year in the making. We're responding to that report through delivering testimony during a City Council Hearing. There's asymmetry between what was written and how we're responding to it. And for that reason, we will not be able to address every single item written in a report that's nearly 20,000 words long.

We will honor the spirit of the report while addressing its feedback through four key themes.

I urge the Council, and all who are interested, to review our most recent City Council Testimony. This was delivered during the Preliminary Budget Hearing held on Tuesday, March 25, 2025. That testimony, which can be viewed at legistar.council.nyc.gov, speaks in detail about our department's history, how DVS has arrayed, our primary services, and what we do to fulfill our charter mandate. It reviews our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and it relays current priorities.

In the interest of time, I'll try not to speak too deeply about things that were already mentioned there — And then another flag, there are execution approaches made in the scorecard that claim to have been informed by municipal and higher level government work in Australia and Europe. Some of these norms, while purportedly common outside of The United States, have no precedent for being done at the city, state, or federal levels inside of America. And then a final flag, I, you know, pray that we have a healthy discussion. Everything that follows is not

borne from a place of "let's blame this person for this, or that person for that." It comes from a place of let's speak openly about what's going on." What has gone well? What needs work? What does the path look like as we navigate towards a better tomorrow?

It is clear from the report, those who contributed to the scorecard acted with benevolent intentions, kind hearts, and good faith. They acted in a way that removed ego and maintained focus on the veteran community. We aim to embody that same mood.

Now to some of those major themes I mentioned.

Theme One: *Resource Allocation*

It is important to note that we, the NYC Department of Veterans Services, are a municipal government entity. As a public organization, DVS, the smallest department in New York City Government, does all that we can to execute the laws that are written using the budget that we have provided. Our task, per Chapter 75 of the New York City Charter, is to assist and inform members of the uniformed services community, including allies and stakeholders in the areas of healthcare, housing, benefits, culture, education, and employment.

When recommendations are written, which circle back to the comment, *paraphrasing*, "DVS doesn't have enough resources."

Note that we, along with all agencies, must operate within the budget that we do have an environment where citywide financial resources are finite, and we are able to achieve great work with the staff and resources that are available to the department. "We can always do more with more" is a statement that we've uttered several times during past City Council Hearings throughout the years. When resource changes can be made, we embrace them. Needless to say, when we do not have the resources, when the City is going through tough times, like the COVID-19 pandemic and the migrant crisis, we do not stop and feel sorry for ourselves. We do not retreat and complain. Our veterans, all of them, including their families, sacrificed so much for this country doing more with less. We can function, too. Our challenges, relative to those overcome by our community, are small. That said, in the face of adversity and extreme scarcity, DVS innovates and executes.

I tell our team all the time, strategically, DVS's work is like football. We move left, right, or forward. We do not stop or go backwards.

Being that this is the norm for DVS, we focus very much on how to leverage the resources and partners around us to attain certain capabilities. For each of our charter mandated areas, questions that we ask are:

What are the community's needs in this space? How can DVS leverage the resources and goodwill that we have as a government entity to ensure that those needs are met? And how do we add value in a way that is unique and efficient?

DVS is not the end all be all; we are a catalyst for further change. From a military standpoint, we aim to ensure that certain capabilities are present in the landscape. We enact that approach by offering direct services where needed, providing referrals, and executing what we call *synergies*. Synergies are situations where we collaboratively work with partners to ensure that, for the value delivered to veterans and their loved ones, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. We do our best to foster a

dynamic where we punch above our weight class such that – inclusive of partners – $1 + 1 = 3$.

The takeaway: I ask that discussions of resource allocation be realistic, focused on the end state first. In other words, how do we reverse engineer an environment that looks like “X” and factor in all players and resources available?

Theme Two: *Expectation Management*

In general, I take responsibility for the feedback that we, the NYC Department of Veterans Services, have not managed expectations in the best way that we can with the veteran community. There are several things to say here in clearing the air.

First off, we are not the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Oftentimes, veterans and their loved ones have grievances that they wish to air with the federal government about VA services, and they do not know where to go. At times when they believe that no movement has occurred, we provide them with the VA's Office of Inspector General contact information.

For the record, the VA's Office of Inspector General website is va.gov/oig. The OIG hotline is +1 (800) 488-8244.

Another nuance in confusing us with the VA, for veterans who face housing insecurity, the VA will assist veterans who are eligible for VA healthcare. If you're not eligible for VA health care, then the VA will not provide assistance should you become housing insecure. That responsibility falls on us.

Historically, approximately 40% of New York City's Homeless Veterans are not VHA eligible. For those veterans, we assist them with the housing search. DVS has housed 1,447 veterans since our inception, and this is our contribution to the city's reduction in the homeless veteran population – from 4,677 in 2011 to 624 in 2024 – a more than 80 per 85% decline.

While we do what we can to achieve certain capabilities, partnership and collaboration are cornerstones. It is important to make sure all who observe us know that we are a small agency who efficiently uses the resources we have to accomplish an incredible amount. I feel as though in the report, our agency size, relative to what we've done as such a small organization, was not factored into the scoring. It is not an apples to apples comparison to put side by side with other departments.

To mention a few examples of how we work with partners to deliver an outsized impact:

For employment — nyc.gov/vetjobs — DVS facilitated employment opportunities at a rate of roughly 125 per month. A key differentiator between us and our colleagues at the Department of Small Business Services, whom we work in lockstep, with via their priority one program, SBS helps clients obtain jobs where the median pay is \$19 per hour. DVS helps clients obtain jobs that traditionally pay more than \$40,000 per year.

For VA claims — nyc.gov/vetclaims — During FY25, the City Council in its wisdom, and we thank Veterans Committee Chair Robert Holden, Finance Committee Chair Justin Brannan, and Speaker Adrienne Adams for this, funded a Veteran Resource Center Initiative which effectively increases the number of accredited Veteran Service Officers who help New York City Veterans file VA claims. Beyond that, one of our VetConnect service providers, Northwell Health, has hired two fulltime Veteran Service Officers who are also able to help veterans file VA claims. These actions increase our community's overall ability to respond to the veterans' claims-related needs.

Per the ACS 2023 1-year estimate, the percentage of veterans who have a service connected disability rating nationwide is 31.2%. That proportion drops to 21.6% in New York State, then to 20.1% in New York City. In the pursuit of parity between the proportion of veterans served at the national and city levels, we're doing everything that we can to close the gap.

The Veteran Feeding Program – nyc.gov/vetfood – Since June of 2020, DVS, in partnership with HelloFresh, the New York State Department of Veterans Services, the New York State Food and Anti-Hunger Policy Coordinator, the Campaign Against Hunger, Black Veterans for Social Justice, Amazon, numerous community and civic entities, and philanthropic partners such as the New York Health Foundation and Bob Woodruff Foundation has facilitated the preparation and delivery of 2,000 meal kits per week. Each meal kit contains four meals, picked up by approximately 20 community entities, and delivered to food insecure New York City Veterans.

Mission: VetCheck – nyc.gov.vetcheck – Started in 2020, Mission: VetCheck is a buddy check wellness calling program run in partnership with New York Cares and courtesy of generous support from various

1 funders, including the New York City Council – Once
2 again, thank you, Chair Holden, Chair Brennan,
3 Speaker Adams, and the entire Council for your
4 support.
5

6 Over the past few years, more than 16,000
7 Mission: VetCheck calls were made each year,
8 resulting in approximately 2,000 referrals per
9 services per year. Mission: VetCheck is a key way for
10 us to reach out to veterans who are in the shadows.

11 Another place where we must manage expectations
12 are two of our contract related efforts. Two
13 initiatives where innovation is occurring – but it
14 takes time – are: a) transitioning to a new technology
15 provider for our VetConnect NYC platform, and b) our
16 rollout of the Private First Class Joseph P. Dwyer
17 Veterans' Support Program.

18 To level set, VetConnect NYC is our agency's
19 digital referral initiative. You can learn more by
20 visiting nyc.gov/vetconnect. The Private First Class
21 Joseph P. Dwyer program is a state funded effort
22 administered to normalize help-seeking behavior among
23 veteran and military families. Details can be found
24 at nyc.gov/vetdwyer.
25

The execution of these efforts has been impacted by several things, most significantly by challenges surrounding PASSPort, the City's digital procurement platform. The challenges involving PASSPort for City contracting in general are covered in the report. Things that I can say – beyond the PASSPort piece, which is being addressed:

In each of these cases, the VetConnect technology provider change and the way we execute Dwyer, DVS stepped away from maintaining the status quo.

The technology change in VetConnect was rooted in feedback from our community about our digital referral platform. We plan to launch the new look VetConnect NYC portal on the first day of Fiscal Year 2026 on July 1st, 2025.

For Dwyer, DVS is taking Dwyer funding and through a grant like process, which conforms to New York City's Procurement Protocol Board Rules, distributing resources to local veteran organizations and allied entities in order to have a hyper-local impact for Dwyer resources. Money has and is in the process of being dispersed in support of 31 New York City Dwyer projects at this time.

We're on a good foot with Dwyer and VetConnect now. Nevertheless, I take full responsibility for not realizing how much of a delay would occur in processing these contracts.

Some additional thoughts:

Along with the contracting component, Dwyer also took time as we internally worked to ensure that funds connected to the program were fluidly sent to DVS. Another thing, the intersection between us needing PASSPort to perform all Dwyer-related procurement and the platform's existing challenges made executing Dwyer particularly hard. That said, we are powering through all issues.

Another factor that affected the VetConnect rollout, we needed to incorporate new technology in VetConnect, technology not used before in New York City government in order to fully comply with Local Law 37. Until now, no technology exists where you can bulk upload a list of New York City addresses and immediately learn the city council districts associated with those addresses. This innovation is key to DVS sharing contact information with each council member about the veterans whom we are aware

of in your districts during the ramp up to Memorial Day and Fleet Week.

As I reflect on feedback in the report card that there's a disconnect between how the agency sees itself versus how we're seen by the veteran community, three things come to mind:

Number one, knowing that if media reports are correct, only 21 people were contacted to provide all qualitative and quantitative feedback for the scorecard. In other words, the survey percentages mentioned and the comments provided only came from 21 individuals, otherwise known as 1/100th of 1% of our population – at most – so it's point .01%. It is hard for me to digest that feelings towards DVS from New York City's entire veteran community are so negative and strong.

Number two, it must be said much of our work aims to bring veterans into the light. A majority of U.S. Military Veterans do not self identify. Per the federal government's FY23 Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures Report, 34.3% of veterans self identify nationwide, 29.8% self identify in New York State, and 24.1% self identify in New York City. When you add the fact that the FY25 budgets for the VA,

the New York State Department of Veterans Services, and DVS are \$378.6 billion; \$30 million; and \$7 million respectively, despite the combined resources that we have, this problem with self identification persists. It impacts us all.

When taking in feedback from the veteran community, we must face the duality of: Am I receiving and accepting... I'm receiving and accepting wisdom from those in our tribe who do self identify. At the same time, it is incumbent on us to find and attract the veterans who do not.

And then with our limited resources, we often spend time in places where those who do not self identify are, that is entities and organizations that could capture them. To those who have self identified, because we're heavily focused on the non-identifying veterans, they could view us and think, "I do not see you aggressively coming to me." The charge, "We do not see you", is still the charge. Our state and federal counterparts have received similar feedback as well. I accept that. It is something that all of us are working on.

From reflecting on the report, I think another reason for the disconnect between how the community

1 sees DVS and how we see ourselves is we've spent
2 ample time these past several years building
3 capabilities. Our logic, informed by various
4 community interactions, our Veteran And Military
5 Family Survey, City Council Hearings and the like,
6 you cannot get something with nothing. One must offer
7 attractive programs and benefits in order to inspire
8 and motivate our brothers and sisters to self
9 identify as U.S. Military Veterans to come into the
10 light. We have been overjoyed to notch wins that
11 provide more offerings to the veteran community.
12 We're preparing the battlefield, so to speak. Members
13 of the community may think, "That all sounds great,
14 but I do not know about these things. I need to see
15 you deliver those things." That is something we are
16 pivoting to currently.

18 To us, the one-two-three combination of using
19 Mission: VetCheck to make cold calls, one, sharing
20 veteran contact information with council members in
21 the lead up to Memorial Day; two, the launch of the
22 new look VetConnect NYC platform on July 1st; three,
23 our major milestones which will define the pivot
24 point.

25 Theme Three: *Penetration*

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2 They are, *paraphrasing*: Have you or any member of
3 your household ever served in The US Armed Forces,
4 and do you consent to being contacted by DVS? The
5 objective for us is to inspire and motivate veterans
6 who have not self identified to do so and to take
7 advantage of what we and our partners have to offer.

8 This ties back to our overall strategy: Connect.
9 We learn who our veterans are. Mobilize. Veterans
10 learn who we are, and they discover our offerings.
11 And Empower. We serve them.

12 Our approach hinges on the concept of touches.
13 You need at least seven touches, or occasions when a
14 person interacts with your product or offering, in
15 order for it to translate into a possible conversion.
16 We, the Department of Veterans Services, do not have
17 the resources to perform all seven touches alone.
18 Even if we could, that would not be the best way. It
19 is best for it to come from different sources through
20 different angles.

21 Prior to the new VetConnect, prior to having so
22 many capabilities available, and prior to this
23 touches approach, DVS saw our number of veterans and
24 families serve increase over the past three years,
25 FY22, 23, and 24, from 1,068 to 3,338, to 10,701.

With limited resources and a tough economic backdrop, we have labored since 2019 to get to this point. I truly believe that this expansion plan will work.

We owe the Council and the broader veteran community a more detailed, short and long-term plan. We accept that feedback. Today, I want to assure people there's a lot of work, a lot of intentionality, and a lot of thought behind what is occurring. We appreciate the support and patience from everyone as this all comes together.

Theme Four: *Smart Growth*

When speaking to the question of what DVS should look like over its next 10 years, it is not feasible to offer numbers without being able to defend those numbers in what have been, and may continue to be, difficult economic times.

I'll provide what I think is a good framework for the next five years. Don't want to say 10 years because things change so much, things beyond our control.

But some caveats – It takes time to grow an organization. And then there's a spiritual return on investment to these suggestions. We should always do right by our U.S. military service members and their

1
2 loved ones. That said, the monetary return on
3 investment arguments can be made on the net effect of
4 these additions as well.

5 And then one last caveat, the current breakdown
6 of DVS, organizationally and otherwise, is outlined
7 in our Preliminary Budget Hearing Testimony from
8 March 25, 2025.

9 What follows is what I believe DVS could look
10 like as a DVS 2.0 Regarding smart growth, the thing
11 that I will say, speaking to tomorrow's policymakers,
12 do not manufacture a crisis. When you're in an
13 environment like this where resources are scarce,
14 there are leaders who will engineer a situation where
15 they inspire veterans and their loved ones to come to
16 their organizations for help knowing that they are
17 unable to triage the need. The point is to tell
18 benefactors and prospective financiers, "Look at all
19 the veterans who need me. I do not have the resources
20 to support them. Please fund my work."

21 While that may be a practice for some nonprofit
22 and for profit organizations, for DVS as a government
23 veteran services agency, we cannot operate that way.
24 We must calibrate what we and our partners are able
25 to offer to the intensity with which we promote those

offerings citywide. DVS must stand ready to receive and triage a growing number of clients who approach us to do otherwise is to do harm. Everything that we're doing is predicated on having the right composition, disposition, and strength to engage New York City's entire veteran community working with partners and to deliver the resources that U.S. military service members past and present and their families all need, also working with allied organizations and stakeholders.

Responses to scorecard recommendations:

For leadership, strategy, and direction, we're happy to publish a short and long term-plan. It is critical that we make sure that the plan dovetails with existing reporting and oversight mechanisms. This is all in support of working smartly and efficiently.

Service delivery recommendations: When it comes to our Veteran Resource Centers, or VRCs, the key issue is not where each VRC located is or if a DVS employee be available during non traditional hours to receive clients – including all logistical implications involved. The issue is, do veterans know DVS so they know that they can reach out to us and

ask us for help? We meet and serve veterans during non traditional times always. If veterans are not able to meet in person at a Veteran Resource Center during the VRC's stated hours, then we flex to meet them remotely and or in person on a case by case basis. We take a dynamic approach as opposed to a static one with both this and our presence in the shelter system.

The pain point is making sure that veterans are aware of DVS. This goes back to the plan that was discussed during the previous section. It outlines how we intend to have more constituents learn who we are as we facilitate increased touches and go viral.

Earlier in this testimony, we addressed the scorecard's comments on the disconnect between how DVS views its operations versus the feedback from the 21 respondents to the report. And then for the sake of efficiency, and recognizing that internal audit and oversight mechanisms exist between those established by the Office of Management and Budget, the Mayor's Office of Operations, The Comptroller's Office, the Department of Investigation, and the New York City Council. DVS will not perform internal audits of its operations. We trust the overlapping

audit, oversight, and investigative mechanisms, systems that exist within city government.

Also, recognizing that we must be smart with our resources, it is vital to have more people doing things worth measuring at DVS than to have staff members internally measuring those things.

Relationships and collaboration: The agency has several existing touches with veteran community members. These include, but are not limited to, veteran and military family community summits – we hold these at a rate of one to two times per year; Community Engagement Sessions held quarterly with veteran community leaders; Employment Workshops held two to four times per year; Entrepreneurship Sessions held two to four times per year; Women Veterans Luncheon held one time per year; Veterans Mental Health Coalition meets four to six times per year; Community Survey conducted once every four years with 1,500+ respondents; Veterans Advisory Board Meetings – DVS attends and addresses these meetings five times per year; Veteran Feeding Program, each Wednesday on 50 out of 52 weeks per year; various veteran community gatherings – and events agency attends more than 250 veteran community events each year; and

Mission: VetCheck – approximately 16,000+ buddy check wellness calls to veterans each year.

For digital engagement: there are approximately 10,000 veterans who subscribe to our weekly newsletter, nyc.gov/vetnewsletter. We grew from having 245 to 362 to 474,000 social media impressions over the last three years, and our website was visited 28, then 125, then 161,000 times over the same interval. Those numbers are separate from the direct services work we've done in Housing, VA claims, burials, and employment, among other things.

To reiterate, the number of veterans and military families we've served from The Mayor's Management Report has increased from 1,068 to 3,338 to 10,701 over the past three years – Fiscal Years 2022, 2023, and 2024. I push back on the notion conveyed by 21 individuals that we are not present and that we do not listen to the needs of the community.

There's a broader issue which bedevils all municipalities and states, including the federal government, about how to tackle the challenge of veteran self identification.

As I've briefed, we're engaging this issue directly. The plan that we're currently executing will help us address these things.

For perspective, the proportion of NYPD members, uniformed and non uniformed, who are veterans, out of all billets, is 5.2%. The proportion of FDNY members is 8.6%. The same metric for the Department of Corrections is 5.4%. Military connected persons comprise a large part of DVS's staff. Beyond this, we

1
2 host an average of six transitioning service members
3 or military interns tied to the Department of
4 Defense's Skill Bridge program each year. During a
5 given academic semester, DVS hosts 20 to 30 VA work
6 study students who support our agency, assisting in
7 areas ranging from Communications to Housing to
8 Information Technology.

9 It is common practice for us to post job
10 openings, full-time and ancillary, on our agency's
11 newsletter. DVS significantly incorporates veteran
12 community members into our workforce between direct
13 and ancillary staff.

14 To be compliant with fair hiring practices, we,
15 and all of New York City government, cannot
16 discriminate against a job applicant on the basis of
17 their status as a uniformed services member, past or
18 present. Also, we cannot discriminate against a job
19 applicant on the basis of them not having been a
20 member of the uniformed services.

21 For Financial and Resources Management, my
22 response to the suggestion that DVS audit and perform
23 an impact analysis of every penny that the agency
24 spends is in line with my response to the previous
25 recommendation about auditing.

For Digital Government, many of the digital government recommendations will be accomplished through the rollout of our new VetConnect NYC platform at the beginning of FY26, starting on July 1, 2025.

For Measurement, Analytics, and Knowledge Management, many of the measurement, analytics, and knowledge management recommendations will be accomplished through our new VetConnect NYC platform, which kicks off publicly on July 1st. We are happy for publish policies for data sharing on the DVS website in the future as well.

Recommendations to the City Council:

In the spirit of giving and receiving feedback, three DVS recommendations to the City Council follow:

One, please include the Local Law 37 Veteran Identifier questions on constituent intake forms in your offices:

- Have you or any member of your household ever served in the US armed forces?
- Do you consent to being contacted by the NYC Department of Veteran Services?

Two, please require all nonprofits funded by the Council to deliver veteran programming to interact

with DVS. Engaging us allows DVS to amplify the nonprofit's veteran specific events, services, and offerings.

And three, the spotlight brought by the support and this hearing to veterans issues is always welcome. Many pieces of legislation have been introduced by the council members to address veterans issues.

I'd like to briefly turn today's spotlight on to two such pieces of legislation:

Introduction Number 685 would, among other things, legally create a Veteran Leadership Advisory Program to educate veteran owned business enterprises about city procurement opportunities and support such business enterprises during the procurement process.

DVS does this now through our Veteran Business Leadership Association, much like Local Law 40 of 2024, which codified our agency's digital services platform VetConnect. Introduction 685 would codify the our Veteran Business Leadership Association into law.

Introduction Number 686 would amend the membership of the Street Vendor Advisory Board to include the Commissioner Of Veteran Services or their

designee, and it would increase the number of Speaker appointed members to seven to include a representative of the veteran community.

These two pieces of legislation address specific issues that veterans raise with DVS repeatedly. I welcome the opportunity to work with the Council on these bills with the shared goal of positive and meaningfully impacting the veteran community and our city.

In conclusion, thank you again for taking the time to have this discussion. We are happy to answer all questions the Council has.

The New York City Department of Veteran Services can be reached via telephone at 212-416-5250; by email at connect@veterans.nyc.gov; online at Nyc.gov/vets; and through the social media handle @nycveterans.

I will say it one more time:

Telephone – 212-416-5250

Email – connect@veterans.nyc.gov.

Online – Nyc.gov/vets

Social Media – @nycveterans

God bless you, God bless the city of New York,
and God bless America. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, thank you, Commissioner, and I give you an "A" for speed reading because you, again, you – 20 pages you just went through. And so I think that's quite amazing.

And we understand, you know, we understand the evaluation process and we're going to ask you questions on that.

But I just want to acknowledge that we've been joined by Council Member Paladino on Zoom.

So I'd like to just... you mentioned some of the things I'm about to ask in your testimony, I have to go through the process. So, let's talk about the process of evaluation.

DVS was one of the, as you know, is one of the three city agencies to be chosen for the first round of the Report Card Initiative.

Other than what you mentioned, or you can just repeat it, what do you think went well during the data collection and analysis process and what could have been improved?

Now you mentioned the 21 people that were polled, you know, the advocates, but are there any other things that you can elaborate on?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think when it comes to data, it's, first off, we're so happy that the Council has gone through this, that the Speaker has taken this initiative. We're happy to be the first in the shoot for the conversation. Anything that brings more attention to the veteran community is better than less. So the fact that we're talking about veterans here today, that's a win for our community. We want to say that.

For the data, we think that reaching out to us, we could have gotten them information about who all the different veteran leaders are that we are aware of in the city. You know, we maintain a list of over a 160 veteran leaders as far as different organizational heads and whatnot, and we could have shared that gladly. So it could be something that's broader, even if it's just going after leaders, to go after something that's broader than what was just 21 people. So to you know, for us, we've said it in the past, we estimate that there'd be about 200,000 veterans in this city, more than that, actually. Once you include families, you're looking at a community of 600,000. We have 200,000+ veterans, 400,000+ family members.

To have just 21 people, it's not fully reflective, and for us having just shared... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So what would you say? What... (CROSS-TALK)

COMMISSIONER HENDON: what the content... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: How many would you say? Five-hundred? What number?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Oh, as far as an appropriate number?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yes

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I know for us, for survey purposes, we always try to... for our Veteran Military Survey of our community, we try to target a number that's greater than 1,200 for it at all times.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: And we usually keep it at north of 1,500. So, not that they need to get that much, but even if you want to just go to leaders to interact with more than 21, I think it gives a little more credence to things. It can be more representative.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So how satisfied were you with the degree of input that DVS staff had in providing information for the report? And how satisfied were you with the degree of input that DVS staff had in reviewing the early findings and recommendations before the report was finalized?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: So the Council, I know the first wave of questions was about 133 questions, with 93 main... 92 main questions, and the rest was sub questions. It was 133 questions. Was a question that we received first, and we responded as best we could, and then there were subsequent waves of questions, so there were times when they were prodding us for the information.

When it comes... when the report itself was complete, though, you know, we received it about two weeks ago, and first we're told, here's the Executive Summary, we need you to give us a full response to the report just from seeing a two page Executive Summary, so we hadn't seen all of it. And so, we didn't get to see everything. And so, once we did see everything, I will give credit to the Council where there were two things that we flagged as factual, things that just factually weren't accurate, and they

did make those tweaks, and we're thankful for that...

(CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So they did change it for
(INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

COMMISSIONER HENDON: They did make those...
(CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: (INAUDIBLE) you're seeing
that.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: They did make those two
changes... They made those two changes, but for us,
as far as, this is our first forum to really give
full feedback after having seen it in its entirety.
So there's a lot that I wish we could have... Had we
seen it, and been given more time as opposed to,
*Here's the two pages, give this to us, and that will
count as you having read it.* I just wish that dynamic
didn't exist.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So how satisfied were you
with the outreach that the City Council Compliance
staff made to VSOs and advocates in the veterans
community in seeking their input during the process?

You mentioned only 21, but so would you say
you're dissatisfied?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think that we... we have information. So it's part of section 31.105 of Administrative Code, a piece of it, and this ties the VAB operations. "The Department shall also maintain and periodically update the contact information of veterans organizations located in the city."

And so I feel like that's something where we could have, you know, we've been happy to provide. I feel like the Council or the Speaker's team, they wanted to do this completely independent of us, and we could have at least gotten them information for folks who are in leadership. That's... That's (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right. For the record, though, they engaged the advocacy groups, speaking on behalf of the members, and engaged the Veterans Advisory Board extensively for the report. So that's according to the Compliance staff.

Let's talk about the findings. The final report offers seven key findings. Would you give us a brief reaction to one, commenting on whether you think each one is a fair representation of DVS's work?

So let's start with number one. *DVS made an effort to meet veterans where they are likely to be.*

Do you agree with the findings on it?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You do? Okay.

Number two, *DVS has tried to use its resources wisely, recognizing that it cannot do it alone.*

Do you agree with that finding?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. I'm gonna go through this, so it'll be, you know, be a lot.

Maybe I could ask them, but all at once, there is a gap, know, number three, *There is a gap between DVS's reported practices and the experiences described by veterans and advocates.*

Do you agree with that finding?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: This is the one where, you know, the caveat to it is, a lot of the work for us is identifying the veterans. You know, we always say at the hearings, roughly one out of four veterans self identifies, like 24.1%.

And so, a lot of our effort is spent trying to go reach out to those folks who are in the shadows, to kind of get them into this. So I think that's one piece of it.

Another piece of this is, we've been spending ample time, and this is why I agreed that we want to put our short and long-term plans out and make them public, just building the capabilities out here, putting different benefits or offerings out there for the veterans to know about.

If you don't have much to offer people, way of benefits and offerings and supports, they're not gonna show. And so for us, it's been, be it through housing, through healthcare, benefits, culture, education, employment, it's been setting up the all the different accoutrements, if you will, that can be attractive so we can get our veterans to come into the light, so that then more of them can identify. And then you have that stronger relationship, the report is suggesting.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Number four, *Continuity of care is critical to the long term health stability and financial well-being of veterans.*

Do you agree with that finding?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I agree with the caveat that for us it's, you become a member of this community when you first take the oath to serve, protect, and defend. You stay a member of this community even into

1 the grave and beyond. And so for us, it's about how
2 do we start to identify these service members as soon
3 as they join the tribe? And so that's why we've been
4 so heavy with tying in with our friends at the
5 Defense Department to learn who our veterans are.
6 We're even working to have an event where we see
7 class of 2025 high school graduates who are enlisting
8 in the military to kind of connect with them before
9 they even go off the basic training — so they know,
10 hey, we're here. But then to stay with them
11 throughout all their endeavors in life, and to look
12 at it as that continuity of care on housing issues,
13 continuity of care on economic issues, be it
14 employment, be it education, continuity of care on
15 healthcare issues.

17 So for us, it's really this holistic approach of
18 cradle to grave, you know, as soon as you take the
19 oath, you're one of us and we're with you even when
20 you're in the ground and beyond.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay.

22 Number five is, *DVS has created various support*
23 *channels for veterans to access its services and also*
24 *collaborates with several government and nonprofit*
25 *agencies on a number of initiatives.*

Do you agree with that finding?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay.

So number six is, *DVS needs to rebuild trust with New York City with the New York City Veteran community.*

Do you agree with that?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I don't.

Once again, it's the adaptive challenge for us is finding our people and attracting them to what we have to offer. That's step one. And you can't even have the trust discussion if you don't know who I am and vice versa.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: So that's where a lot of our energy's been focused.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

Finally, on number seven, *DVS must do better in leveraging other New York City agencies to reach and serve more veterans.*

Do you agree with that finding?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think we can always do better. So we're doing a lot. We play very, you know, we play in the foxhole hard, so to speak, with

1
2 partners like Department of Small Business Services,
3 Department of Social Services, to include that's HRA,
4 that's Department of Homeless Services, with the
5 Mayor's Office of People With Disabilities, you know,
6 we and others – we do a lot working with them, and
7 that's city side.

8 On the state side, not only working with the
9 Department of Veterans Services at the state level,
10 but working closely with the Higher Education
11 Services Corporation that runs special scholarship
12 programs for veterans, working with the state of New
13 York Mortgage Agency as far as veteran home buying
14 opportunities, and, you know, just doing what we can
15 to tie in, including something as far as the New York
16 State Education Department and looking at access via
17 or voc rehab and that nexus between these two as far
18 as vocational rehab.

19 At the federal level, it's not just working with
20 the VA, but also working with our good friends at the
21 Department of Labor when it comes to different
22 employment opportunities.

23 And, of course, the Department of Defense
24 recognizing roughly 13,000 veterans in this city are
25 people like me who are reservists or active duty or

guards. So we do what we can to tie in... and Department of Housing and Urban Development, let's not forget. So we do what can to tie in city, state, federal with our government partners.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right.

Let's talk about the grades now. I know my students didn't like a C grade, but because I taught for forty-something years, and C was not great, but it was an average grade, at least in college. It showed average work.

But DVS received an overall grade of C in the report, with C defined as "adequate performance and capability, some evidence of continuous improvement activities, sufficient evidence of internal assessments of performance, and or capability gaps, internal processes need improvement."

Do you feel that the C for that is a fair grade in DVS?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I don't feel that's a fair grade. I think that when I look at the definition for... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: What would you say... What is fair?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think at least a B. And I say this because when you look at the numbers, if you're grading a student, that student goes over the past three years, just speaking that veterans and families served metric, roughly 1,000 to roughly 3,000 to roughly 10,000 over a three-year period.

If you look at that student and that social media impression goes from 245,000 to 362,000 to 474,000 over a three-year period.

You look at that student, they go from, for site visits to their site, 28,000 to 125,000 to 161,000 over a three-year period.

I think it's hard to say that student is a C student. And you have to say that we've been doing something to try to take in the feedback from our community and incorporate it.

When I look at the B definition, it's "positive performance and capability." I believe that is what we're doing. It's "extensive evidence of continuous improvement activity". I believe that's what we're doing.

And then there's "widespread evidence of internal assessment of performance and or capability gaps." I think that for us, case in point is the VetConnect

situation where there was a lot of feedback from our community on how to upgrade our case management platform so we can be better with how we're serving our veterans and closing the loop with them.

It's not online yet, simply because of contracting issues, but that'll be fully online come July 1st, but we heard our community. We incorporated that feedback.

I look at the different surveys we've put out as far as our Veteran And Military Family Survey from a few years ago. For our next one, we'll be unveiling that on May 15th. So we are serving our folks to get input, once again, with more than 1,500 respondents.

And then I look at things like the Community Engagement sessions we hold, our presence at the Veterans Advisory Board sessions. I look at the summits that we put together and other events, and I feel as though we do what we can to create this feedback loop where we can hear our community, and its leaders, and give them forms where they can speak and we can account for those things.

And so for those reasons, think the right grade should be at least a B.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right. So the fact that you had three times the amount of engagements over the years, you've increased that, that warranted a B grade, mostly, just based on all the programs you initiated and all the contacts, just that you were in contact with more veterans in this little past year, three times the amount.

So which of the recommendations do you plan to implement in the next six months, would you say, from the Council's recommendations?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: So I think that the VetConnectNYC, because a lot of the recommendations that deal with case management, and how cases are tracked, and how information is gathered, and closing the loop appropriately when the referrals, that ties to this new look VetConnect, and so that's one that we look at that we will be implementing.

Also, *sharing a short and long-term plan*. I think that is a very good recommendation. We'll be putting that online so folks can see what's going on.

And then another one will be, you know, the *publishing policies for data sharing on the DVS website*. That's another recommendation we will be taking.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Good, okay.

Any recommendations you do not plan to implement?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: We will not implement the auditing piece. And I only say that because it's a quadrupling of resources when you have so many other organizations that do oversight and investigation to say, DVS, do that as well. So we will not be implementing the auditing recommendation.

And we won't... I understand what the community is getting at, saying, hey, *you need more and more veterans there*. But we currently are best in class in the city as far as a proportion of our employees who are veterans. And to me, the real riddle, because we cannot have discriminatory hiring practices at the end the day, that violates human rights law for the City. For us, it's about when more of our community knows about us, when more veterans self identify, then when they see those opportunities, when we post them in social media or post them on the website, we'll have more veterans who apply. So organically, we may see more representation there. So, yeah...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So it is, you know, again, I feel, I'm going to, this is my personal view, that the agency should be three times the size. We talked,

1 I used to say double the size, but three times the
2 size. Because we can't even do mailings. I mean you
3 can't do mailings at all to veterans if wanted to
4 reach them with a lot of information. I mean it's
5 very difficult to do. And especially for the veterans
6 who don't have email, or are not online, and so
7 forth, don't have the necessary capabilities. So you
8 are limited as opposed to most other agencies.

9 But what would you say would be an ideal size of
10 the agency, considering you get a budget of just over
11 \$5 million, what would you say would be... where you
12 could probably do most of your, meet most of your
13 goals if you had *this* budget?

14 This is hypothetical, I'm not gonna put you on
15 the spot on it.

16 COMMISSIONER HENDON: To speak about it in terms
17 of capabilities, because there's a better way to put
18 it, like, as far as speaking of it in terms of
19 desired end states, kind of help, and let that paint
20 the picture as far as reverse engineering.

21 One desired end state is to get the functional
22 zero with veteran homelessness. Right now, our point
23 in time count is 624 homeless veterans, and to get to
24 400 is a goal. So when we look at the team that
25

Lamarr runs, each of his folks, they have about 12 to 15 move outs per quarter. So what we can do to kind of get there and stay there as far as functional zero on veteran homelessness, that's one piece. So looking at having enough staff to maintain that.

Another one is closing this gap we spoke to as far as Mike's team when it comes to VA claims. You know, recognizing that you're trying to move from having its... forgive me the number — here we go, it's 31.2% of all veterans has a VA rating at the federal... nationwide. We're down to 20.1% here in New York City.

So whatever it takes to have enough capacity to cover that gap, as far as the number of veterans who can get their claims filed. And you want to put an asterisk there to account for burials or folks who pass away, making sure that the family knows what burial benefits to take care of or that the veteran can, you know, preempt those things. I think those are key pieces as far as when we try to drive that components.

Another component on the employment side, it's I'll take right now, for instance. Forgive me not having the exact number, but it's a little over 4,500

1
2 veterans in New York City whom we estimate may wind
3 up becoming unemployed due to reduction forces in New
4 York City... in federal government.

5 So if you look at the federal reduction forces
6 happening, we foresee over 4,500 veterans not having
7 jobs. If you look at the number of working-aged
8 vet... working class veterans, working-age veterans,
9 and you look at the fact that one out of 10 veterans
10 works for the federal government, and you see a
11 target of roughly 75% reduction in force. So we need
12 to be able to have the resources to embrace them on
13 an entrepreneurship side or on an employment side.

14 So for me, when I look at these things, it's
15 really with a focus to how do we have enough bodies
16 to get to functional zero? How do we have enough
17 folks to at least close the gap on the services
18 piece? How do we have enough folks to – it's not just
19 about the near term of a reduction of forces, but to
20 receive a strong flow of veterans who may have
21 employment needs, recognizing difference between us
22 and SBS. We will get you a job that is \$40,000 or
23 more. SBS, right now, it's more of an hourly job, you
24 know, \$19 an hour is their median amount. So thinking
25

of it in those ways as far as what we're trying to target when we speak to growth.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Can you commit to tracking and publishing overall numbers? You know, like you've housed 100 veterans out of 10,000, and outcomes, 24% of veterans remained housed over three years, to better understand the impact that they're having?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to defer to Lamarr.

I'll start a little bit. For us, I know that we report a good deal on our current local laws as far as the reporting that is with VRC basis, with an annual basis. Forgive me for not having those laws in front me, think it's 215, and Local Law is 44.

So I know that we already report out a lot of information, and so I just wanna make sure that we are capturing what you're saying. I know we've got MMR. Lamar, you want to...

SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WHEELER: We have MMR.

We have the MMR. We have the PMMR that we report the same findings. I just want to say that we're anticipating more numbers, more people for aftercare and rapid rehousing types of issues, more so than homelessness. Yes, we want to get to functional zero. But people, working people, working veterans and

veteran families right now are really under siege and having difficulty in making it rent. So, we...

(CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And it's not gonna get easier with the veterans aging. Over the years, it gets tougher.

Tell me how we could improve the numbers, and this is big for you, Commissioner, about the veterans self identifying. How do we move the needle if we can't communicate with veterans through the mail, or you're limited to communication?

How do we get, like you mentioned one where with city agencies can certainly ask the questions. But what, you know, *Are you a veteran or anybody served, you know, in your family as a veteran?* That kind of question. But how else do we move the needle? Because that's the most frustrating thing I've seen, where they don't self identify it.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think that us all doing this together is key. In other words, this is why the data sharing is so important. This is why for us, when we live in a world where you know who all the veterans are in your district, that you will go out and try to get the word out to them about any

offerings, resources available. But the same thing for that assemblyman, same thing for that state senator, same thing for that borough president, and so on and so forth – and that community board.

So if we share this information, and these are agreements that we put into place a few years ago. We started signing agreements so that once we knew we'd be able to land the plane here from a data disaggregation standpoint, we get out there. So if everyone is reaching out, at some point, the dam breaks. If enough of us, all of us, as far as those who are in public positions who are able to obtain this data, is when all of us are reaching out like this, it's gonna make those impact. And it many times may not be about the veteran. It may be getting that veteran's spouse to come online. It may not... it may be about getting that veteran's child to come online or someone else.

So for me, I'm hoping that when we are all multipliers within our respective circles in penetrating these things, I think that'll change the situation.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So the commitment to long-term formal needs assessment for veterans beyond the

survey, you know, like bringing in external experts.
Is that something you can kind of address?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to defer to Mike a little bit on this, on the care coordination side. But I believe that we already, when we bring someone, it's part of the workflow that something like this is already current.

But, Mike, yeah...

SENIOR DIRECTOR BOCCHINI: Yes. So when we're contacted by a veteran, whether it's in person, online, email, through our website, phone call, we have a preset list of questions that we ask them to try to identify all the needs that they might be facing, because they might turn up reporting one need, but through the process of talking to them, we end up opening multiple cases for them.

So a housing client might never have filed a VA claim. A VA... somebody filing a VA claim might be unemployed. Somebody who's unemployed might be thinking they want to start a small business. So, we try to address the need that they come to us with, but also figure out what else they might need.

Whether it's a veteran program, or another city program that we might be able to refer them to,

keeping in mind that not every veteran who comes to us with a problem is necessarily experiencing a veteran problem, where there is a veteran program specifically set up to benefit them, but they may have a question that they just need someone to answer their call at another city agency. And that's where it's great that we have the partnership with other city agencies, where they have identified veteran liaisons, so there's a person within that organization who is sort of a friendly face to take that veteran's question.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: A needs assessment for the whole veteran population...

SENIOR DIRECTOR BOCCHINI: Oh, I see, I see...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, that, that's what the question, yeah...

SENIOR DIRECTOR BOCCHINI: Yeah, so I think he needs a survey of what the needs would be. So, I don't know, uh...

COMMISSIONER HENDON: We already perform the survey.

I'd argue that our current, which we already do as a four-year battle rhythm, a four-year rhythm of

the Veteran Community and Family Survey, that that kind of...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Could you do a phone survey, for instance?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Right now, we use Mission: VetCheck as a way to reach out to folks, but right now, I don't... this is backed up. I'm worried about us doubling or tripling, like, to do the same thing in different ways. I just want to careful with our resources.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: That's all I'm saying, Chair...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, yeah...

SENIOR DIRECTOR BOCCHINI: We do send a survey to everybody that contacts us through VetConnectNYC. So we follow up with them, and then... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: In the way of what? How do you reach...

SENIOR DIRECTOR BOCCHINI: A customer service satisfaction survey. So we email... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Customer Satisfaction?

SENIOR DIRECTOR BOCCHINI: Mm-hmm.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay.

1 SENIOR DIRECTOR BOCCHINI: Yeah.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And how... What's the
3 response on that, would you say?

4 SENIOR DIRECTOR BOCCHINI: We have it with us. So
5 the last one that we did, we did a batch, and we
6 received 43 responses out of a total of 73 that were
7 opened. You know, you send an email, people don't
8 always open it up.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah.

10 SENIOR DIRECTOR BOCCHINI: But it is limited to
11 those who've already accessed our (INAUDIBLE)...
12 (CROSS-TALK)

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, I'm want that... I do
14 ... I do answer surveys when I'm dissatisfied, you
15 know, mostly, because I'm angry. You know? But if I'm
16 satisfied, yeah, unless the person went way above and
17 beyond in helping me, I probably wouldn't...

18 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to flag, too...

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, go ahead.

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: With this new look with
21 VetConnect, we should... we'll be capturing data so
22 we can report in a better way on these types of
23 issues as far as what the needs are underlying for
24 folks. So I'm going to flag that. That's something
25

else that's baked in, which we'll see with this new platform for VetConnect.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Again, thank you, thank you, Commissioner, and your staff. That's all of the questions that I have. Anybody else?

Council Member Nurse?

COUNCIL MEMBER NURSE: I would just say that I think... I haven't read this. I did skim through it just now, and I read through your testimony. And I would say that the C, to me, reflects more of a lack of commitment from the Administration than a 30-something person agency or how many people are here, 37 are hired there? Like, it's not realistic, and it's not viable for you all to be doing the level that's being asked of with that level of resources.

So I think it's really on the Administration to be putting more resources and, quite frankly, on the federal government — It's the federal government that recruits. It's the federal government that has the covenant with people, and they should be putting up the resources. I think it's too much that's being asked right now based on the resources that are being given for you all.

So I just want to say, thank you, for what you're doing.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And I would agree with that statement. And I think everybody would...

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: Absolutely.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's fair thinking, and it supports our veterans, supports DVS. It's a catch 22, where if you don't get the funding, you can't do the things that you want to do. And a smaller staff, uh, not being able to even communicate with your... And especially on self identification, not being able to send even a phone, do a phone survey, but not able to mail is a detriment. So the funding would have to be increased. So I agree with the council member, that the agency is too small, it's underfunded drastically, and our veterans deserve better. So I would put it on the Administration. And I have said that over and over again. So I will meet with the Mayor on this to tell him, very quickly, that we have to increase DVS's budget dramatically if we're... And that will pay dividends in, certainly, if our veterans get more services and more disability funding from the government, from the VA. Then that

1 money, again, that money will be spent in New York
2 City, and New York City will realize an uptick
3 certainly in its finances. So I think it is a good
4 investment. So I will be telling the Mayor. And I
5 hope you will tell the Mayor also, Commissioner. All
6 right?
7

8 Thank you, thank you so much for your testimony,
9 and good job.

10 I will now open the hearing for public testimony.
11 I remind members of the public that this is a formal
12 government proceeding and that decorum shall be
13 observed at all times. As such, members of the public
14 shall remain silent at all times.

15 The witness table is reserved for people who wish
16 to testify. No video recording or photography is
17 allowed from the witness table.

18 Further, members of the public may not present
19 audio or video recordings as testimony, but may
20 submit transcripts of such recordings to the Sergeant
21 at Arms for inclusion in the hearing record.

22 If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please
23 fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant at Arms
24 and wait to be recognized. When recognized, you will
25 have three minutes, we're going to make it three

minutes, Sergeant, (INAUDIBLE) it's two, we'll make it three.

And today's hearing oversight topic is:
Implementing Recommendations from the City Council's Report Card Initiative – No other topics, please, because we always sidetracked with that. Stay on topic.

We will hear all in person testimony first, and then we will move to testimony on Zoom.

If you have a written statement or additional testimony you wish to submit for the record, please provide a copy of that testimony to the Sergeant at Arms.

[You may also email written testimony to Testimony@council.nyc.gov within 72 hours after the close of this hearing. Audio and video recordings will not be accepted.]

I will now call on the first panel: Amy Hozer-Weber; Jane DaCosta; and Joseph Bello. Okay, Joe is coming.

Okay, Amy, do you want to start when you get a seat there? Okay. And just a reminder to introduce yourself before you start speaking.

AMY HOZER-WEBER: Good afternoon... Good afternoon, Chair Holden, and the other members of the Committee on Veterans. My name is Amy Hozer-Weber, and I am the Director of The Civil Practice at the Veteran Advocacy Project.

VAP ensures access to healthcare, housing, and income for low-income veterans and their families with a focus on those living with post traumatic stress, brain injury, substance dependency, and other mental health conditions. I am happy to testify today regarding Speaker Adams' State of The City Report Card for the Department of Veterans Services.

As the Committee, DVS, and the community move forward with an idea of DVS 2.0, I would like to highlight the priorities VAP believes will ensure New York City's Veterans and their families can thrive.

The report highlights that only 33% of the workforce capacity for DVS is dedicated to service delivery. The direct services provided to veterans and their families is at the heart of the agency's mandate, yet according to the report, only a third of the staff has "assisting clients as part of their job description."

Five DBS employees are assigned to the Veteran Support Services Unit. These staff members work on VA claims and provide information to veterans, including referrals to mental health services.

According to the report, the unit also, "serves as a primary interface with clients". These case workers will also be responsible for fulfilling other proposed Council initiatives that aim to increase DVS's presence in each of the 51 districts.

The report card highlights that the Veteran Support Services casework are spread thin, which has raised concerns over the quality of DVS' services and the continuing ability of the Department to keep up the demand for claims assistance.

Given all that these caseworkers are taking on, it is difficult to understand how they have the time to work on claims, which require reviewing records, gathering evidence, and presenting them in a way that obtains the highest disability rating for a veteran.

The fact that the same individuals are doing extensive outreach and making referrals serving as the primary responders on mental health requests, raised questions about how well these tasks can be accomplished.

The Speaker's report also notes that DVS has lower target numbers for mental health referrals due to changes in mental health screening.

The City has engaged in a partnership with New York Cares which runs Mission: VetCheck, where volunteers make calls to veterans for whom the City has phone numbers. The volunteers are provided one page of preapproved resources and NYC 988, New York's webpage for the national crisis line, is the one listing for mental health. Reportedly, DVS has no other plan to create coordinated efforts on mental health services.

In order to set DVS staff up for success, VAP urges the Council to expand the Department's budget, so they can hire more positions providing services. To improve the efficiency and strengthen the efficacy of DVS caseworkers, the current responsibility of the Veteran Support Services Team should be separated into two distinct areas, claims and communications. With casework caseworkers solely dedicated to concentrated areas, DVS would be better able to serve the needs of the community, including overwhelming demand for claims assistance.

Historically, improving (TIMER)...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You can finish up.

AMY HOZER-WEBER: Thank you.

Improving veterans' housing stability has been one of the strongest programs at DVS. Federal funding cuts are threatening New York City housing providers and the work of housing advocates. As the report card states, "Comprehensive and accessible support must be available to veterans to find and successfully secure housing."

While DVS works closely with DHS and other stakeholders, the report highlighted that veterans have expressed frustration over how difficult it can be to communicate with the agency. This may be in part because what DVS can provide to veterans is not always clear. *Is DVS paying brokers fees, rent? What criteria do the veterans need to meet to obtain these funds?*

Other places in the report reference misaligned expectations and this may apply to housing services. Providing detailed information, not only about the type of help available, but about who qualifies for these services, would improve veterans' expectations and advocates' ability to make appropriate referrals.

Improve communication about specific resources

was a theme repeated throughout the report. The primary purpose of DVS is to be a connector of veterans and the resources they have earned. The DVS website has many categories and tabs and drop down lists that can be overwhelming and difficult to get concrete information unless you fill out a VetConnect form. There are also links with pages about programs with little information. As programs evolve, it could be challenging to ascertain what is currently available.

VAP believes that the Council and Department need to have a transparent conversations about what DVS is doing, should be doing, and can do. As a community, we need to provide the resources necessary for the agency to accomplish the initiatives we have asked them to do. Veterans must have trust in the agency that was created to serve them. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Great, thank you, Amy.

JANE DACOSTA: Good afternoon, my name is Jane DeCosta, I'm the Executive Director and Founder of Metropolitan Equestrian. We are a nationwide organization — I'm Brooklyn born and raised.

I'm a 100% disabled vet, and I was discharged 22 years and seven months ago.

And why that timeline is important is because 22 ago, nine months ago, I was the youngest City Council appointee for the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs. Twenty-two years later, nine months later, we're having the same conversation.

And I'm saying this because back then there was less resources, less staffing, less budget. But the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs, that's what it was called the time, MOVA, under Mike Handy, found me when I was in the military. They actually came to our ship. And he said, "I'll see you when you come out." And I came out and he says, "I got this idea," and that's how I became the youngest City Council appointee, which is all well and good.

That human connection is how we reach out to our veterans. Not a survey, not a phone call, not a days base, not anything of that nature, and it takes some relevance. And yes, I was 23 at the time, now I'm — you could do the math — (LAUGHTER) But, here I am 22 years later, 22-nine months later, and I'm still hearing the same conversation.

I'm not going to say that this is all the blame of the current Commissioner, but this is something that we keep repeating. The speech is all the same.

So as an Executive Director of this nonprofit, I asked the state to come and help me fund to have veterans - active duty and Gold Star - and their immediate family members - to be a part of equestrian sports. Of which, by the way, I did try to contact many city councils and no one responded. And I will tell you, I do have a lobbyist firm. That was the

only reason why I know about today is because I have a lobbyist firm that comes to our organization. And the state was able to answer that, because they gave us funding to be able to service veterans' Gold Stars and immediate family members. These immediate family members tell us what's going on with the veterans, and that's how we were able to connect them to federal programs and other nonprofits like veteran advocacy projects and many other ones.

So I can't speak to how the City can do their funding. That's way above my pay grade. But I will tell you, as someone who is a 100% disabled vet, someone who has taken care of our own veterans, someone who has been a City Council appointee, someone who has award from Senator Marty Golden as a very, very distinguished (TIMER) veteran, who has serviced many veterans in New York City and Long Island, and someone who has taken advantage of health benefits and VA home loans and everything else, and has got the education and have zero student loan debt — because I'm a veteran — we have to do better, and it doesn't... it's not a survey, and it's not a website. You gotta get some relevance. And the service members that are coming out there are younger

1
2 than me. So maybe we need to do what Mike Handy
3 wanted to do, may God rest his soul, and put younger
4 veterans out there to be the change we wish to see in
5 the world. Thank you.

6 Joe Bello?

7 JOE BELLO: Chairman Holden, members of the
8 Veterans Committee, thank you for the opportunity to
9 testify today.

10 Having taken a deep breath, listening to the
11 Commissioner's testimony, I want to reiterate on the
12 record what I said last at the last hearing, that DVS
13 is nine years old. Commissioner Hendon has been the
14 commissioner now, he will be the commissioner for
15 five years now, come December. He's here at every
16 hearing, and he writes in the book consistently. So,
17 looking at the report, I'm trying to figure out,
18 okay, so he's now talking about all these things that
19 the Agency is going to do, but where has it been over
20 the last five years?

21 We can sit there and say that 21 people were
22 surveyed, 41 people, 51 - I'm out in the street, and
23 I know many of the people here are, too, and even
24 people that are listening. And we hear the same
25 thing, the same thing that the Agency is failing.

1
2 So the Agency report card is an important step
3 towards strengthening the oversight of DVS. I commend
4 the Council, particularly the Compliance Team, for
5 this effort. The findings confirm, and I'll say it
6 again, what many of us in the community are
7 observing, that DVS is failing to meet the needs of
8 veterans and their families.

9 And I'm going say this as well, while the Council
10 assigned a letter grade of C, and the Commissioner
11 believes that it should be a B, I personally, looking
12 at the rating scale, believe it should be a D.

13 Reviewing, and I want to show you this, reviewing
14 DVS's stand up report from 2019, it is clear that the
15 agency has expanded all its programs and initiatives
16 under the current commissioner, while the Mayor, the
17 current mayor, has not given any funding into this
18 agency.

19 So the other problem is there's no publicly
20 available strategic plan. This leaves veterans and
21 stakeholders in the dark about the Agency's
22 direction, goals, and priorities. The lack of
23 transparency, combined with the high staff turnover,
24 and a reported 970% increase in service requests,
25 from FY23 to FY24, overwhelms the agency and half of

1
2 them are front facing, which leads to delays and poor
3 follow-up.

4 The frontline staff, and I said this last month,
5 are under extreme distress and the Agency's
6 organizational chart that's in the report even shows
7 individuals who already left the Agency.

8 Additionally, as I testified and the Commissioner
9 brought it up again, the \$450,000 investment in the
10 new VetConnect platform has yet to deliver any
11 results. It's being built out. Veterans are forced to
12 rely on a Microsoft form, undermining transparency
13 and data collection. Meanwhile, DVS continues to fall
14 short in fulfilling its legal reporting obligations.
15 And this goes to what I said last month as well,
16 Local Law 37, 215 and 216 (TIMER) the report praises
17 DVS partnership with non for profits, but it also
18 highlights a very key concern, a heavy reliance on
19 non for profits, many who are facing their own
20 funding and capability challenges without strong
21 sustained collaboration from DVS. This is creating a
22 serious accountability gap that is compounded by
23 DVS's lack of regular community engagement.

24 And I'm not even going to get into the surveys.
25 The report didn't list a 2020 veterans convening that

took place in Brooklyn when the Commissioner first came on. Despite being an agency for nearly nine years, a shocking 58% of veterans remain unaware of DVS's services. How is that? I'm not sure how that is because, we all... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, but, Joe...

JOE BELLO: know that we were losing veterans...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But, Joe, but, let me just... because I think you'll agree that the Administration should put in, they should (INAUDIBLE) larger...

JOE BELLO: Oh, absolutely.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But...

JOE BELLO: We... We have this conversation...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: How much is really on the Administration, and not the Agency, the DVS? Meaning, DVS has a small staff. So not being ,you know, again, not addressing some of the... not being able to communicate through mail. I think it's huge. I think if we increase the budget just so they can communicate four times a year, let's say, to veterans...

JOE BELLO: Yeah...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: that would go a long way. So, that's why you have to take every... I take it with a grain of salt here... (CROSS-TALK)

JOE BELLO: Oh, no, and I'm not saying I don't agree with you. What I am saying is that you cannot have an administration that is not funding, doing PEGS, doing cuts, right? We've been to all of these testimonies, but then having a commissioner that is adding on programs and initiatives. Who is suffering there? The staff. And when they are dropping the ball, you've got the leadership here cracking down on them, and what do they wind up doing? They wind up leaving. Where's Nicole Jordan Jones? I ,you know...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, that's, like...

JOE BELLO: It's a two-pronged...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: It is. It's a catch 22, though. Just like with the Police Department, officers are quitting, because not only are they over worked, they're handing more duties, they get criticized when they have overtime, too. It's... Unless we hire more officers, unless we hire more DVS personnel, we are going to be in the predicament.

JOE BELLO: When then I think this goes to what we talked about last month at the Preliminary Budget

Hearing. I personally, I mean, I hope you are able to connive the Mayor to put additional funding into DVS. But I'm not gonna hold my breath on that... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. Right.

JOE BELLO: So, just to wrap up... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I don't know... Again, I don't know if... I tried to tell him. And the answer was, well, we shouldn't be doing the federal government's work. And that kind of thing...

JOE BELLO: And I think that's why what we said last month in the DVS 2.0...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

JOE BELLO: we have to have a discussion about what is doing and what is not doable.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, Council Member Ariola?

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: I just want to say that the Mayor did the federal government's work when he welcomed over 200,000 illegal migrants and put them up in hotels, and paid for their food, and paid for their medical insurance, and put them in school, and made sure they had clothes - that was all supposed to be federally funded. So that's not an excuse on the

Mayor's part. When we do have that conversation, we will bring that up to him.

JOE BELLO: I appreciate that.

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: Because when they want to find the money, they do. And it should go to the veterans.

JOE BELLO: Mm-hmm. So just a wrap up, veterans upheld up their promise to serve, now is passed time for the City to uphold its promise to them.

I want to thank the Council again. Thank the Compliance Team for their work on this report. And my full testimony has been submitted for the record.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thanks, panel. And I have to step out to have a very important meeting. Council Member Ariola has agreed to chair the hearing on... I'll try to get right back and listen, but I just have to run out for a 15-20 minutes, something like that, thank you.

(PAUSE)

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: The next panel is Armando Crescenzi, George Singleton, and Rabah Belkebir.

(PAUSE)

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: We will go left to right. You can start (INAUDIBLE) when you're ready.

ARMANDO CRESCENZI: Thank you. My name is Armando Crescenzi, thank you for this opportunity to speak on the implementation of the Speaker's recommendation for the Department of Veteran Services.

The challenge is in the title: Can the Department of Veterans Services implement the recommendations in the Speaker's report card?

My name is Armando Crescenzi, I'm a Post Commander of my American Legion post. I'm a life member of the DAV, and the Military Offices of America Association. I'm a New York State certified alcohol and drug counselor, and I received my JD in 1994 from Pace University School of Law.

In 2010, I founded a nonprofit organization called Put Veterans First, whose mission is to help New York City Veterans become self sufficient by building their own small businesses as vendors and food cart operators.

The injustices and abuse that the veterans face at the hands of the City is disgraceful, and City should be embarrassed of its record with the veterans who street vend.

If it's to make a few extra bucks or to start a food service empire, thousands of veterans sign up

every year with the Department of Consumer Affairs and Worker Protection. This is one place where 100% of veterans self identify – at the Department of Consumer Affairs and Worker Protection. If you are... if they're not self identifying, it's because there's nothing there for them. They're motivated to self identify at places like this. When it's time for licensing, they step up.

They come in highly motivated and inspired to start a business. And year after year, thousands of veterans are driven out of the marketplace by the very same city that boasts on how friendly they are to its veterans. Many would think that the problems that they face from the agencies and the NYPD could be easily solved with a well placed phone call from the Department of Veterans Services. Unfortunately, Department of Veterans Services has completely abandoned us. You've heard the expression, "No veteran left behind." "No soldier left behind." We are, we've been left behind. We are outside the perimeter and we are under fire.

Some of the challenges we face include:

City agencies and the NYPD refusing to recognize the rights of veteran to street vend. Issuing

summonses, which are completely erroneous. They can't hold jurisdiction to even get into court. They're bogus summonses. The judges at OATH and in criminal court, likewise, are ignorant of the privileges that we hold, and very often the decisions are decided against us.

The Department of Transportation is privatizing every bit of sidewalk space for rent to the highest bidder. Sidewalk furniture, benches, dining sheds are all physically encroaching on our means of making a living.

The Health Department is silent (TIMER) on all — this will take me another minute — Health Department is silent on all veteran vending matters following their unlawful passage of the Street Vendor Modernization Act. They are going to add another 4,000 more food carts to an already crowded street... to the already crowded streets.

The Department of Consumer Worker Protection has turned over all vending responsibilities to a private entity called the Street Vendor Project. Now, first of all, that goes against anything in the City Charter. You can't have a private entity installed and making decisions, and there's direct conflict of

1 interest. Their goals are diametrically opposed to
2 those of street vendors who are veterans. They want
3 open street vending. They want to lift all
4 restrictions. They would like to remove all
5 restrictions and basically take away all licensing
6 requirements.
7

8 UNKNOWN: Mm-hmm

9 ARMANDO CRESCENZI: They think street vending is a
10 human right and that this city owes it to them.

11 So that may be fine, but what about the veterans
12 who've been doing this for 20 years and now their
13 privileges are just pulled out from under them?

14 Veterans have we have been literally begging for
15 help from DVS. We are the perfect target population
16 which DVS can easily engage and easily get tangible
17 results. We don't need any funding. We're asking for
18 help. We're asking for a voice. These are rights that
19 are already codified in law, and they've already been
20 litigated in the courts in our favor. In fact, I
21 challenge the DVS today to make a commitment to
22 veterans who vend.

23 So as I asked earlier, can the DVS implement
24 recommendations in the report card? You know, every
25 month we come here, and Joe made a point, it's years

1 now. This is not DVS's first year. So I've we've been
2 coming... we've been coming in for certainly since
3 the inception. I was so happy when they made a
4 Department for Veteran Services. As street vendors
5 who vend, I think we're instrumental in bringing it
6 to a department level, uh, city agency.

8 From from MOVA, I think we're instrumental in in
9 bringing it to department level. And we've been
10 ignored. All right?

11 So we absolutely have no voice. So every month,
12 we come in with our pleas. We come to these hearings,
13 and we really shouldn't have to come to these
14 hearings to be heard, but we're not getting any
15 response at DVS. So the phone numbers that keep being
16 repeated again and again and again, why bother? I
17 have been in touch with DVS over the years to no
18 avail.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: I think, if I can just
20 interrupt you for a moment, and ask you to please
21 wind down and wrap up.

22 But, the fact that the Commissioner and his team
23 are here, it's a good time to have an off-the- mic
24 conversation with them. And this way, you know, they
25

can get information from you here. So you're not getting an unanswered phone call. All right? Am I...

ARMANDO CRESCENZI: Actually, I think that ship has already left the dock.

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: So, you've already had those conversations...

ARMANDO CRESCENZI: I have... I am in regular contact with the Department of Veteran Services. Like, month to month, week to week. I thank you for pointing that out. I can... I made a list of names of all the point of contacts I have spoken to over the years. They attorneys and their assistants, and the departments and deputy commissioners, and it's, like, they all give me a little bit, you know, I don't want to... They give me a little... they appease my concerns for the moment. And then there's no follow up.

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: Okay, then we as a Committee are going to have that conversation with the Commissioner, thank you. Next?

ARMANDO CRESCENZI: So, I just... All right, so, thank you very much... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: Thank you for your (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

ARMANDO CRESCENZI: I'll close right there...

(CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: and your service, thank you.

RABAH BELKEBIR: My name is Rabah Belkebir, I am a service-connected, United States Army disable vet. I myself, have been a street vendor the last 30 years.

There is exactly 1,600 veterans street vendors, of which 300 are disabled veterans. And you know what? We did some research. There is only right now 200 working, because of the illegal vendors, which is city funded \$6 billion, they get \$6 billion. So they are chasing us from the streets.

So like we said, for the last two years, I've been coming in and out for these Council hearings, whatever. And something happened last time. They did create something, which is, we asked for it, it's the city agency because they always, the city agencies always ignore veterans. So we did ask to have like liaison between us as disabled veterans vendor and this so-called-city agencies. And, of course, we ask to go through to make it more official, to go to through the DVS. So they just created this liaison agency, whatever they call it.

1
2 So, you know, they designate Jason to be the
3 liaison, but Jason now is in Washington. And I spoke
4 to the Commissioner last week. Right? He said that
5 he's going to put someone else, of course. That's...
6 so this is the what we're gonna do. It's in the
7 website and everything. So I hope this agency will
8 start, you know, doing their jobs that they get paid
9 for.

10 So we're expecting the Commissioner, you know, to
11 designate someone who's going be the liaison, but as
12 soon as possible. We can wait, you know, because we
13 are really hurting. We're getting more summonses.

14 By the way, in Times Square area, I'm talking
15 about food vendors. There's veteran's food vendors.
16 Everybody... I'm talking about food vendors, George.
17 Everybody's illegal there. The only two person who
18 are legals, which means me and Armando, and we are
19 the only ones who get summonses.

20 And Department of Consumer Affair, what happened,
21 they issued and approved a yellow license, which
22 means to have a yellow or blue license, you have to
23 be a service-connected disabled veteran. Department
24 of Consumer Affairs, they issued it to someone who
25 has nothing to do with our armed forces. So this is a

fake. We did everything, but they never listened to us.

The Department of OATH, we're trying to get... because if you are not a veteran, they're gonna dismiss the... if you are a veteran, they will never dismiss that. And we went to court, me and Armando, (TIMER) so we will know what's going on.

So this is what's going on, but, hopefully, something will happen. We hope the agencies will start listening to the to the authority and, of course, with the with the DVS.

That's I have a lot of things left to say, lot's more, but that's good for now.

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: Thank you so much, and thank you for your service.

Sir?

GEORGE SINGLETON: Yes, good afternoon, my name is George Singleton. I'm the President Of Disabled Veterans of New York. It's an organization that me and my veteran vendors started on our own. The purpose of it was to bring the issues that we have, not as just vendors, as veterans in the city and the state of New York.

Bangladesh, and they made it... made it look bad in the city for the veterans.

Now you got people from everywhere working in the streets of New York City with no license. I drive past Central Park every morning to come to Times Square. You got a bunch of people down there with all type of big gigantic vendor things. They're not following no laws. I mean, we got restrictions on our tables. There's no restrictions out here now. I mean, but you're gonna come running to the vets and give us a ticket. That's a problem.

So I would challenge the City Council, come out here and talk to us. Don't sit in your office or go wherever you go. Come talk to us. We're the ones that's to kept y'all safe. Don't we deserve that right? We kept everybody in this country safe. We deserve that right, and I'm tired of y'all... of us being disrespected by everybody.

I mean, I'm born and raised in Brooklyn, so I'm a little bit loud, a little bit rough, that's how it is in New York. When you're a New Yorker, you're a New Yorker. You don't like to take a bunch of crap off of nobody. Come on, man. We veterans, we've been trying to do this thing the nice way. They taught us skills

that can hurt a lot of people. You don't really wanna unleash veterans out into the street and being all upset every day like they've been doing. Come on.

Let's fix it before it gets crazy out here.
That's real.

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: I couldn't agree more.

ARMANDO CRESCENZI: Okay, I just want to say something. There is 30,000 vendors, but the City are punishing only... There is only 200 disabled vendors. But the City, they don't care about the other 30,000 non-veterans. Their problem is us. Only the 200. That's it.

GEORGE SINGLETON: You know why, right? You know the reason why that is? Because if they get rid of disabled veterans, then they can make room to give it to all the vendors. Do you understand that, guys? That's the deal. The only one that y'all can't move in the city is disabled veterans. That's the whole purpose of this whole everything - with all these tickets.

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: Okay, well, I'm gonna have a conversation with the Chair of the Department of Consumer Affairs and Worker Protection, and I'm also going to have a conversation with Keith Powers, who

is the Council Member over at the Times Square area. And we'll have answers for you. My Chief of Staff is in the audience. She'll give you her information, and we'll get back to all of you. I will keep your... your information...

ARMANDO CRESCENZI: (UN-MIC'D) (INAUDIBLE) never do anything they're supposed to... You sent me to him, you remember?

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: I remember, and I remember there was some movement, I'm sorry to see there wasn't enough. But, we'll revisit.

ARMANDO CRESCENZI: (UN-MIC'D) remember (INAUDIBLE)

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: I do remember you, very, very well, I remember you, sir.

GEORGE SINGLETON: So are we done?

ARMANDO CRESCENZI: Thank you.

GEORGE SINGLETON: Thank you.

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: Okay, our next panel is Timothy Pena, Sharon Brown, and Christopher Leon Johnson.

(PAUSE)

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: Okay, staying with the same routine, Mr. Johnson, you can go first.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: All right. Okay.

Good afternoon, My name is Christopher Leon Johnson, and I wanna make this clear that the reason they got a C grade, it wasn't because they wasn't doing a bad job. It was because we had this little Speaker who's trying to run for... run for mayor, had a big feeling that she weaponized her little... her little grading system to make them say, look, If you don't support me for mayor, then I'm a bury your... bury your agency. And I have a big feeling that they didn't... they didn't wanna dance her little dirty beat. So she tanked their... She gave him a bad grade.

I believe that the Veterans Committee is doing a great job. The issue is that this the City Council... and the City Council, especially with that little... that little... the little lady over there, Mrs. Sandy Nurse. She's not here right now, but they need to have a City Council hearing to remove her as the one of the members of the City Council Committee For Veterans, to put us somewhere else. Because, yeah, her father's a veteran, but she don't give a damn about no veterans in this... in this she don't give... she don't care about no veterans. She don't

care. Something like... she don't care about no veterans. You need... Ya'll need to remove Sandy Nurse. That's the start. Remove Sandy Nurse...

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: So I what I am going to ask you to do, is to really stick to, Christopher, (INAUDIBLE)...

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Yeah, I'm sticking to the...

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: You know, just stick to the... to what we can do better for...

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Yeah.

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: Department of Veterans... (CROSS-TALK)

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Yeah, but that's what we do...

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: (INAUDIBLE) Veteran Services...

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: that's what we're doing for the veterans...

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: But everyone on this committee really does care. Otherwise, they can be asked to be removed from the Committee.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: But she gonna be removed. I'm not... I'm not here to argue...

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: I'm saying, they can ask. So if they're on this committee, which is a small committee, you know, relatively...

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Yeah.

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: compared to other committees. So everybody does care and everybody wants to do the right thing. And I do agree to a point where, yes, the City Council has to be held accountable, the Administration has to be held accountable, and more money has to be put into the Department of Veterans Services. Because, yes, we do hear the same thing all the time. Why? Because their budget number never goes up. Never goes up. And they have, as Joe Bello mentioned, an issue with retention because people get better jobs elsewhere.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Yeah.

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: That they can work less. So, I agree with you, and I thank you for your testimony.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Yeah, I'm gonna keep it a minute, like a minute (INAUDIBLE)...

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, go ahead... (CROSS-TALK)

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: All right, so, yeah, like, I said...

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: I thought you were finished (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Like, I said, ya'll just start... ya'll just start. But, you gotta remove her from the committee. That's a big start.

The second is that the City Council needs to designate, uh, needs to start, uhm, designating veterans to be part of the Deliveristas. They need to start recognizing the Deliveristas, too. But the same time, these guys were correct about the vendor situation where they get treated like dirt. The veterans get treated like dirt outside City Hall. There's no veterans outside. And that's like one of the places where they're supposed to get serviced. They're supposed to be treated well, is outside City Hall. They get treated like dirt while at the same time, the people that... Like, what people call migrants, they get... they get... never get harassed. They never get harassed by the cops. They never get tickets. But there's a reason behind that, is because these, these, nonprofits, like the Street Vendor Project and Make the Road New York, and this

Progressive Caucus, which that council member, Sandra Nurse is a part of, and she's one of the biggest leaders of it. They protect these guys. They protect these guys and gals while the veterans get treated like dirt. That's the issue here. Like I said, I'm not... Like, I said, they... I know they're doing a great job, these guys (TIMER) these guys are here doing a great job. Like, I said, the first thing ya'll need to do is get rid of Sandy Nurse off that Veterans Committee. Like I said, she doesn't care. She didn't ask not one question in the past about six hearings today. Six hearings. Even the pre-budget hearing, she didn't ask not one question at the pre-budget hearing. So to keep it real, like, look, if... I understand ya'll gotta defend your...

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: So, just to clarify, she did make a statement today. And...

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: (INAUDIBLE)

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: for more money for the Department of Veteran Services... (CROSS-TALK)

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Now she's saying... Now she's saying it because...

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: So, so, that...

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: She's saying it because...

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: That happened here. But, (INAUDIBLE)... (CROSS-TALK)

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Now today because...

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: We're not going to debate whether or not she belongs on the Committee. She's on the Committee. And she's going to do her job... (CROSS-TALK)

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Well, she need to be removed...

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: for Department of Veterans... (CROSS-TALK)

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: She need to be... Ya'll need to be... Ya'll need to come out and rally against Sandy Nurse... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: Well, you can... (CROSS-TALK)

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Go in front of her office... (CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: That you can do on your own time, but not today... (CROSS-TALK)

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: And go in front of her office, and call the Speaker to get her removed...

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: We're going to move to...

(CROSS-TALK)

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Just get her removed...

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: We're going to move...

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Thank you.

COUNCIL MEMBER ARIOLA: to the next person. Thank
you so very much.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Thank you.

SHARON BROWN: Hello, my name is Sharon Brown.

Before I begin, remember Israel released the
hostages. Let Yahweh's people go. Defend Israel.

Okay. We have to really help the veterans, and we
can't just keep talking about it. We have to make
sure that the veterans are declared to have been
active duty while they were homeless. They were out
on the streets. Their skill set is to defend the
nation. While they were out there on the these
streets of New York City and around America, they
should be deemed to have been serving and been on
active duty. And I have said this before. For the
time that they were homeless, and whatever time that
they were in the military prior, they will be getting
paid and the benefits will be assessed for the time

1
2 that they were homeless and the time that they
3 actually served.

4 As the gentleman spoke about the vendors, I was
5 trying to figure out what he was speaking about.
6 There are vendors that line City Hall near the bridge
7 side, and I don't see any stickers or anything that
8 show that there are veterans there. That is very
9 concerning that there are no veterans represented.

10 But I still do, like I said before, want veterans
11 to own stores, brick fronts, and, you know, things
12 like that. They shouldn't only be out on the street
13 vending. They should also have the right to own
14 stores, houses, property, vehicles. We should be
15 funding them to make sure that they have the best.

16 So because they have defended this nation, they
17 should get everything that is a part of the American
18 dream. A house if they want to or an apartment,
19 whichever one they choose, a vehicle for them to
20 drive if they are able. If they aren't able, and they
21 don't understand that they are able, they can learn
22 that disabled people know how to drive. I had an
23 uncle who was missing a leg; he was military, and he
24 was driving a car even though he had a leg amputated.
25 So military can function when they are not being

1 debilitated by the system. They should not be forced
2 into mental health programs and things like that.
3 They need to be active in life, owning property,
4 owning vehicles, teaching other people things that
5 they know. They have taken care of this nation, and
6 we should take care of them. It's not about drugging
7 them and telling them what to do. They have the
8 skills to tell society what they need to do to be
9 safe, secure, and to progress and to prosper. They
10 were paid for these kinds of thing.
11

12 Also, for those who are (TIMER) homeless - I'll
13 just say this the last - those who are homeless, when
14 they are out on the street, there should be people
15 from the HRA to go out and hand out food stamp cards
16 for them to use and cash while they're out on the
17 streets. We need bathrooms for them. We need them to
18 get permanent housing now. There are veterans out on
19 the street. This is obscene. Veterans living on the
20 street is obscene.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, thank you for that
22 testimony.

23 SHARON BROWN: Yes.

24 TIMOTHY PENA: Good afternoon, My name is Timothy
25 Pena. I own an organization called Veterans Justice

Project that assists incarcerated, homeless, and transitioning veterans with resources and referrals to facilitate a successful entry into civilian society.

I myself spent five months at the disaster that is the Grant and Per Diem Program at Borden Avenue Shelter in LIC back in 2022. In a span of 11 days, we had three veterans die there in a VA program, two from overdose, and one from a hit and run.

First, I'd like to recognize Department of Veterans Services for their hard work. Despite being underfunded, they have made major advances in outreach over the past year. I would... and I would disagree with a grade of C on that point.

However, listening to what we're talking about today, I believe that they have put too much of an emphasis on online, on VetConnect, on Squares, on phones, all of these things where you have a majority of veterans who either have no phone, especially those of us who are in still in the homeless spectrum. And those that do have phones, a lot of us are not tech savvy to be answering a bunch of questions on our phones.

1
2 My experience with incarcerated veterans is snail
3 mail. And I buy a bunch of stamps, and I mail them
4 newsletters. I've started a pocket-sized handout
5 here. I've been working on this for two years. No one
6 from the City, DVS or otherwise, has ever
7 acknowledged that I put in my own money, my own time.
8 I'm a 70% disabled veteran. Nobody has ever come
9 forward and said, "How can we help you put this
10 together? Because we want to be getting in touch with
11 our veterans."

12 Before my time is up, I'd like to make one
13 observation that in the report, (TIMER) it was stated
14 that the Veterans and Family Summit at Yankee Stadium
15 last year brought in 460 veterans. I attended a
16 standdown event in Phoenix last month. We served
17 almost 2,000 veterans in two days - 2,000. Four-
18 hundred-sixty, and a 115 of them were there for
19 professional capacity.

20 The veterans will self identify if you give them
21 a reason to self identify. If we are going out to the
22 veterans, we're meeting them where they are, we're
23 bringing them in, they'll get engaged. They'll
24 identify. Thank you very much.
25

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Tim. And, by the way, it's because if DVS had the ability, the budget to do mailings, I think ,you know, like you said, not everyone is online, they're not going to fill out forms online. But, if we did actually send them a letter, send them a flyer, send them some services, send them the booklet, that would go a long way.

TIMOTHY PENA: I don't understand that. Because I financed this with my VA Disability.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, but how do you deliver it to veterans?

TIMOTHY PENA: I take directly to them at the shelters. I take it directly... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, but that's one place. I'm saying... (CROSS-TALK)

TIMOTHY PENA: to them on the street...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I'm saying to communicate with thousands of New York City veterans...

TIMOTHY PENA: There's a 100,000 people that go through Madison Square Garden a week. I live two blocks from there.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

TIMOTHY PENA: Engaging veterans in this city is as easy as it gets. Whether we are...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Not if they don't self identify. We don't know who they are.

TIMOTHY PENA: If I go up and I put out... If I go and stand outside Madison Square Garden, and I ask, "Are you a vet?" "Are you a vet?" "Are you a vet?" The veterans that are veterans are gonna say, yes.

So I don't believe this self identification narrative.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. All right, thank you, panel. Thank you so much.

We have one more in person, Michael Matos.

(PAUSE)

MICHAEL MATOS: Can everyone hear me? Perfect.

Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Mike Motos, I'm a U.S. Coast Guard veteran. I've been advocating for the veteran community for about five years now.

And first off, I'd like to say about the City Council Report Card, I think it's a very good thing that we started a process where we can increase transparency on how our city agencies are working, what's not working, what can be improved and such.

I think especially during our time in a broad political climate in our country, we need more

transparency as ever. So I do commend the efforts there.

When it comes to DVS, I understand that there are there is criticism. There is things to be worked on and such. But I think we can all agree from hearing from my advocates and the City Council members that, to my understanding, the biggest issue we're having here is funding.

You can't have an increased capability of an agency without properly funding the task forces that come with it that require the teams that are put together to accomplish the things that need to be done. Right?

So when we're thinking about things that need to be done and how we can move forward from this and increase that grade for the DVS. We basically just need to look at increasing funding. That's my overreaching comment there.

Now I do know the team of the DVS. I've spoken to numerous amounts of them. And one thing I will say, they are dedicated to the veteran community. These individuals are overworked. I've spoken to them on all levels. They need help. They need increase in staffing.

1 I understand we're moving towards the digital
2 age, so I understand there's a frustration when it
3 comes to, like, snail mail, like some of my
4 colleagues have mentioned before. And again, that
5 just goes to my understanding, it goes back to
6 increasing that funding, increasing the capability to
7 do these things.

8 So I'll make it short because I kinda came here
9 on my break from work to testify real quick...

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, Michael...

11 MICHAEL MATOS: Yes?

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Do you think the C grade is a
13 fair grade, considering?

14 MICHAEL MATOS: All things considered, and knowing
15 the staff, knowing the team and how much work they
16 put in, I do think it would be fair to give them a B.

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay.

18 MICHAEL MATOS: That's fair to me. There is work
19 to be done. But I can't discount the effort that this
20 team has put in.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. I don't think anybody,
22 I mean, I certainly, I have experience with the
23 Commissioner and with the staff. I do feel they're
24 overworked. I know they care. And I know the
25

Commissioner cares, that the Commissioner is living and breathing veterans in New York City. I know his... he's got a tremendous work schedule.

MICHAEL MATOS: Yeah.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So I think it all goes back to funding.

MICHAEL MATOS: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And if we ,you know, if we increase the staff, they wouldn't be overworked.

MICHAEL MATOS: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: As much. And it's not a lot of money. We're not talking ,you know, it's a \$5 million+ agency. If we even put \$8 million in, I think that would go a long way in increasing some staff members, less workload, and then being able to communicate.

MICHAEL MATOS: I agree.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: (TIMER) with the veterans and getting more of them to self identify.

But, thank you, thank you, Michael, thanks.

MICHAEL MATOS: Of course. One last thing...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, go ahead, sorry...

MICHAEL MATOS: I would love to see more collaboration. I know we have a few good advocates

here working together, regardless of our differing opinions and such. Remember, we are all one veteran family here in the city. So we can be critical of each other, but let's focus on moving forward in how we can work together, instead of pointing fingers on what went wrong.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah.

MICHAEL MATOS: Let's work together on making it better.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Like I said when I took over as Chair, we're all on the same team here.

MICHAEL MATOS: Yeah.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We want to help veterans. We're all on the same mission, and our goals are the same. So let's work together. Like you said, collaboration is important and trying to come up with constructive criticism... When you do have... When you criticize, as long as you, you know, if you criticize with some actual solutions. And again, I think it all turn it goes back to budget. But thank you so much.

And I want to thank Joann Ariola, the Council Member, for taking over for me. I also want to do a shoutout to, I don't know if you did, Jason Loughran,

1 who is going to be sorely missed as the Deputy
2 Commissioner, and he's a great guy. He's going to do
3 well in his new role. And but we miss him, and I know
4 DVS is going to miss him. He has big shoes fill. But
5 I want to thank Jason and DVS for all of the hard
6 work over the years, thank you.

8 MICHAEL MATOS: Thank you.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And with that, uh, if there
10 is anyone else present in the room who has not had
11 who opportunity to testify, but wishes to do so,
12 please raise your hand.

13 (NO RESPONSE)

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, seeing no one
15 else. There is no one else who has raised their hand,
16 seeing no one who wishes to testify, this hearing is
17 now adjourned. [GAVEL]

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C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date May 23, 2025