

Testimony of James Hendon
Commissioner for the New York City
Department of Veterans' Services (DVS)
New York City Council Committee on Veterans
Topic: Preliminary Budget Hearing
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Introduction

Good afternoon, Chair Holden, members of the Veterans Committee, other City Council Members, and all members of New York City's Veteran community who are in attendance.

My name is James Hendon. I am honored to serve as Commissioner of the NYC Department of Veterans' Services – or DVS. Joining me for today's hearing are Cassandra Alvarez, our agency's Chief of Staff, and Lamarr Wheeler, DVS' Senior Executive Director for Housing Support Services. We pray that today's testimony offers you insights into the role that DVS plays in New York City's Veteran community, particularly as budget season approaches. Our objective is to give you as rich a viewpoint as possible (from us) as you factor in all stakeholders while charting an optimal path for those who have served in the US Armed Forces – past and present – and their loved ones in New York City.

By way of a roadmap, we will discuss demographics, the history of the agency, how we are structured, our service of charter-mandated areas, agency priorities, a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats), recommendations for the Council (from a discretionary funding standpoint), and our perspective on budget issues as DVS.

Demographics

The 2023 ACS 5-Year Estimate holds that 129,311 Veterans live in New York City. Twenty-nine percent are African American, 22.3% are Hispanic or Latino, 5.5% are Asian, 0.7% are American Indian or Alaskan native, and 0.1% are Pacific Islander. Approximately 41.2% of New York City Veterans are White. As is New York City, Veterans are a majority – minority community.

Women comprised 10.2% of all New York City Veterans in 2023. This is notable because the same data point ten years ago (in 2015) put our female Veteran population at 6.9%. Taken year over year from 2016 to 2023, our women Veteran population has increased by an average of 0.8% per year. This is greater than the projected national growth rate of female Veterans (according to the VA) of 0.3% per year.

In terms of age, approximately 29.3% of our population is younger than 55 years old, while 70.7% is 55 or older. Our largest cohort is the 75 and older group, which comprise 31.8% of all New York City Veterans.

Something not captured in the Census Bureau's data: According to the Department of Defense, approximately 200,000 Service Members transition from active duty service each year. Of that group, 10,000 transition to New York State. Out of those who transition to New York State, 5,000 transition to New York City. Many transition here for school – using Post 9/11 GI Bill and Vocational Rehab

benefits. After obtaining their education, a majority of them do not stay. Recognizing that half of all Veterans settle down in a place where they are not originally from, it is important to inspire these Veterans to live, learn, and work in New York.

One other thing – the most important thing about the Census data: it significantly under-counts Veterans. The Census Bureau defines a Veteran as a person who served on active duty status at some point in their life and no longer serves. If you are currently serving in the military (Active Duty, Guard, or Reserve) and you live in New York City, you are not captured in Census data. I – a drilling US Army Reservist – am *not captured* in Census Bureau data. Even more critically: if you are a Veteran of the Guard or Reserve who never deployed on federal active orders (Title 10 orders for the Guard, being placed on orders that were not for drill or training in the Reserve), then you are not included in the Census Bureau's information, period. Roughly 40% of all US Military Service Members are Guardsmen or Reservists. Many are not captured by the Census Bureau according to this definition.

Because the Census data is so flawed, as a starting point when discussing the size of New York City's Veteran community, we use the number of Veterans that the VA estimates are eligible for VA healthcare in the five boroughs – 152,409. This comes from the VA's FY 23 Geographic Distribution of Veteran Expenditures Report. For the most part, VA healthcare eligibility is limited to honorably discharged Veterans who have served for 24 continuous months on active duty or, for Guardsmen and Reservists, those who have completed an entire federal / non-training deployment. The VA data, too, does not account for all Veterans. That said, adding the number of Active Duty, Guardsmen, and Reservists in New York City (13,121 in FY 23 per the Defense Department) to the number of Veterans whom we believe are not eligible for VA healthcare brings us to an estimated size that is approximately 200,000. We cannot provide an exact number because the ex-factors are:

- How many Guard and Reserve Veterans who have never deployed live in New York City?
- How many New York City Veterans have a less than honorable discharge?
- Also, how many Active Duty Veterans who have served for less than two years live in NYC?

New York City's definition of a Veteran is the most permissive in the country. We recognize you as a Veteran regardless of how long you have served, your component of service (Guard, Reserve, Active Duty), and your character of discharge. That said, ascertaining the size of our City's Veteran community is difficult. All that we know for certain is that the federal numbers are undercounts.

I personally believe that New York City's Veteran community is at least 230,000 members strong. The Department of Veterans' Services currently has contact information for approximately 190,000 New York City Veterans – out of a database containing 530,000 contacts. We had contact info for less than 5,000 New York City Veterans in 2019; we have contact information for 190,000 now. We are actively working to get a handle on this issue and our people. We recognize the policy implications.

History

The Department of Veterans' Services was created through Local Law 113 of 2015. Our official date of establishment is April 8th, 2016. Prior to being created, Veteran community members protested outside of City Hall in 2014 and 2015 clamoring for the creation of what we now know as DVS. The genesis for the complaints: Veteran nonprofits that received discretionary funding from the City Council wanted their own Veterans' services department to coordinate with for the execution of their contracts. The Veterans felt like contracting with larger agencies was impersonal and that the groups did not have a certain baked-in cultural competency to see and fully deal with the nuances of the Veteran and Military Community. It

took almost two years of protesting to reach a place where the City Council voted on Local Law 113 on November 10th, 2015 – the day before Veterans Day – and the Mayor at the time signed the bill into law on December 10th, 2015 (one month later).

When the City made DVS (starting on April 8th, 2016), it took the five staff who worked for the then-Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs and combined them with eight staff who worked exclusively on Veteran housing issues at the Department of Homeless Services (DHS). Key things about the agency when it was first created:

- DVS did not have its own administrative back-end at the time. We were dependent on the Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS).
- The housing group that originally came from DHS worked in a silo. It continued to focus like a laser on addressing Veteran homelessness. It did not integrate into other aspects of the agency at the time.
 - o An aside: the Veteran homeless population in New York City has decreased from 4,677 in 2011 to 624 in 2024 (a greater than 85% decline). This is largely attributable to the leadership of the DVS housing team and other Continuum of Care partners. We thank all of them for their work.
- The rest of DVS was focused on being a referral agency, not a direct services agency. The center of gravity for the Core4 Whole Health Model, our agency's strategy from 2016 to 2019, was referring Veterans to groups that focused on culture, connection, community, and clinical care.
 - o For perspective: 61 out of the 62 counties in New York State has a County Veterans' Service Office. In the case of New York City, which covers five counties, we have DVS. We were the only such entity that did *not* help Veterans submit VA claims. Many consider filing VA claims to be a foundational Veteran service.

Things changed for us in late 2019. DVS began a shift – starting with my time here – to focus on direct services. Technology – which is masterful in helping to facilitate referrals and optimize performance in general – is great. However, the bedrock of any government services organization is its ability to provide core services. Technology enhances those things. It does not come before them. That was a key difference in the philosophical shift at DVS.

Other changes (or evolutions ... this is not everything ... it is just a handful of them) include:

- The housing team – while maintaining its integrity – became integrated with the rest of the agency.
- We transitioned away from the DCAS support model to one where DVS now maintains all of its internal administrative functions.
- We developed a VA Claims Unit to help Veteran community members file VA claims.
- We have evolved our procurement capacity significantly such that we are processing a growing number of Veteran-oriented City Council discretionary contracts and contracting opportunities tied to state funding.

In all that we do, DVS triages issues in the Veteran community where there is acute need and we can provide unique value. We do what we can to deliver that value while optimizing the partners and resources available and being mindful of our mandates in the City Charter.

Structure

Speaking of the City Charter, our charter mandated task, according to Chapter 75, Section 3102 of the New York City Charter, is to assist and inform Veteran and Military families in the areas of housing, healthcare, benefits, culture, education, and employment.

I think of our work through multiple prisms, so I am going to speak to how we are arrayed in terms of those contexts at this time.

When you exclude the headquarters, think of DVS as two sides of a coin. One side involves the internal operations of our agency. The other side deals with Veterans' Services – the client-facing component.

There are 39 positions authorized for DVS. Thirty-four of those slots are currently filled. We are on track to fill four more slots in April and May (we thank OMB for those approvals). The fate of the 39th slot, which was vacated last week by someone who was on protected leave (it had not been used recently prior to becoming available) – is being internally discussed. We are optimistic about it being filled. Our goal is to reach 100% strength this calendar year.

Out of the 34 people who are currently assigned to DVS, four are in headquarters, 20 fall on the services side of the coin, and 10 fall on the internal operations side.

Internal operations consist of the following functions:

- Technology (which includes IT, Data Analytics, Tech Support, and Cybersecurity);
- Fiscal Operations (which includes budgeting, procurement, the processing of payments, and technical assistance);
- Logistics;
- Payroll & Timekeeping;
- Human Resources;
- Equal Employment Opportunity; and
- Legal / Compliance

There are ten people in internal operations. Many of those people perform multiple roles in order to account for the various functions and to ensure that we have depth and redundancy when necessary.

The services side (20 employees) breaks down such that each charter mandated area is accounted for. Services can also be seen through the lens of four functions:

- Direct services;

- Referrals;
- Synergies; and
- Communications.

Structure - Direct Services

Our direct services are:

- Housing, which employs 7 DVS team members;
- VA Claims, which employs 6 team members; and
- Indigent burials, which employs one part time member who does not count against DVS' headcount. This is the only person who serves as an ancillary staff member in this way. This is courtesy of NYC Aging's Silver Stars Program. We thank NYC Aging for its partnership.

Structure – Referrals

All in our agency are able to make referrals; most often do. That said, the referral coordination process is led by one member of our agency, our Executive Director for Mental Health and Care Coordination. One team member has overall responsibility for referrals.

Structure – Synergies

The synergies unit – those who coordinate with partners enabling DVS to deliver offerings where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (making 1+1=3) – has four team members.

Structure – Communications

Communications, which has two team members, works lock step with our direct services, synergies, and referrals arms to amplify our offerings and tell the DVS story.

Charter Mandated Areas

By charter area:

- Our housing team covers housing;
- Our claims team and burials coordinator cover benefits;
- Our synergies team covers education, employment, and culture; and
- All teams directly and indirectly cover health
 - o Housing and Claims approach health through the lens of access (and lack of access) to VA healthcare.
 - o Synergies and referrals approach health through the contexts of:

- Mental health;
- Wellness; and
- Food insecurity

When one looks at our agency's performance in the charter-mandated areas – things done by our services team as undergirded by internal operations – much of our work by charter area follows:

- *Healthcare.* Veterans Mental Health Coalition, Veteran Feeding Program, Get Covered NYC Vet, and Mission:VetCheck. Details can be found at nyc.gov/vethealth, nyc.gov/vetfood, nyc.gov/coverednycvet, and nyc.gov/vetcheck.
- *Housing.* Helping Veterans take a step up wherever they are on the housing ladder, from emergency housing to supportive housing to affordable housing to home ownership. More information is available at nyc.gov/vethousing and nyc.gov/vetladder.
- *Benefits.* VA Claims Support, Indigent Burials Support, and recurring Veteran & Military Family Summits. Details can be found at nyc.gov/vetclaims, nyc.gov/vetburials, and nyc.gov/vetsummit.
 - Please note: the next Veteran and Military Family Summit will be held at Citi Field on Saturday, May 3rd. There will be an emphasis on employment, housing, mental health, and access to VA services.
- *Education.* Veterans on Campus (in partnership with City-based institutions of higher learning), Military Family Advocate Program (also known as MFA ... in partnership with NYC Schools), Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (also in partnership with NYC Schools). Most details can be found online at nyc.gov/vetstudents, nyc.gov/vetparents, and nyc.gov/vetmfa.
- *Employment* (please note that employment includes entrepreneurship). Veteran Business Leadership Association (VBLA), VetBizMap, Veteran Street Vendor Liaison Support, Edge4Vets, and VetJobs. Details can be found at nyc.gov/vbla, nyc.gov/vetvendor, nyc.gov/vetbizmap, nyc.gov/vetbusiness, and nyc.gov/vetjobs.
- *Culture.* Culture breaks into two categories: one-time efforts and enduring activities. Examples of one-time efforts include, but are not limited to: erecting a memorial honoring New York City's Post 9/11 War Veterans and their loved ones (details can be found at nyc.gov/vetmemorial). Another example is ensuring that VA memorial markers are erected for all 36 New York City Vietnam War Veterans who are still missing an unaccounted for. Enduring cultural activities include: OurVeterans NYC (a Veteran community calendar maintained by the Bob Woodruff Foundation in partnership with DVS ... the website is OurVeterans.NYC), recurring New York City Veteran community commemorations and activities, the Veteran Voices Project, and the City of New York's administration of the Private First Class Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans' Peer Support Program. Details are available at nyc.gov/vetvoices and nyc.gov/vetdwyer.

Priorities

Priorities for the agency – in order – are: data, transitioning service members, housing, claims, and culture. We do not list mental health as a separate priority because it undergirds all that we do.

- *Data.* The goal regarding data about New York City's Veteran community (particularly Veteran contact information) is to get it, clean it, and share it with governmental entities with whom we can legally and ethically partner. Examples include the New York City Council, New York State

Department of Veterans' Services, and the VA. If all of us are doing our part to engage New York City Veterans, then more of our brothers and sisters will come into the light. We are in a situation where, from an outreach standpoint, more touches are always better than less. Also, to be clear: the most recently available VA information holds that, as of FY 23, 34.3% of all Veterans self-identify in the United States, 29.8% self-identify in New York State, and 24.1% self-identify in New York City. Identifying our people so that we can love them through our services is the most critical thing that we do.

- *Transitioning Service Members.* Our goal for Transitioning Service Members is to identify them, attract them to New York City (and the City's opportunities and benefits for Veterans in general), and serve them. Thanks to years of work – in partnership with State Directors of Veterans' Affairs nationwide – DVS now receives DD214 information for Veterans transitioning to New York City (as soon as the separation document is cut ... we get it electronically). Also, as of last autumn, we now are notified once an Active Duty Service Member formally tells the military that they intend to end their active duty service and transition to New York. We know that a future Veteran is inbound to us up to 18 months before their active duty service ends. It is vital to make sure these people do not fall through the cracks and become untethered to Veterans' Services – much like what happened to many who came before them. This is our second priority.
- *Housing.* Perennially, DVS is strong in its support of two out of four rungs of the housing ladder – emergency housing (those facing homelessness and in the shelter system) and supportive housing (those in need of additional support in the path to independent living). While maintaining what we do in emergency and supportive, we are working to become stronger in the upper rungs of the ladder – affordable housing and home ownership. In light of economic uncertainty and the 1.4% vacancy rate in New York City, we seek to become stable ground for Veterans looking for counseling and navigator services specifically in these endeavors. There exists no one-stop shop that can listen to a Veterans' affordable housing and home ownership needs and then advise them on Veteran-specific city, state, federal, public, private, and nonprofit options. This is an example of DVS (in a synergistic, 1+1 = 3 way) closing the gap.
- *Claims.* Another gap to close: the service-connected disability rate is 31.2% nationwide according to 2023 Census data. That rate falls to 21.6% in New York State and 20.1% in New York City. Taken conservatively – using Census population data that we know is severely depressed – that suggests that at least 14,354 New York City Veterans would receive a service-connected disability rating from the VA if they applied for one. This would raise the proportion of New York City Veterans with disability ratings to the national average. Our goals here are to increase the number of accredited Service Officers in New York City who are able to submit VA claims, inform the public about available, high-quality, free VA claims support, and help ensure that accredited Service Officers in the five boroughs file claims at a steady pace.
 - o We would like to take this time to thank the Council for supporting the Veteran Resource Center initiative, which uses a Congressionally-Chartered Veteran Service Organization to ensure that VA claims support is offered out of each Council Member's district office at a cadence of one day per month starting no later than FY 26.
- *Culture.* Our fifth priority is culture insofar as we hope to amplify, support, and when possible, seed events that bring together our Veteran and Military Family community. There are several things here. As mentioned before, enduring community events, the memorial to Post 9/11 War Veterans and their loved ones, and honoring New York City's Vietnam Veterans who are Missing in Action come to mind.

- One culture-promoting initiative that I would like to focus on: for the Joseph P. Dwyer Program, where the state confers money annually to promote activities that normalize help-seeking behavior amongst Veteran and Military families, DVS – along with all other counties in New York – is a Dwyer program recipient. We now receive more than \$400,000 per year in Dwyer Funds. It took time to put this together, but we are the only recipient that is doing something as dynamic as what we do. While operating within all contracting and Procurement Protocol Board guidelines, we effectively employ the Dwyer resources in way that parallels the administration of a grant. The deadline for the first Dwyer Program applications – post pilot stage – was in December. An evaluation committee (representative of various demographics within our community) was convened. We are in the process of administering Dwyer funding to winning organizations at this time. In total, thirty NYC Dwyer organizations will receive funding for 31 projects (one group applied for two different things). We are excited to watch this process unfold. The current NYC Dwyer awardees are recipients of funding in FY 25 and FY 26. The opportunity to apply for NYC Dwyer funding will open every two years. The next window for Dwyer applications will be during calendar year 2026 in advance of funding to be remitted during fiscal years 2027 and '28.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths for DVS are:

- We are able to connect Veterans to a robust array of services and offerings.
- DVS has strong grasp of who the Veterans in New York City are – down to the name, address, and contact information level. Our awareness in this space is growing.
- We leverage our brand and the imprimatur of government to inspire partners (and be inspired by them) to collaborate and deliver needed synergies.
- We have access to Housing Choice Vouchers that are specifically for Veterans who are not eligible for VA health care – speaking of the HUD-VASH Collaborative Case Management voucher.

Weaknesses

- We are still a young and growing organization. For many things that we do – internally and externally – we are establishing precedents by doing what has never been done before (at DVS). It takes time, learned experience, and sweat equity to come up the learning curb.
- The evolution of the agency has moved slower than planned due to the City's economic backdrop. I am speaking of headwinds presented by the COVID-19 pandemic followed by the migrant crisis. Five of the department's eight years of existence – the most recent five – have been impacted by this challenge.
- The rollout of our new technology platform to undergird VetConnect NYC, DVS' digital referral portal, was delayed. The reason: additional time needed to be taken to configure the new portal to meet the requirements of Local Law 37. In essence, Local Law 37 requires City agencies to ask a Veteran identifier question on client-facing forms. The quantitative aspect of those responses – how many Veteran community members responded to agency X or department Y –

are to then be reported broken down by City Council District. No one – on the Speaker’s side or the Mayor’s side – has technology that is able to take a group of addresses in bulk and tell you (for all of those addresses) which City Council District each respondent lives in. Absent having someone on our team do this individually for each of the thousands of Local Law 37 respondents, we took the approach of adding this application to VetConnect NYC; it helps us accurately and efficiently track this data point. This has led to a delay in the rollout of the new platform that undergirds VetConnect. Nevertheless, the work still goes on. VetConnect NYC as an effort is fully functional. It always has been. The new technology component that bolsters it will be integrated this spring. Visit nyc.gov/vetconnect to learn more.

Opportunities

- The penetration that DVS has made regarding data presents an opportunity. I am speaking to data tied to Local Law 37, data sharing agreements with the New York State Department of Veterans’ Services and the Department of Defense, asking partner organizations to ask a Veteran identifier question (voluntarily, not through law), and using VA Veteran identification tools such as VA SQUARES.
- The increase in the women Veteran population in New York City – at a rate faster than the national projected rise in female Veterans – is a favorable occurrence.
- The Dwyer Program and resources that we are just now able to inject within the Veteran community offers a powerful lifeline of support.
- The New York State Service-Disabled Veteran Owned Business Program – and our agency’s role as a promoter and ambassador of it – provides swift economic opportunities for large numbers of Service-Disabled Veterans who may soon be unemployed (given the current federal work backdrop).

Threats

- New York City’s Veteran community is aging. We need to accommodate our older Veterans accordingly. To reiterate: 70.7% of New York City Veterans are age 55 or older. 17.5% are between the ages of 55 and 64. 21.5% are between the ages of 65 and 74. 31.8% are age 75 older.
- The Veteran community – like all in New York City – face availability and pricing constraints when it comes to housing. It is incumbent on DVS to be as connected, knowledgeable, and helpful as possible when assisting and informing our community members on housing-related issues.
- If the federal government continues the massive reduction in force that is currently planned, then we will see more New York City Veterans thrown into financial insecurity. This has economic and housing ramifications. Add to that: on one hand, we will see an increase in the number of Veterans who engage the VA for support (those who are unemployed). At the same time, the VA will be less effective at responding to these Veterans, recognizing that approximately 20% of its staff – more than 80,000 people – will have been terminated. It is important to note that 1 out of 10 working age Veterans is employed by the federal government. Thirty percent of the federal workforce is comprised of US Military Veterans. Separately, 20% of all US employees works for a firm that is a federal contractor. Veterans who are direct federal employees and those affiliated with contractors will be affected.

- We fear that the VA will use an upcoming review of its medical infrastructure assets to close the VA hospitals in Manhattan and Brooklyn along with a Community Based Outpatient Clinic on Staten Island. This process – which occurs once every four years and is known as the Asset Infrastructure Review Commission – will resume again in the spring of 2026. AIR Commission recommendations are made based on the number of Veterans in a community who self-identify and use their local VA healthcare facilities. This is another reason why New York City Veteran self-identification is key.

Council Budget Recommendations

Items that we would encourage the Council to consider this budget season follow. I am speaking only about discretionary awards. These are gaps where we believe that nonprofits can fill a void in Veteran ecosystem. Further, these are areas that have not been funded by the Council to our knowledge in the past.

- Nonprofits that support, train and assist mentors in Veteran treatment courts.
- Food insecurity specific to Veterans.
- Small business counseling and networking that is tailored towards Veteran street vendors.
- Pre-home ownership counseling specific to Veterans.
- Organizations that support Veteran and Military families whose children attend public school.

DVS Budget Focus

For DVS – specific to budget season – a focus for us is to strive to reduce our vacancy rate to less than three percent. This involves the new hires I mentioned that we will make in the coming weeks. A less than three percent vacancy rate translates into 38 out of 39 DVS positions filled. My dream is to get us to 100% as we work internally on steps needed to fill the 39th spot.

Another thing that we are mindful of this budget season is increasing the number of discretionary awards that we process. Our goal is to action all council discretionary awards valued at \$20,000 or less no later than FY 28. We are focusing on the \$20,000 or less awards – the small dollar awards – because they speak directly to the needs of our community. Thinking back to the creation of DVS (why Veteran community members originally protested): smaller nonprofits that won these types of awards were the ones that experienced difficulty in dealing with larger, non-Veteran specific agencies like the Department for Youth and Community Development, the Department for the Aging, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and the Department of Social Services. We assumed five discretionary awards during FY 25 as a pilot – to learn the nuances of this work. We are optimistic about increasing the number of awards gradually as each year goes by. For perspective: the median number of small dollar council discretionary awards conferred each year from FY 2016 through FY 2025 was 28. The median aggregate value of those awards in a given year was approximately \$206,000.

Conclusion

We are doing everything we can – in what are ever changing and complicated times – to identify and deliver resources to our Veterans and their loved ones. The mission of the agency begins with the words “connect, mobilize, and empower New York City’s Veteran community ...” Our strategy can be

summarized by the words *connect*, *mobilize*, and *empower*. *Connect* is to identify our Veterans and know who they are. *Mobilize* is to have the Veterans recognize us and know who we are – and what we deliver. *Empower* is the act of serving them.

As the smallest department in New York City government (I always tell people that there are 39 people authorized for DVS ... the next largest agency has an authorized strength of 136 ... the largest has an authorized strength of 48,876), we have spent ample time building our offerings, putting together our team, and getting the *connect* portion of our work right. As this solidifies, you will soon see a large portion of our efforts touch *mobilization*. Pay special attention to when we begin sharing Veteran contact information at the district level with you as City Council Members starting this spring. We will all amplify messages – tailored, borough-wide and citywide – together. Touches will increase and people will come into the light. Once *mobilization* (Veterans learning about us) has been optimized, we will witness a strong churn in Veteran services as we all help our brothers and sisters (and their loved ones); we will *empower* them.

This is the plan. There have been several ups and downs and back and forths in this fight. But we are here. And all of us, for the most part (including you), are ready.

Things are not going to be perfect. However, we will achieve the vision of those Veterans who protested outside of City Hall more than a decade ago. We will achieve the vision of the entire Veteran community. Veterans and their loved ones wanted a department in New York City government that would be there for them and do right by them.

We thank the Council for enabling us to be here and do these things.

Lastly, recognizing that DVS is eight (going on nine) years old: so many people – myself included – wishes we could have snapped a finger to be where we are. The last new department – prior to DVS – was created more than two decades before us. This took trial and error, it took changes in leadership at all levels (internal and external), and it took partners to help us identify where the surfaces and gaps were. Thank you to all partners. Most importantly, it took patience and understanding. Thank you to the Veteran community for being patient with us. We are building a foundation, offerings, and systems that will (ideally) stand the test of time.

If you need us, then know that the NYC Department of Veterans' Services can be reached at nyc.gov/vets, 212-416-5250, connect@veterans.nyc.gov, and using the social media handle [@nycveterans](https://twitter.com/nycveterans).

Please subscribe to our newsletter at nyc.gov/vetnewsletter in order to learn more about our Women Veterans Empowerment Luncheon on Wednesday, April 2nd, the Edge4Vets Spring Career Workshop on Tuesday, April 15th, and the Mets Military & Family Summit on Saturday, May 3rd.

Thank you!

Family Legal Care's Testimony to the New York City Council's Committee on Veterans' Budget Hearing

Tuesday, March 25, 2025
Robert F. Holden, Chair

My name is Tyler Levsen and I am a Staff Attorney and Legal Research Advisor at Family Legal Care, formerly Legal Information for Families Today. Thank you to Chair Holden and members of the Veterans Committee for the opportunity to submit testimony about the issues veterans are experiencing in family court.

On behalf of Family Legal Care, I'd like to thank the New York City Council for its continued support and focus on issues impacting New York's parents and caregivers in Family Court. Without funding from the New York City Council Legal Services for Veteran's Initiative we could not assist veterans and their families confront issues at the heart of their well-being, including child support, custody and visitation, and domestic violence. **Our work is especially important now, as numerous veterans have been laid off from their federal jobs, and the VA faces possible budget cuts, termination of contracts, and layoffs, imperiling the programs that veterans rely on.** We hope you will continue your valuable support for our essential services and resources for veterans in Family Court.

Family Legal Care's mission is to increase access to justice in New York State Family Court. We combine legal guidance, easy-to-access technology, and compassionate support to help unrepresented parents and caregivers self-advocate on critical family law issues, while working on reform that improves the system for everyone. We work primarily on cases of child support, custody and visitation, parentage, guardianship, and domestic violence.

Veterans encounter family law issues as others do, but there are unique aspects to their situations and laws that impact the process and results for them. Considering the disruptions of military life on families and the challenges veterans face reintegrating into civilian life and accessing services, veterans need specialized support to navigate Family Court.

Here is some background information on the important services we provide to hundreds of veterans and thousands of other NYC parents and caregivers:

Last year, Family Legal Care served over 200 veterans or current military members. Most of the veterans we serve are struggling with child support arrears from cases that could be modified. This can mean they experience enforcement actions against them through the Family Court or the Office of Child Support Services, or they have money garnished from their military retirement/pension or their VA disability benefits. But sometimes the amount collected can be incorrect or could be lowered through modification, withheld improperly, or beyond the statute of limitations for collection. If the veteran does not realize this, it could mean they are not receiving the correct amount of their benefits, which places them in financial hardship.

In addition to the services we provide to individual veterans, we conduct legal education workshops, presentations, and webinars on common family law issues for veterans. Past webinars can be found on our public YouTube page.

Family Legal Care's programming to help New Yorkers is multi-faceted:

- Offering legal advice and consultations from staff attorneys with expert knowledge on family law topics.
- Providing critical legal information to pro se litigants via our bilingual phone, email, and live chat Helplines or in-person at the city's family courts.
- Developing over 60 multilingual legal information materials on child support and other family law issues, which are available online and in each of the city's borough courthouses.
- Connecting unrepresented litigants with pro bono attorneys for video consultations through our Pro Bono Program.
- Developing innovative digital tools that make legal information and court documents easy to access, understand, and be completed on a mobile device.
- Connecting those impacted by the digital divide in our Tech Hubs to the equipment and stable internet connection they need to access the hybrid courts.

The Court's decisions touch the lives of thousands of children and families with profound, long-lasting effects on their safety, economic security, health, and well-being.

We are the only organization in New York State dedicated solely to empowering parents and caregivers to represent themselves in New York Family Court. Each year we help over 28,000 parents and caregivers to self-advocate for positive outcomes in Family Court. The demand for free, expert legal advice has never been greater, continues to grow, and Family Legal Care is the only organization in New York City filling this need.

The New York City Family Courts have been under-resourced and overburdened for decades, and 80% of litigants come to Family Court without a lawyer. These unrepresented litigants are disproportionately low-income, from communities of color, often undocumented immigrants, or speak monolingual Spanish or some other language. Because the family courts are understaffed, there is a justice gap for many of the litigants. Organizations like Family Legal Care and others have worked closely with the Court to close this justice gap, but serious issues remain.

Strong families are essential building blocks for a thriving city, and we believe we have a powerful upstream impact in this unique space through Family Court. Family Legal Care helps veterans self-advocate for positive outcomes in Family Court. With increased support from the City Council, Family Legal Care can continue to be part of the solution.



March 25, 2025

Testimony to the
Committee on Veterans

Established in 2005, Queens-based GallopNYC provides therapeutic horsemanship programs to children and adults with disabilities, seniors, and veterans. GallopNYC serves over 500 individuals with disabilities each week with the help of 18 therapy horses and over 350 volunteers. Our services are primarily located at our home base, Sunrise Stables in Howard Beach, Queens. We hope to soon open a stable at Ocean Breeze, Staten Island. We also offer services in Prospect Park.

As GallopNYC has grown, demand for our services has grown even more rapidly, mostly through word of mouth. In New York State, over 12% of residents are living with a chronic condition or disability that affects their daily life. Living with a disability can create barriers to education, obstacles in entering the workforce, and/or difficulties in securing long-term employment positions. GallopNYC's core programs address the issues that many individuals with disabilities face. Through discretionary funding, GallopNYC will have the opportunity to continue offering our services to Queens children and adults with disabilities, seniors, and veterans.

Core Programs

The programs currently offered by GallopNYC are projected to provide direct services to over 500 New Yorkers for the upcoming 2026 fiscal year. An integral part of these activities is the training, care and feeding of nearly two dozen horses and ponies. All of these programs rely on the support of the City Council, private foundations and individual donors.

Therapeutic Riding: Term-based, 30-minute riding lessons for children, youth, and adults with disabilities. Lessons combine riding with groundwork activities (such as grooming) to build a rider's developmental, social, emotional, and physical individualized skill goals. PATH International riding instructors set 3-5 skill goals for each rider every term. Riders with a financial need receive full and partial scholarships towards their therapeutic lessons. A favorite program in this category is "Pony Club," where children and their families participate in group sessions as well as riding.

Hippotherapy: GallopNYC partners with certified therapists to provide equine assisted therapeutic or rehabilitative treatment to improve coordination, balance, and strength. Hippotherapy is conducted by an occupational therapist.

Job Skills: A workforce development initiative that prepares individuals with disabilities 16 years and older for employment in animal caretaking, client-facing roles, and administration.



With the support of job coaches, paid interns gain hard and soft technical skills while working in GallopNYC's facilities.

Veterans and their Families Riding: Therapeutic Riding and horsemanship lessons are modified to address the specific needs of military veterans. Work with horses is calming and appeals to Veterans' leadership skills. We have found group and family programs promote needed support. Veterans and their families participate in GallopNYC's programs at no cost to them.

Seniors: Seniors 65 years and older socialize and learn new skills by caring for our herd of horses and volunteering in therapeutic riding lessons. Seniors become invaluable volunteers in our core therapeutic programs.

Domestic Violence: Recognizing that NYC has a large number of families in shelters, we have developed a program for families who have experienced domestic violence. If funded, we will offer horse time and group activities, similar to our "Pony Club," where we aim to use the bonds with horses to help rebuild trust.

Recreational Riding: Limited recreational riding lessons for the public. Recreational lesson revenue supports lesson scholarships for riders with disabilities.

We are sincerely grateful for your consideration of our requests. Your support would make a profound difference in the lives of individuals with disabilities, enabling them to walk, talk, and learn in ways that might otherwise remain out of reach. We are excited about the opportunity to work together to expand our programs, reach more riders, and continue our journey of improving lives through the power of therapeutic riding.

Together, we can make a lasting impact, and we look forward to the possibility of collaborating with you to connect with additional students, veterans, and seniors in New York. Thank you for your time and consideration. If you have any questions please feel free to contact us.

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TESTIMONY OF MJHS HEALTH SYSTEM**PRELIMINARY BUDGET FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026****SUBMITTED TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON VETERANS****CHAIR ROBERT HOLDEN PRESIDING****MARCH 25, 2025**

Chair Holden and members of the New York City Council Committee on Veterans, thank you for holding this public preliminary budget hearing. My name is Ashton Stewart. I am a Navy Veteran who served in the Gulf War and currently serving as Veterans Program Manager for MJHS Health System.

MJHS is a not-for-profit health system that was founded in 1907. Our hospice and palliative care program has provided end-of-life care for New Yorkers with serious and advanced illnesses since 1980. In fact, we were part of New York State's original hospice demonstration project. Recognizing that Veterans have unique needs at the end of life, MJHS created a specialized clinical care program that focuses on compassionate listening, trauma-informed care, respectful questions and acknowledgment of service. Our goal is to guide Veterans toward a more peaceful end of life and ensure their families receive the support they need. We also mentor other hospices in our region, enhancing their Veteran-specific programs and services.

In 2019, and every year since then, a national "We Honor Veterans" initiative created by an organization that's now known as the National Alliance for Care at Home (The Alliance) has awarded us Level 5 status (the highest category possible) for our compassionate care of Veterans. This honor is especially meaningful as a larger generation of Korean, Vietnam and Gulf War Veterans require access to quality palliative and hospice care. Two years ago, we were awarded the prestigious *We Honor Veterans National Outstanding Program Award*. As recognition of our work grows, so too does the number of Veterans in need of our services.

Given the number of Veterans who need services and the magnitude of their needs, we recently expanded our program to include any Veteran under our care—whether they've turned to us for short- or long-term care. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges, by 2036, the population of Americans over 65 will increase by 34 percent, while the number of Americans who are 75 and older will increase by 55 percent.¹ Many of these individuals are Veterans, or

¹ Zucker, Howard, M. D. "Where Have all the Doctors Gone?" *AARP Bulletin*, Jan/Feb 2025, Vol 65 No 1



married to a Veteran, and many reside here in New York City. In 2020, it was reported that over 70 percent of New York City Veterans are over the age of 65, highlighting the urgency of our work.²

In 2023, we experienced a 46 percent increase in Veterans and their spouses seeking hospice and palliative care versus the year before. This demand continued to surge with another 15 percent increase in 2024. Already in 2025, we have assisted dozens of Veterans with complex needs, many of whom served in the Vietnam War. Recently, two of our Vietnam Veterans exhibited acute symptoms of PTSD. Fortunately, MJHS was able to assist the families and connect them with critical resources from their communities and the VA. And for the MJHS care team, I was able to provide my clinical colleagues with insight on potential PTSD triggers and strategies for how to comfort our patients who begin to remember past traumas.

As mentioned earlier, Veterans face unique challenges as they approach the end of life. Many suffer from service-related injuries not recognized by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), and some struggle to accept care due to deeply ingrained military values of self-sacrifice and stoicism.

Many Veterans we encounter at MJHS are eligible to benefit from the recently upgraded Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxins (PACT) Act of 2022. The goal of the PACT Act is to, “Expand access to VA healthcare and benefits for Veterans exposed to toxic substances like burn pits and Agent Orange, allowing them to receive care and compensation for illnesses presumed to be caused by their military service, including benefits for surviving family members of deceased Veterans affected by toxic exposure.” Many Veterans and their survivors that we encounter are eligible for these PACT Act benefits, but they are unaware, or they have not pursued them because they feel overwhelmed by the process or don’t know where to start. MJHS has assisted several such Veterans in 2024. Unfortunately, at least two Veterans passed away before the process could be completed. Since New Yorkers tend to accept hospice care later than people in almost every other state, time is of the essence and with only one full-time Veteran liaison, we are unable to meet the demand. Claims must be filed before the Veteran passes away.

Until we are able to hire an additional person, I am pleased to report that MJHS has been working with the New York State Department of Veterans’ Services to update the existing VA Military Health History pocket card for medical providers and clinicians. The current VA version is outdated due to passage of the PACT Act. And, given the results of the 2018 RAND study, *Assessing the Capacity of New York State Health Care Providers to Meet the Needs of Veterans*,

² Murphy, Jarrett. "A Statistical Snapshot of NYC's Veterans." *City Limits*, 11, Nov. 2020, <https://citylimits.org/2020/11/11/a-statistical-snapshot-of-nycs-Veterans/>.



that showed “only 2.3 percent of health care providers in New York State meet all criteria for effectively serving the Veteran population,” the need for an updated pocket card is essential.

My colleagues and I are sure this is not an isolated issue and hope to make this update a national effort. In the coming months, we are preparing to roll out a pilot for the updated pocket card to get feedback from different types of partners involved in Veterans’ care, from as many disciplines as possible. We want to ensure the content is helpful and easy to follow.

MJHS is requesting \$75,000 from the 2025-2026 Veteran Services Initiatives, under the Veterans Community Development line, to hire a part-time Veteran liaison to help us with our Veterans program. The additional support will allow MJHS to address our staffing challenge with a two-pronged strategy: The part-time liaison will help us conduct additional boots-on-the-ground outreach and Veteran-service-organization command posts. More importantly, they will host more in-person celebration of service pinning ceremonies, one of the most effective ways to connect, one-on-one, with Veterans and their families. This strategy will also help ensure more Veterans are set up to receive quality care before being discharged from the hospital. In short, pinning ceremonies serve many purposes; to honor Veterans for their service, empower them with Veteran benefits information, especially the PACT Act, honor them for their service, listen to heroic stories of sacrifice and patriotism, and provide a sense of comfort. With the growing number of Veterans and their loved ones receiving our services, and the increased profile of our Veterans program, we are in great need of additional support with facilitating these ceremonies. Additionally, This funding will help us have more time to conduct initial outreach to Veterans admitted into our program. As mentioned earlier, time is of the essence in connecting with Veterans and their families to ensure they are receiving or at least made aware of benefits they are entitled to. We anticipate that the additional help will help us provide direct support to 50 more patients per year.

Last year, I had the honor to represent MJHS in the New York City Department of Veterans’ Services Roundtable Discussion, provide testimony at several New York City Committee on Veterans hearings, and was appointed to serve on the New York City Veteran Advisory Board, as well as the Board of Visitors for the New York State Veterans’ Home at St. Albans.

This year, MJHS will continue our popular hybrid Vet-to-Vet Café on a quarterly basis, as well as partnering with City agencies and community groups. In fact, a hybrid event about brain health and aging Veterans was held on March 21 in collaboration with the New York City Department of Veterans’ Services and NYC Veterans Mental Health Coalition.

Far too many Veterans don’t receive all the support they need before they are at the end-of-life. MJHS, with your support, can help change this.



Thank you for considering our request to be part of the Veterans Service Initiatives. We look forward to continuing to partner with the New York City Council Committee on Veterans in 2025-2026.

Respectfully submitted,

Ashton Stewart
Veteran Program Manager
MJHS

**TESTIMONY OF JOSEPH BELLO
NY METROVETS**

BEFORE

**THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL
VETERANS COMMITTEE**

PRELIMINARY BUDGET HEARING ON VETERANS

March 25, 2025

Chairman Holden, members of the Veterans Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's preliminary budget hearing.

Last year, Finance Chair Justin Brannan stated the budget was: *"More than simply a financial plan and a list of expenditures, it is our city's statement of values. It shows the rest of the world what the greatest city on the planet cares about."* Yet, as we review the FY26 preliminary budget, it's clear that DVS remains stagnant—its headcount basically unchanged, and its budget roughly \$494K less than the FY25 adopted budget.

The administration's continued lack of investment is unacceptable, and our community deserves better. However, with this potentially being the final budget under this administration, a funding increase seems unlikely. Therefore, my primary concerns are the strain on DVS staff and the agency's continued lack of communication and transparency. As I've shared with elected officials across the boroughs, they often know more about what's happening at the agency than the community does.

The lack of transparency is especially troubling regarding veteran resources. Over a year ago, the Council passed a mental health roadmap for veterans. Local Law 38 (Intro.1239-2023) required DVS, in coordination with the Office of Community Mental Health and other designated agencies, to conduct outreach on veteran mental health resources via social media, radio, print, and digital platforms. We have yet to see any action besides a few Instagram posts.

Additionally, Local Law 37 (Intro.1237-2023) required DVS to compile survey data from city agencies and report to the Speaker (Council) on the number of veterans identifying their status, broken down by agency, service type, and council district. This report, due on December 15, 2024, has also not been delivered.

VetConnectNYC

VetConnect is intended to connect veterans with services through a network of providers, including the VA, government agencies, and non-profit partners. Yet, questions remain about the platform's effectiveness and the transparency of the data DVS collects. Nearly a year ago, UniteUS was removed as the platform provider without any public explanation, and a negotiated acquisition contract (\$450K) was awarded to a Texas-based non-profit called Combined Arms.

However, DVS failed in its due diligence to ensure that Combined Arms had an appropriate platform to operate VetConnect, forcing the agency to rely on a makeshift solution, akin to Google Docs, which undermines the program's intended support. As a result, Combined Arms is now developing the platform, while no Local Law 215 reports have been posted for either July 2024 or January 2025.

Mission: VetCheck

Last week, during Mental Health Week, the administration issued a press release stating that between November 2023 and June 2024, DVS contacted 10K veterans through Mission: VetCheck. However, given the agency's limited staff and resources, as well as the scale of

outreach within that timeframe, it seems unlikely that DVS made those calls. It is far more plausible that NYCares and its volunteers conducted that outreach. Notably, the press release highlights more than 400 referrals but doesn't specify who these veterans were referred to, the impact of these referrals, or what services were provided.

While Mission: VetCheck connects veterans to resources, this lack of transparency is concerning. I am also concerned that DVS may use these numbers (phone calls) to inflate its reporting, particularly through the MMR. To be clear, Mission: VetCheck is a referral program, not a mental health service and while 10K veterans may have been contacted, the actual effectiveness of these referrals remains unclear.

It's important to note that NY Cares continued the program after DVS "paused" it in 2023 – which is confirmed in the MMR. Without any transparency, it's my guess that NY Cares funded the program during this time, which if true, would raise questions about the timeline and DVS's funding for this program during this period. Finally, I note that the ending month listed in the press release coincides with the beginning of the FY25 budget. Veterans deserve transparency and honest assessments, not press releases focused solely on optics.

Joseph P. Dwyer Program

I am also deeply concerned about the funding for the State's Joseph P. Dwyer Peer-to-Peer program administered by DVS. In FY22, the program received \$150K, increasing to \$400K in FY23 and \$510K in FY25. Despite the release of the FY25 funding RFP in July 2024, with an August deadline that was extended to December 2024, no funds have been distributed. DVS is expected to receive another \$510K (or more) from the State for FY26, yet no explanation has been provided for the delays, nor why some organizations are being asked to accept less funding than originally requested. Furthermore, neither this committee nor the public has been updated on the status of the four pilot programs DVS operated in FY23. Full transparency is required, including a detailed accounting of how these public dollars are being spent, and I call upon this committee to hold a separate hearing on this topic and for the NYC Comptroller to audit the program.

Funding for Veteran Services

While I have always supported increased funding for veteran services, I cannot support or endorse another year of funding for what we (in the community) refer to as the Paul Vallone initiative (i.e., Veteran Resource Centers). Paul was a good friend for many years, and I believe he would be disappointed by how this funding has been managed.

Moreover, the Council's Veterans Initiative only saw a \$30K increase for FY25. The allocation of roughly \$2.8 million in discretionary funding across five initiatives (Homeless Prevention Services, Job Placement, Legal Services, Mental Health Services, and Community Development) continues to be insufficient. I urge this committee and the Council's BNT to redirect the majority of FY25's \$540K to significantly increase the Council's Veterans Initiative.

Finally, for several years now, I've listened to DVS tout its accomplishments, but once again it is disheartening to see little tangible progress. The agency continues to lack communication, transparency, context, and measurable outcomes across its programs – whether its resource guides, disability claims, including the number of successful claims since 2020, the Dwyer Program, VSO building violations, CoveredNYCVet, the DUALS program, and even the post-9/11 Fallen Service Memorial. Three years into this administration, the veteran community remains an afterthought reduced to handshakes, optics and half-hearted gestures.

In conclusion, as the Council begins its FY26 budget negotiations, it's crucial that more funding be directed to the nonprofits working tirelessly in the community to support veterans and their families.

Thank you, councilmembers for your time. I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

Testimony by the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG)
Before the New York City Council Committee on Veterans regarding:
Preliminary Budget Hearing – Veterans
March 25, 2025

Chair Holden, Council Members, and staff, thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony regarding the Fiscal Year 2026 budget. My name is Ryan Foley, and I am the Project Director and Supervising Attorney of the Veterans Practice at the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG). The New York Legal Assistance Group uses the power of law to help New Yorkers in need combat economic, racial, and social injustice. We address emerging and urgent legal needs with comprehensive, free civil legal services, impact litigation, policy advocacy, and community education. NYLAG serves military veterans, immigrants, seniors, the homebound, families facing foreclosure, renters facing eviction, low-income consumers, those in need of government assistance, children in need of special education, domestic violence survivors, persons with disabilities, patients with chronic illness or disease, low-wage workers, members of the LGBTQ+ community, Holocaust survivors, and others in need of free civil legal services.

NYLAG's Veterans Practice is a community-based veteran program, funded by the City Council's Legal Services for Veterans Initiative and Department of Veterans Services Discharge Upgrade Legal Assistance Services grant. The Veterans Practice provides comprehensive services to Veterans and their families, regardless of discharge status, with the aim of increasing eligibility and access to the numerous federal and state benefits available to the Veteran community. Veterans face all the same legal concerns as any other population but also experience issues unique to their Veteran status. NYLAG's Veterans Practice focuses on those

specialized issues, while simultaneously utilizing the expertise of NYLAG's 300+ attorneys, paralegals, and financial counselors to address any other civil legal needs presented. In these challenging times, it is crucial that we do not overlook our Veteran community members in need of support, and ensure they have access to critically needed assistance and resources.

NYLAG recognizes the importance of bringing lawyers into the local community to reach the most vulnerable. Our Veteran attorneys conduct on-site legal intakes at the Bronx and Manhattan VA Medical Centers as well as Borden Avenue Veterans Residence, Samaritan Daytop Village, and Black Veterans for Social Justice. Every day we witness the hazardous combination of lack of access to benefits and severe mental health conditions. This leaves Veterans at-risk for financial instability and homelessness, even when there are specific resources available to address these issues. Too often Veterans are left on their own to navigate a confusing and complicated bureaucracy, unable to access the benefits and supports they are entitled to. Legal assistance can make all the difference for a Veteran who is facing eviction or lacks income to find stable housing.

Our client Sarah, a 38-year-old Veteran who served in the U.S. Army, was severely injured during a training accident while in the military. The accident left her with significant physical and mental health injuries. Following her discharge in 2020, she submitted multiple disability claims, but her housing instability, caused by a combination of financial and mental health factors, prevented her from receiving a copy of her decision. After meeting with a NYLAG attorney during an intake at a homeless shelter, Sarah was connected to our Veterans Practice. By investigating with the VA, we discovered that she had been awarded disability benefits, but that the VA could not reach her to set up a bank account for direct deposit of her award. With the help of NYLAG, it took less than a week for Sarah to finally access her retroactive VA compensation award of more than \$15,000. Even with the challenges posed by

Sarah moving locations every few weeks because of the impact of her PTSD, NYLAG was able to further assist her in increasing her disability benefits to the maximum level of 100% Permanent and Total. Sarah now receives nearly \$4,000/month and will no longer face the possibility of reduction in the future, which was a high risk due to her frequent relocation. While Sarah still is working through the mental health challenges of her military service, she now has the resources to cover basic necessities and to secure stable housing that will support her needs, allowing her to focus on healing from her service-related trauma.

NYLAG is extremely grateful to the City of New York for its investment in legal services for veterans, which allows us to assist veterans like Sarah. NYLAG has been the recipient of funding through the Legal Services for Veterans Initiative since its inception and because of that funding, we have worked with veterans on thousands of legal issues including veterans' benefits, public benefits, housing, consumer protection, and obtaining advance planning documents, among many others. The Discharge Upgrade Legal Assistance Services grant has substantially increased our capacity to advocate for veterans who received a less-than-honorable discharge, which can bar them from access to VA health care, educational grants, and income support from disability compensation or pension. These two programs highlight the City's commitment to serving all veterans.

Today's uncertainty makes continued and increased support to programs that uplift New York City Veterans more important than ever. We cannot allow the brave individuals who volunteered their service to struggle at a time when the federal government is making significant cuts to social support programs across agencies. It is critical to affirm our commitment to the Veteran community and to strive to ensure that no Veteran faces a financial or health crisis, or housing insecurity alone. This is only possible through the continued development of wrap-around resources including health, housing, and legal services. Veterans have been

disproportionally impacted by the reduction in the federal workforce and other program cuts, and we need to protect these deserving and at risk individuals with quality services and support at the City level.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony. NYLAG looks forward to engaging in further discussions about how we can best serve our veteran community and improve their access to crucial legal services and other resources.

Respectfully submitted,

New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG)



**Testimony before the New York City Council
Committee on Veterans Preliminary Budget Hearing
March 25, 2025**

J. David Stiffler, MD

Good afternoon, Chair Holden, and members of the New York City Council Committee on Veterans. I am Dr. David Stiffler, Medical Director of the NYU Langone Military Family Center. We appreciate the Committee holding this hearing and the opportunity to comment on the City's budget for veterans in 2026.

The NYU Langone Military Family Center was established in 2012 with the goal to fill in the gaps in mental health services available to veterans and their families in the New York City area. The Center's mission is to address the mental health challenges of this population by providing accessible, high quality, evidence-based treatment to veterans and their family members.

Since inception, our Military Family Center has provided mental health treatment to over 4,200 veterans and their family members. We provide services completely free of charge and offer our services to veterans regardless of their discharge status, combat exposure, or era served. Our services are available to family members of veterans, even if the veteran is not involved in the treatment. The work is made possible through the City Council continued funding of veterans' initiatives, we encourage the Council to continue to invest in mental health programs for our veterans.

To summarize our program, we provide comprehensive evaluations and personalized, evidence-based treatment for a number of mental health problems including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, ADHD, insomnia, and substance use disorders. We offer top tailored therapeutic treatments such as prolonged exposure therapy, cognitive processing therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy, and written exposure therapy. We provide assessments for veterans with a history of traumatic brain injury, ADHD or other cognitive and executive functioning challenges. For couples or families experiencing relationship difficulties, we offer either couples or family therapy. We are also able to offer individual psychotherapy for children and adolescents.

To maximize engagement and access to care, we offer appointments during the evening, outside of normal business hours. We offer confidential mental health services in person or by video through a virtual health platform allowing personalized care for veterans and family members who prefer remote or flexible times.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and happy to answer any questions.

Testimony

New York City Council Committee on Veterans

FY 26 Preliminary Hearing

March 25th 2025

Good afternoon, Chair Hudson and members of the New York City Council Committee on Aging. My name is Bryan Ellicott-Cook (They/He), and I serve as the Director of Government Relations at SAGE, the nation's largest and oldest organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBTQ+ older adults. I am delivering remarks today on behalf of SAGEVets—the only program in New York City and New York State specifically designed to address the unique needs of older LGBTQ+ veterans.

Supporting those who served our country with **bravery, sacrifice, and resilience**—often while struggling with their identity as veterans—is no easy task. The impact of anti-LGBTQ+ policies in the U.S. military, from the Revolutionary War through today, continues to weigh heavily on the older LGBTQ+ veterans we serve. Recognizing these heightened barriers to services—and the fact that **56% of LGBTQ+ veterans in New York City are over the age of 50—SAGEVets was created to identify, support, and improve access to care for this community.** With the support of the New York City Council, SAGEVets provides life-changing services to LGBTQ+ older veterans across the five boroughs. **To continue this critical work, SAGEVets respectfully requests the renewal of \$100,000 under the Legal Services for Veterans Initiative in New York City's FY26 budget.**

The veterans we represent are no different from any other U.S. military veterans. Most are deeply patriotic, and many served during conflicts abroad, returning home with significant trauma. However, what makes the veterans we serve unique is that, in addition to the challenges all veterans face, they also carry the burden of discrimination and exclusion due to their LGBTQ+ identities. These decades of suppressed pain – and for some even experienced violence -- can irreparable harm. SAGEVets plays a crucial role in helping these veterans heal, rebuild trust, and access the care they deserve.

Despite their service and sacrifices, LGBTQ+ older veterans are not immune to the increasingly hostile political climate. Many face heightened fears about their rights, healthcare, and overall well-being. For thousands, SAGE is a lifeline—providing critical services, advocacy, and community support to ensure they do not face these challenges alone. The trans military ban is just one example of the ongoing federal attacks on trans rights, even though a disproportionate number of older trans people are veterans. Programs like SAGEVets are more crucial than ever, ensuring that trans and LGBTQ+ elders who served their country receive the support and care they deserve.

Through the SAGEVets program, we work with veterans individually, beginning with re-establishing trust. Many LGBTQ+ veterans feel abandoned by their government and hesitate to seek benefits and services to which they are entitled and that could significantly improve their wellbeing and overall lives. OSAGEVets supports them every step of the way in their healing journey, always moving at a pace that aligns with their personal comfort level.

When they are ready, we facilitate referrals to crucial services, including social programming, mental health support, access to VA healthcare, discharge upgrades, and disability compensation benefits. The latter—a tax-free benefit. SAGEVets serves as a linchpin in navigating these complex processes, ensuring that cases are seen through to completion, even when they take years to resolve.

Support from the New York City Council has been instrumental in the success of the SAGEVets program. With City Council funding, we have expanded our reach to more LGBTQ+ older veterans across all boroughs and secured significant victories, including discharge upgrades for LGBTQ+ veterans through the New York State Restoration of Honor Act, eviction prevention, blind annuity benefits, access to public services, and disability rating increases for participants. Additionally, we offer community-building programs, support groups, and Know Your Rights trainings for LGBTQ+ older veterans. To sustain and expand this vital work, we are requesting a funding renewal of \$100,000 in the FY26 budget.

SAGE is deeply grateful for the ongoing support from the New York City Council and the Committee on Veterans. We look forward to continuing our partnership to ensure that our city's LGBTQ+ older veterans receive the care and respect they deserve. Thank you for your time and commitment to fairness for all New York City veterans.

Bryan Ellicott-Cook, Director of Government Relations
bellicott@sageusa.org

**VNS Health Testimony to the New York City Council
Committee on Veterans
New York City Council Budget and Oversight Hearings on The Preliminary Budget for Fiscal Year
2026, The Preliminary Capital Plan for Fiscal Years 2026-2029 and The Fiscal 2025
Preliminary Mayor's Management Report**

Tuesday, March 25, 2025

Good afternoon, Chair Holden and Members of the New York City (NYC) Council Committee on Veterans. My name is Contessa Officer, and I am the Director of Veteran's Programs for VNS Health. I am also a Veteran, I served in the US Army Reserves and National Guard. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

For 130 years, VNS Health has helped people live, age, and heal where they feel most comfortable — in their homes and communities. VNS Health is honored to serve and provide our Veterans with a variety of healthcare options. We ensure that Veterans and their loved ones receive the respect and care to serve their unique needs. As the largest nonprofit home and community-based healthcare provider in New York, VNS Health provides high-quality home and community-based care to more than 70,000 New York residents each day through a wide range of services, including skilled home care, hospice, long-term care, and behavioral health care.

VNS Health Veterans Outreach Program

Founded in 2015, the VNS Health Veterans Program has connected thousands of patients to VA benefits and community services since its inception. In Fiscal Year 2024, the VNS Health Veterans Program offered services to over 1,500 New York City Veterans or Veteran family members. We are the largest hospice and home health service provider to Veterans in New York City.

The VNS Health Veterans Programs is unique in that we focus on reducing social determinants of health through increasing Veterans and their family's access to quality healthcare options in the home and community, while at the same time connecting them to additional benefits available through the VA such as home health aide hours, durable medical equipment, and benefits for Veteran spouses and dependents.

The Program also refers Veterans to community-based resources such as supportive housing, transportation, and educates clinicians on Veteran issues, such as PTSD and suicide prevention. Our Veteran team members visit Veterans in their communities and homes to recognize their military service, work with their health care team and provide support to families as they navigate the VA benefits process.

Our Veteran patients come from every borough in New York. Manhattan (31%), Queens (33%), Brooklyn (14%), Staten Island (13%), and the Bronx (9%). In terms of war eras, 22% of our patients are WWII Veterans 24% are Korean War Veterans, 16% from Vietnam Veterans, 8% are Cold War Veterans, and 30% from Peacetime/Other).

Aging Veterans in New York City

Of the approximately 140,000 Veterans in NYC today, 71% are 55 or older. This community has diverse and complex physical and mental health needs that the VA (our nation's largest healthcare system) addresses with a multitude of services and benefits. However, because of the complexity of the VA system and systemic poor health literacy among Veterans, many never fully access or utilize the benefits

they need. In addition, in the post-COVID era digital literacy and access to telehealth services are even more critical.

As NYC's Veteran population continues to age, it is becoming even more important to conduct outreach so that they know about their full VA benefits which can include home care, long term care, and hospice services.

The VA healthcare system, including Community-Based Outpatient Clinics (CBOCs), Vet Centers, and community care network (CCN) providers like VNS Health, provide access to affordable, accessible care and help mitigate some of the social determinants prevalent within the Veteran community. According to one peer-reviewed medical study, Veterans are diagnosed with approximately 8-10 chronic conditions – twice those of non-Veterans, many of these conditions are military service connected. Veterans will thus need greater levels of health care and more coordinated care.

For the thousands of Veterans VNS Health has cared for over the years, health literacy has been a major need. Most Veterans simply do not know what VA health benefits they are eligible for, and how those benefits work with Medicare, Medicaid, or private insurance benefits. Veterans often do not realize they can receive care from VA Community Care Network providers, which extends the VA healthcare benefit beyond the walls of VA hospitals to community-based providers. This misconception can lead to Veterans not receiving care because they do not know what is available or they are concerned about medical costs.

This proud aging community is often reluctant to seek help and discuss delicate and intimate issues that impact caregivers' ability to deliver effective and quality care. CCN providers like VNS Health provide a safe space for this underserved and vulnerable community to seek help.

Program Sustainability

We are grateful for the \$170,000 we received in City Council Discretionary Funds for FY2025, which allows us to provide support and care to over 1,500 Veterans. In this upcoming year, we are seeking \$500,000 to both sustain and expand outreach, connecting more Veterans to care. Veterans seeking mental health, substance abuse and social service supports often benefit from peer-to-peer interactions. With additional funding, our team of trained Veterans would be able to work with the Veteran and their care team to help them more fully achieve their individualized goals. With this funding, we intend to more than double the number of Veterans we reach.

In addition, this the Veterans Program began a partnership with the New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) this year to provide more Veterans with access to healthcare services. This new partnership will also require additional funding to support Veterans across NYC referred to the VNS Health Veterans Program. Veterans will receive individualized support from healthcare professionals to include services from our care management program and or health plan.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony. We appreciate the City Council's leadership on Veterans' issues and offer our ongoing partnership and collaboration.



**Testimony on behalf of Volunteers of America-Greater New York
The New York City Council Committee on Veterans
Preliminary Budget Hearing
March 25th, 2025**

Introduction and Thanks:

My name is Eric Lee, and I am the Director of Public Policy for Volunteers of America- Greater New York (VOA-GNY). We are a local affiliate of the national organization, Volunteers of America, Inc (VOA). I would like to thank Chair Holden and members of the Committee on Veterans for the opportunity to testify today.

About Us:

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

Background:

Volunteers of America has provided direct services to veterans since World War I. VOA-GNY carries on this legacy by offering a continuum of care to support New York City's veterans who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, serving 750 veterans every year. In addition to providing acute crisis intervention, counseling, financial assistance and housing placement services to veterans in the community, we are one of the largest providers of supportive housing for veterans in New York City, Northern New Jersey, and Westchester County, and we are extremely proud of our involvement in New York City's initiative which successfully eliminated chronic homelessness among veterans.

Our Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) community-based outreach program identifies low-income veteran households and connects them with a range of supportive services to promote housing stability and prevent homelessness.

Budget Priorities:

Thank you, Chair Holden, members of this Committee and the entire City Council, for your unwavering leadership and commitment to supporting veterans who served our country. **We are extremely grateful for the Council's steadfast support of VOA-GNY through the Veterans Community Development citywide initiative, and we are seeking the Veterans Committee's support for our funding renewal request (Ref 181375) in the FY26 Budget.** Given the growing uncertainty of Federal resources, the funding the Council provides through this initiative is even more critical to enriching the lives of the veterans we serve.

VOA-GNY utilizes initiative funding to enhance services for veterans within our citywide VA-funded SSVF program as well as veterans housed within our multiple permanent supportive



housing sites. This includes art therapy services, which Chair Holden has championed as extremely impactful for the mental and emotional well-being of veterans. Through the initiative, we also connect veterans to employment and training opportunities in high-demand fields like transportation, healthcare and construction. We are seeking an expansion of our funding request this year (\$100,000 request, an increase of \$26,000 from FY25) to help veterans to cover costs related to training and employment, housing placements, and daily basic needs, as well as enriching therapeutic programming, education and recreational services at our congregate housing sites which have set-aside units for veterans.

Legislative Priorities:

Int. 29-2024 (Farias)

VOA-GNY supports Int. 29 which would provide training to first responders and service providers to recognize the symptoms of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) in survivors of Domestic Violence (DV). Both veterans and DV survivorsⁱ disproportionately suffer from TBIs due to the injuries they sustain to the head and neck, but while the US Department of Veterans Affairs does mandatory screenings for veteransⁱⁱ who served in combat operations, there is no comparable screening for survivors, and wider training on TBI will help both populations **Thank you Chair Holden and Council Member Nurse your co-sponsorship of Int. 29, and we urge the Committee to join in advocating for passage of this legislation, as well as your leadership in prioritizing funding for first responders in the FY26 Budget to receive TBI training, to ensure our best and bravest have the resources they need to save lives.**

Res. 16-2024 (Paladino)

VOA-GNY supports veterans and others in institutional settings, and we applaud Council Member Paladino for championing Res. 16-2024 which would increase the personal needs allowance, putting more money in the pockets of deserving Americans.

In Closing:

Thank you, Chair Holden and Members of the Committee, for your steadfast commitment to our city's veterans, and for ensuring that providers like VOA-GNY are equipped with the resources we need to support them in living fulfilling lives with the honor and respect they all deserve.

Testimony respectfully submitted by Eric Lee.

For more information, please contact me at elee@voa-gny.org.

ⁱ Lifshitz J., Crabtree-Nelson S., Kozlowski D.A. Traumatic Brain Injury in Victims of Domestic Violence. J. Aggress. Maltreatment Trauma. 2019;28:655–659. doi: 10.1080/10926771.2019.1644693. [DOI]

ⁱⁱ Polytrauma/TBI System of Care, U.S. Dept of Veterans Affairs, https://www.polytrauma.va.gov/system-of-care/TBI_Screening.asp



NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

Tuesday, March 25, 2025, 12:00 p.m.

SUBJECT: PRELIMINARY BUDGET HEARING - VETERANS

Good afternoon, my name is Peter Kempner. I am the Legal Director of Volunteers of Legal Service (VOLS). Our purpose is to leverage private attorneys to provide free legal services to low-income New Yorkers to help fill the justice gap.

The Veterans Initiative of the VOLS Senior Law Project strives to empower older New Yorkers who served in the military to age in place with dignity, access their legal rights, and live without fear of homelessness. Our free legal services assist low-income older veterans in making key decisions about incapacity and end-of-life care by providing Last Wills and Testaments, Powers of Attorney, Health Care Proxies, Livings Wills, and other advance directives. These documents enable our clients to ensure that their dying wishes are fulfilled and that they are able to maintain income and services during their lifetime. We also enable our clients' caregivers to make medical decisions in line with their beliefs. Our guides, fact sheets, workshops, and training are aimed at overcoming confusion about planning for the future. Through this work, we empower older veterans to take charge of their finances, property, and medical care, helping them continue to live in the communities for as long as possible. We provide home and hospital visits for limited mobility clients to ensure that all eligible veterans are able to access our free services.

Sadly, too few older veterans have properly planned for the future. Among the U.S. population, it is estimated that only one-third have completed an advance directive. Many low-income older veterans think that because they do not have resources or wealth to pass on to the next generation, they do not need to have advance directives in place. Instead of thinking about planning for the future in these terms, we encourage our clients to think about protecting what they have and accessing what they may need during their lifetime.

There are many examples of why low-income veterans experiencing cognitive or physical decline would need to have the right documents in place to stabilize their lives. A veteran who has executed a Power of Attorney authorizes their agent to seek government benefits to pay for housing costs, to sign leases, to do their annual recertification for their NYCHA tenancy, to apply for and recertify for SCRIE benefits, and to deal with any issue that may arise with their apartment. A caregiver without Power of Attorney may find themselves powerless and forced to file for guardianship through the courts. Guardianship is an expensive, lengthy legal proceeding. Most low-income families cannot afford to retain counsel for a guardianship filing and it is very difficult to represent oneself in these matters. Even if a caregiver petitions successfully for guardianship, at that point the veteran may have already lost their home or much needed public benefits. Documents like Power of Attorney mitigate the risk of an older veteran losing their benefits, their housing, and their ability to age in place.

The VOLS Veterans Initiative also provides legal advice on a range of other civil legal issues including landlord tenant matters, access to benefits, consumer matters, and other civil legal needs. VOLS also supports the New York City veteran community through our Microenterprise Project. For over 20 years our Microenterprise Project has helped existing and aspiring small business owners and microentrepreneurs access high-quality free legal services. For many veterans, owning a small business is an effective path to financial stability and independence upon their return from service. VOLS aids with drafting contracts, reviewing government documents, protecting intellectual property, and advising on commercial leases.

Each year since 1994, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) conducts a survey in which participants rank the needs of homeless veterans in their community. The Community Homelessness Assessment, Local Education and Networking Groups (CHALENG) Survey lists out both the met needs and the unmet needs of the most vulnerable veterans and breaks down those results by veterans answering the survey and providers answering the survey.

The most recent survey's results were published in March 2025 and paint a troubling picture with respect to the unmet legal needs of veterans. Respondents to the survey reported that 6 out of 10 of the highest unmet needs of veterans were legal in nature.

According to the New York City Department of Veterans Services New York City is home to roughly 210,000 current and former US Military Service Members. Ensuring that our veterans have access to high quality, culturally competent, free legal services is of utmost importance.

In Fiscal Year 2024 the New York City Council dedicated \$600,000 to its Legal Services for Veterans Initiative to help bridge the access to justice gap for our city's veteran community. The seven organizations who receive this funding provide veterans with legal assistance on a broad range of matters, including family law, housing, public benefits, healthcare and homecare, financial planning, and consumer protection. Thanks to this initiative these legal services organizations not only dedicate critical staff resources to providing veteran focused legal services, but they are also able to leverage these resources to harness thousands of hours of pro bono support from the private bar.

The amount of funding dedicated to providing free legal services to veterans is small but critical. It is imperative that meeting the legal needs of New York City's veteran community remain either at current funding levels or is increased so we as a city ensure that the legal needs of those who sacrificed in service to our country are met.

We would like to thank the City Council for holding this hearing and we hope that the City will continue to invest in services and programs that make New York City a place where veterans feel welcomed and at home.

Peter Kempner, Esq.
Legal Director

Testimony of Dr. Cleopatra Brown
Before the NYC Council Committee on Veterans – Preliminary Budget Hearing
March 25, 2025

My name is Dr. Cleopatra Brown. I am a Cold War Veteran with a service-connected disability. I served six years in the US Navy on active duty, followed by two years in the Navy Reserves. My father was also a veteran who served in the Korean War. I am the Chairperson of CB16, Veterans Affairs Committee, the Founder of Brooklyn's Annual Veterans Appreciation Parade & Resource Fair, and the Chair of Friends4Veterans. I thank the NYC Council Committee on Veterans for this opportunity to speak on behalf of Community Board 3 and 16 Veterans Committee and those veterans who are unable to attend this Budget Hearing.

On behalf of the Community Board 3 and Community Board 16 Veterans' Affair Committee, I stand before this committee for the following reasons:

1. VETERAN HOUSING VOUCHERS & PREFERENCE FOR AFFORDABLE HOUSING

We ask that the Veteran's Budget be increased to create City-VASH Vouchers and hire Housing Coordinators to assist veterans with obtaining vouchers and finding apartment before they face homelessness. No veteran should have to become homeless in order to receive a housing voucher.

We request that the City Council advocate to ensure that all housing developments constructed through Extremely Low- and Low-Income Affordability (ELLA), the NYC Housing Development Corporation (HDC) and the NYC Housing Preservation Department (HPD) provide a preference for veterans. We respectfully request that veterans receive at least 20% preference of the affordable housing listed on Housing Connect and for condo homeownership projects being developed in NYC.

Currently, on Housing Connect, residents of community boards are given a 20% preference, and city employees receive 5% preference, while veterans—those who have served, protected, and fought for this country's democracy—receive no preference at all. Rather than allocating funds to support veterans who have served and fought for this country, the City has recently increased funding for 2000 migrants to receive housing vouchers for all undocumented family members, regardless of income. Meanwhile, veterans living in shelter are required to work at least 10 hours per week to qualify for a CityFheps Voucher and remain on the waiting list for a HUD-VASH Voucher due to the shortage of case managers.

2. HIRE ADDITIONAL STAFF (VETERAN OUTREACH SPECIALISTS/ENGAGEMENT COMMUNITY OUTREACH SPECIALIST) AT NYC DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS SERVICES

We also suggest increasing the Veteran's Budget to hire additional staff to be assigned to non-veteran healthcare facilities, colleges, veteran organizations and community board veterans committees to assist veterans in obtaining the necessary benefits and disability compensation and veteran-specific events, and to be assigned to shelters to work with the city in locating apartments for veterans. In the previous administration, the Engagement Community Outreach Specialist was assigned to Community Board 3 & 16 to attend meetings, provide resources, and assist with veteran events.

3. ADVERTISEMENT & MARKETING

We request an increase in the Veteran's Budget to hire an advertising and marketing agency that will conduct direct mailing and emailing campaigns; create monthly newsletter to highlight veteran organizations, services and resources available to veterans; promote veteran-specific events; and conduct surveys to assess the needs of veterans in each district.

4. LEGAL SERVICES

We request an increase in the Veteran's Budget to provide grants to veteran and legal services organizations that assist veterans in submitting and appealing claims for disability compensation and discharge upgrades. This assistance is especially important for those who have been unfairly given Other than Honorable or Dishonorable Discharges due to racism and discrimination.

5. COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

We kindly request that you increase the Budget to allocate funds to local veteran organizations, such as but not limited to American Legion Posts, Disabled American Veterans, Vietnam Veterans of America, Black Veterans for Social Justice, and Services for the Underserved, just to name a few, who are providing services to veterans. In addition, providing funding to community boards with veteran committees to conduct outreach events aimed at providing veterans with resources and informing them of the benefits to which they are entitled.

6. REAL PROPERTY TAX EXEMPTION FOR COLD WAR VETERANS

We respectfully request that the NYC Council Committee on Veterans establish a local law to amend the administrative code of the NYC Department of Finance, in relation to implementing the Real Property Tax Exemption for Cold War Veterans under the NYS Real Property Tax Law Section 458-b (tax exemption for Cold War Veterans). Currently, upstate NY, and several counties in NYS including Hempstead, Rockland, Suffolk, and Nassau Counties, have adopted legislation that established Real Property Tax Exemption for Cold War Veterans, including those who served during the Panama, Lebanon, and Grenada conflicts. However, according to the NYC Department of Finance, only veterans who served during the following conflicts qualify for Real Property Tax Exemptions: WWI, WWII, Korean, Vietnam, Gulf War, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Cold War veterans are men and women who served on active duty in the United States Armed Forces from September 2, 1945, to December 26, 1991, and were discharged or released under honorable conditions. Many Cold War Veterans served during the Lebanon and Grenada conflict – a designated time of war. Unfortunately, NYC Department of Finance does not recognize Cold War Veterans and those served during designated time of war.

Therefore, we respectfully request that the City of NY establish a local law to amend the administrative code to implement the Real Property Tax Exemption for Cold War Veterans under the NYS Real Property Tax Law Section 458-b.

Korean veterans, Vietnam veterans, and Cold War veterans have all been left behind at various times in history. I stand by the founding principle of the Vietnam Veterans of America: “Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another.” While we cannot change the past, we have the opportunity to reevaluate how we treat our veterans today and, in the future, especially during these times of uncertainty.

President Biden eloquently stated, ***"The only truly sacred obligation we have is to prepare and equip those women and men we send into harm's way and care for them and their families when they return home. It brings us together to make sure that the men and women who are willing to lay down their lives for us, get the very best, from us, in return."***

May God bless the New York City Council Veterans Committee, and may God bless America.

From: [REDACTED]
To: [Testimony](#)
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Support for CUNY Central Office of Veterans Affairs Veteran Mentor Program
Date: Tuesday, March 25, 2025 5:51:32 AM

[REDACTED]

Dear Members of the New York City Council,

I am writing to you as a proud U.S. Army veteran and an alum of CUNY School of Professional Studies (CUNY SPS) to strongly advocate for the continued funding and support of the CUNY Central Office of Veterans Affairs Veteran Mentor Program. This initiative is a vital resource that has profoundly impacted my life and the lives of many veterans, providing much-needed guidance, support, and opportunities for those who have served our country.

Transitioning from military to civilian life presents unique challenges, and programs like the Veteran Mentor Program play a crucial role in easing this transition. Veterans often struggle to gain access to essential services such as medical care, housing, and mental health support. The bureaucratic barriers and lengthy processes can make it incredibly difficult for those who have served to receive the care and stability they need. The financial support for this program enables the organization of health and wellness events, employment job fairs, and access to critical information for veterans, as well as their dependents and spouses. These resources help veterans secure meaningful employment, improve their well-being, and navigate the complexities of civilian life with confidence.

As a former beneficiary of this program, I can personally attest to the positive impact it has had on my post-service journey. Through the mentorship and support I received, I was able to successfully reintegrate into civilian society, complete my education, and build a professional career. Now, as a peer mentor, I am committed to paying it forward by assisting other veterans in gaining access to these crucial services. We, as peer mentors, want to make it easier for veterans to obtain the healthcare, housing, and mental health support they deserve, ensuring that no veteran is left behind or forgotten.

I urge the New York City Council to continue its support for the CUNY Central Office of Veterans Affairs Veteran Mentor Program. Your investment in this initiative is an investment in the future of those who have honorably served our nation. By funding this program, you are directly contributing to the well-being, career success, and overall stability of veterans and their families in New York City.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I sincerely hope you recognize the importance of this program and take action to ensure its sustainability for the benefit

of our veteran community.

Respectfully,,
De Quency Bowen M.S. BML

"Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase." – Martin Luther King Jr

From: [Pauline Rhoden](#)
Cc: [Testimony; Pauline Rhoden](#)
Subject: [EXTERNAL] FY26 Veterans Budget/ CUNY Veteran Testimonial
Date: Monday, March 24, 2025 8:13:13 PM

Dear Council Members,

My name is Pauline Rhoden, and I proudly stand as one of the many voices representing the vibrant community of student veterans, active-duty service members, spouses, and dependents within the City University of New York (CUNY) system. As a female veteran who served in the U.S. Army and was deployed to locations like Mogadishu, Somalia, Kuwait, and Southwest Asia during multiple tours, I deeply appreciate the value of the COVA community as I pursue higher education at CUNY Brooklyn College.

I am writing to convey my deep appreciation for your generous support in the past and the pressing need for ongoing and expanded assistance for our veteran community for FY26.

As a veteran, I understand the true cost of service. We have defended democracy, upheld our nation's values through great personal sacrifice, and placed duty before self to protect the freedoms so many enjoy today. That dedication does not end when we take off the uniform; it continues as we work to build new futures, contribute meaningfully to society, and lead by example in our classrooms and communities.

However, the transition from military to civilian and academic life is often filled with challenges. Many of us face financial strain, mental health struggles from our service, a lack of affordable housing, difficulty navigating the educational system, and uncertainty about entering the civilian workforce. In today's volatile social and economic climate marked by inflation, rising housing costs, and social unrest, the need for consistent, community-centered support is more significant than ever. Without it, too many student veterans risk falling through the cracks.

This is precisely where the CUNY Central Office of Veterans Affairs (COVA) plays a crucial role, not just as a resource but as a true community. COVA's Peer Mentoring Program, in particular, has become a lifeline. It connects veterans to others who share their experiences, helps us navigate the complexities of the GI Bill and class registration, provides academic and career support, and, most importantly, offers us a place to belong.

Currently, I have the honor of serving as a peer mentor to student veterans at the New York City College of Technology. In this role, I advocate for the essential resources our community needs. While the VA offers valuable support through programs like Wellness Wednesdays and grants that allow high-achieving student veterans to attend impactful events such as the Student Veterans of America (SVA) Conference, it covers only part of our needs. COVA fills the critical gaps, creating a centralized and accessible space where student veterans can be

heard, supported, and empowered.

More importantly, participating in the COVA Peer Mentorship Program has been a transformative experience that has enriched my academic journey and significantly deepened my confidence both as a student and a professional. As a veteran reentering civilian and academic life, I initially struggled with uncertainty about how to reintegrate into a structured educational setting. However, through my role as a mentor and my close collaboration with the University Director, Lisa Beatha, I gained not only a renewed sense of purpose but also tangible skills in leadership, communication, event coordination, and technology. I was given meaningful opportunities to lead, contribute, and innovate experiences that reminded me of the discipline and determination I developed during my military service and allowed me to apply those strengths in impactful ways. Paired with the collaborative support of fellow veterans and staff, these moments have empowered me to speak confidently, advocate for others, and embrace the value I bring to both academic and professional spaces. Simply put, COVA didn't just help me transition; it reignited my passion, sharpened my skills, and prepared me to thrive beyond the classroom.

With over 2,700 student veterans, dependents, active-duty members, and military-connected students across 25 CUNY campuses, the need for continued investment in programs like COVA is undeniable. We are not just students; we are leaders, parents, caregivers, immigrants, and professionals. We are your neighbors. And we are asking for your support in the following:

- **Fully funding the Peer Mentorship Program** to ensure its continuity and sustainability.
- **Providing temporary housing vouchers (4–6 months)** for veterans experiencing housing insecurity.
- **Establishing targeted professional development initiatives and NYC agency job fairs** in collaboration with CUNY Career Centers.
- **Funding for veterans to participate in career summit events** specifically designed for veteran students.
- **Creating inclusive spaces** for undocumented, single-parent, and underrepresented veteran students to access mentorship and support.

These are not luxuries; they are necessities. Every investment in a student veteran is a reaffirmation of the promise made to those who served. In return, we bring unmatched resilience, leadership, and civic commitment to our campuses and the broader New York City community.

Therefore, I urge you, as representatives of this great city, to stand with us. Ask the veterans in your lives, “What do you need?” and let your platform be the one that helps deliver real, lasting change.

We have served our country. Now, with your support, we seek to continue serving our communities armed not with weapons but with knowledge, experience, and a renewed sense of purpose.

Thank you for taking the time to consider our concerns, and I look forward to your continued support.

Sincerely,

Pauline Rhoden

Student Veteran | Brooklyn College

Peer Mentor | CUNY Central Office of Veterans Affairs

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: COMMISSIONER JAMES HENDON

Address: _____

I represent: DVS

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: SENIOR EXEC DIR. LAMAR WHEELER

Address: _____

I represent: DVS

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. 770

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: CASSANDR ALVAREZ

Address: 3/25

I represent: NYC DEPT. OF VETS SERVICES

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/25/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Peter Kemper

Address: 40 Worth St. NY, NY

I represent: Volunteers of Legal Service - Veterans Initiative

Address: 40 Worth St. NY, NY

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: ALICIA KERSHAW

Address: _____

I represent: GALLOP NYC

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/25/2025

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Sharon Brown

Address: [REDACTED]

I represent: Rose of Sharon Enterprises

Address: 43 Madison Street 3F

Brooklyn NY 11238

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

VERRAMS
COMMITTEE

THE COUNCIL THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. 074 2025 Res. No. _____

☒ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3-25-2025

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Michael J. Verrams

Address: [REDACTED]

I represent: NYC Cold War Veterans

Address: _____

THE COUNCIL THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. Disc 2 of 181375 Res. No. Veterans Community Development Institute

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/25/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Eric Lee

Address: [REDACTED] NY 11385

I represent: Volunteers of America - Greater New York

Address: 135 W 50th St. New York, NY

THE COUNCIL THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3-25-2025

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: BRYAN ELICOTT-COOK

Address: _____

I represent: SAGE

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/25/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: JOE BELLO

Address: DJ# / COUNCIL PB

I represent: _____

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Ashton Stewart (MJHS)

Address: 55 Water Street

I represent: MJHS Health System

Address: Same

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: CONTRESSA OFFICER

Address: 220 E 42nd

I represent: VNS Health

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

11

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/25/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: COCO CULHANE

Address: 1 Liberty Plaza 10006

I represent: VETERAN ADVOCACY PROJECT

Address: 1 Liberty Plaza 10006

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☒ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 3/28/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Christopher Leon Johnson

Address: [REDACTED]

I represent: SELF

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms