

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

----- X

TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

----- X

March 20, 2026
Start: 10:40 a.m.
Recess: 1:00 p.m.

HELD AT: 250 Broadway- 8th Fl. Hearing Rm. 1

B E F O R E: Frank Morano
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:
Carmen N. De La Rosa
James F. Gennaro
Vickie Paladino
Phil Wong

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

Yesenia Mata
Commissioner of Department of Veteran Services

Jack Brodie
Executive Director of Finance at Department of
Veteran Services

Nicole Orlando
Deputy Chief of Staff at Department of Veterans
Services

Ryan Graham
VFW Department of New York Legislative Committee

Ashton Stewart
MJH Health Systems

Coco Culhane
Veteran Advocacy Project

Bill Gross
SAGE

Charlotte Martin
Intrepid Museum

Joe Bello
New York Metro Vets

Timothy Pena
Veterans Justice Project

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

Jennie Bucove
Gallop NYC

Christopher Leon Johnson

1
2
3 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good morning and
4 welcome to today's Preliminary Budget hearing from
5 New York City Council Committee on Veterans. I'd
6 like to remind everyone at this time to please
7 silence their electronic devices, and at no point is
8 anyone to approach the dais. Chair, we're good to
9 go.

10 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Alright, I'm going
11 to gavel once more. [gavel] Good morrow [sic],
12 everyone. Happy Friday, and in 14 minutes, happy
13 Spring. Welcome to today's Committee on Veterans
14 Preliminary Budget hearing. My name is Frank Morano
15 and I have the privilege of serving as the new Chair
16 of this committee. This morning our hearing is going
17 to cover the Fiscal 2027 Preliminary Budget for the
18 Department of Veteran Services, or DVS, and the 2026
19 Preliminary Mayor's Management Report metrics for
20 this agency. Just to speak a bit about the reason I
21 was so eager to chair this committee and the reason I
was so eager to preside over hearings like this,
unfortunately, I think for too long around the
country, but especially in this city, New York's
veterans have been overlooked and in many cases

1 ignored, and these are the men and women that have
2 put their lives in harm's way in service of the
3 country, but this is the one group of people that
4 everybody should be lining up to get behind and
5 support, because the issues that affect veterans,
6 they are the issues that everyone should care about
7 no matter their political persuasion. If you care
8 homelessness, the forefront of the homelessness
9 epidemic has to be veterans. If you care about
10 mental illness, substance abuse, suicide prevention,
11 veterans have all sorts of issues with respect to all
12 of those. If you care about law enforcement, if you
13 care about public safety, if you care about health
14 care, all of these are issues which are part in
15 parcel with the issues that veterans are facing.
16 Unfortunately, while a lot of stereotypes happen not
17 to be true of all sorts of groups, one stereotype
18 that I've noticed in dealing with more and more
19 veterans in my short time chairing this committee is
20 the tough, strong, silent type. Even veterans that
21 are in need of services, they are only too happy and
in some cases too proud to suffer in silence because
so many of them were not raised and are not from a
culture of complaining. And the old cliché of the

1
2 squeaky wheel gets the grease so often happens to be
3 true. Whereas other groups that in some cases are
4 much better served by the administration of city
5 government than veterans, are only too happy to
6 loudly protest whenever a T is improperly crossed or
7 an I is improperly dotted on something that they're
8 being served with. Veterans are so often quiet.
9 That's why I really appreciate the testimony from the
10 people that you're about to hear from today in terms
11 of the public, and I especially appreciate the
12 testimony and the work that our new DVS Commissioner
13 has been doing and that you're going to hear from in
14 a moment. What my goal is in chairing this committee
15 and in presiding over this hearing is to- I've never
16 been accused of being quiet, and I am going to be a
17 megaphone and a mouthpiece magnifying every veterans'
18 issue. I have long felt that the budget
19 appropriations to DVS since this department was
20 founded have been woefully inadequate, and to me the
21 budget question surrounding DVS and DVS-related
issues should be how can we get more money and how
can we make the money that DVS already has more
effective, and that's part of what I'm going to focus
on in today's hearing. Smarter dollars, and look,

1
2 I'm a conservative, a fiscal conservative and a
3 Republican. I am a steadfast guardian of taxpayer
4 dollars, but the money that we're spending on
5 veterans and on DVS specifically is not money that
6 goes down the toilet. It is an investment. It is an
7 investment in our city, not only our economy, but in
8 many cases it could be a money multiplier, because
9 one of the biggest problems that we have is that not
10 enough veterans are self-identifying, and one of the
11 things that that's caused is we've seen a tremendous
12 lack of dollars, potentially millions, that are left
13 on the table from Washington and elsewhere because of
14 that lack of self-identification. Now, who's at the
15 forefront of self-identification of veterans? It's
16 DVS. So, I don't see how cutting any money from DVS
17 serves our purposes not only for the veterans
18 community, but for the New York City taxpayers. With
19 that, I would like to welcome DVS' new Commissioner
20 Yesenia Mata, and I am very, very pleased that she's
21 joining us once again, although a bit irked that she
and her compatriots neglected to include me on the
wear pink in solidarity memo. Good morning,
Commissioner.

1
2 COMMISSIONER MATA: Good morning, Council
3 Member.

4 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: We're going to swear
5 you in in a moment, but I also want to introduce my
6 colleague from Queens, the Co-Chair of the very
7 distinguished Common Sense Caucus, Council Member
8 Phil Wong. and following testimony and questions for
9 DVS, we're going to hear public testimony immediately
10 following that. Thank you to all the advocates and
11 community members who've joined us today. DVS'
12 Fiscal 2027 Preliminary Budget is \$6.6 million.
13 That's a million dollars less than the Fiscal 2026
14 Adopted Budget. We're going to get into why that is
15 the case, and why there's a disparity there. It's
16 partly due to \$585,000 in Council discretionary
17 funding that's in the Fiscal 2026 budget only. New
18 funding in the Preliminary Plan totals \$29,391 in
19 Fiscal 2026, growing to \$44,750 in Fiscal 2027 and in
20 the out-years, and I'm looking forward to discussing
21 DVS' budget at today's hearing, as well as the
current state of several key agency programs,
including housing assistance and NYC Vet Connect, as
well as where DVS and the administration plan to take
these programs and the agency at-large in the future.

1 We're also interested in understanding how the agency
2 is working to meet the savings mandate issued by
3 Mayor Mamdani and how these efforts might affect
4 services to our city's veterans. Many indicators in
5 the PMMR point to incredible success in reaching
6 veterans and providing high-quality services by DVS,
7 an 18 percent increase in placements of homeless
8 veterans and their families into housing, a more than
9 900 percent increase in those receiving DVS' Homeless
10 Prevention and Housing Stability Services, an 11.1
11 percent increase in visits to DVS' website, and a
12 77.3 percent increase in public engagement events
13 attended by the agency. I'm incredibly encouraged by
14 these numbers. I think we do still have more to go,
15 but it's clear that DVS is doing great work and
16 that's something to be celebrated, analyzed and then
17 replicated. While overall, DVS reported very
18 positive metrics in the PMMR, I am curious to hear
19 about a 14.1 percent decline in those served by the
20 Vet Connect platform, a pause to the Mission Vet
21 Check program and a decreased utilization rate of the
collaborative case management housing vouchers.
Finally, I would like to hear about how DVS is
strategizing to meet the needs of the city's veterans

1
2 amidst a changing federal landscape. While we feel
3 changes made to the federal Department of Veterans
4 Affairs here on the ground, we must not let that mean
5 our city's veterans and their family members suffer.
6 I look forward to hearing Commissioner Mata's
7 thoughts on this as well as what the agency hopes to
8 accomplish more broadly during her tenure. I'm
9 looking forward to today discussing all of this, the
10 budget and the performance metrics in the PMMR. I
11 hope we're all going to walk away with an
12 understanding of DVS' goals in this new
13 administration and their strategies for meeting the
14 complex needs of our city's veterans. It's the
15 Council's responsibility to ensure that the city's
16 budget is fair, transparent and accountable to all
17 city's veterans, and as the Chair of the Veterans
18 Committee I'm going to continue to advocate for the
19 delivery of a veterans services budget that reflects
20 the needs and values of veterans across the five
21 boroughs. I want to thank both my staff and the
committee staff for their help in preparing for this
meeting, and I also want to thank the staff of the
Finance Committee as well. Let me thank, in no
particular order, Margaret Barnesely [sp?], Financial

1
2 Analyst, Julia Haramis [sp?], Assistant Director,
3 Richard Yates Wong [sp?], a Percy Sutton fellow,
4 Alejandro Carvajal [sp?], Legislative Counsel
5 Mahnoor Butt [sp?], our Policy Analyst, my Chief of
6 Staff, Frank Rapacciuolo [sp?], my Budget Director
7 Brianna Nasti [sp?], and the entire team back in the
8 district office. Before we introduce someone who is
9 rapidly becoming my favorite Commissioner in the
10 current administration, although truth be told
11 that's not a heavy lift. I will turn it over to the
12 Committee Counsel to administer the oath to members
13 of the administration.

14 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair.
15 Good morning. Please raise your right hands. I'll
16 call on you one-by-one. Do you affirm to tell the
17 truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth in
18 your testimony before this committee and to respond
19 honestly to Council Member questions? Commissioner
20 Mata?

21 COMMISSIONER MATA: Yes, I do.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Nicole Orlando?

NICOLE ORLANDO: Yes, I do.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Jack Brodie? Thank
you. You may begin.

1
2 COMMISSIONER MATA: Good morning, Chair
3 and members of the Veterans Committee. Thank you for
4 the opportunity to testify today. My name is Yesenia
5 Mata and I serve as Commissioner of the New York City
6 Department of Veterana'sServices. I also serve as a
7 captain in the U.S. Army Reserves, and as a military
8 spouse, I understand that when one person serves, the
9 whole family serves. DVS exists because of New York
10 City veterans. They wanted a place that understands
11 their needs, helps them access services in a
12 culturally-competent way, and supports them and their
13 families through complex systems. New York City is
14 home to about 131,000 veterans. Our role is to help
15 them navigate these complex systems by turning
16 options into clear workable plans. When a veteran is
17 at risk of losing housing, we step in early,
18 connecting them with the right city partners and
19 veteran-specific resources to stabilize the
20 situation. When someone feels overwhelmed by a
21 federal claims process, we help organize their
documents, track deadlines, and keep the claim moving
forward. And when a veteran isn't sure where to turn
for work, food support or mental health services, we
connect them to the right partners and stay involved

1 to make sure that the connection works. In FY25, DVS
2 directly served 1,509 veterans, including 393 woman
3 veterans across housing stabilization, employment
4 pathways, VA claims navigation, entrepreneurship, and
5 care coordination. These are documented service
6 interactions tied to next steps, not just passive
7 referrals. With that as a baseline, I want to speak
8 briefly about the FY27 Preliminary Budget. Under the
9 January Plan, DVS' budget changes from \$7.7 million
10 in FY26 to \$6 million in FY27. I want to add an
11 important clarification for the record. The FY27
12 figure for the January Plan is not the full picture
13 of the resources we expect to have available by the
14 start of the fiscal year. As we move from the
15 Preliminary Budget to the Adopted Budget, we
16 anticipate budget updates that will affect the FY27
17 total, including the rollover of state Dwyer [sic]
18 grant funds from FY26 into FY27 and any discretionary
19 funding the City Council may provide in FY27. So,
20 while we take the January Plan seriously and are
21 operating within those means, we also expect the FY27
budget picture to evolve as these items become
finalized. During this budget hearing, it is also
important to be clear about DVS' role. The VA is the

1 one that provides health care and federal benefits.
2 DVS does not duplicate that. Our role is to help
3 veterans access what they earned by translating the
4 process into a manageable plan, supporting veterans
5 through the steps and connecting them to city and
6 community resources that fill gaps in real life. We
7 also serve veterans who are not connected to the VA
8 at all, including those who do not self-identify
9 until they need help. We cannot solve every federal
10 issue, but we can help make sure veterans do not fall
11 between systems. What matters most is how we manage
12 the plan in front of us. During this budget period
13 under the January Plan, we are focused on maintaining
14 consistent service, keeping partners aligned, and
15 ensuring we have disciplined internal operations so
16 veterans continue to receive timely, effective
17 support. Looking ahead to FY27, we will have 50
18 authorized positions and anticipate further budget
19 updates. Veterans answer the call to serve us, and
20 our responsibility now is to be there for them.

21 Thank you, and I welcome your questions.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you,
Commissioner. You were kind enough to testify at our
last hearing on how we can do a better job serving

1 female veterans, and I appreciate the vision that you
2 laid out for DVS in that hearing. I'm wondering if
3 you can expand on that a bit. Do you see DVS' role
4 in the lives of the city's veterans evolving,
5 deepening or expanding? How so?

6 COMMISSIONER MATA: Thank you for the
7 question. As the new Commissioner, I am learning
8 about the agency. I am learning about the systems
9 that are in place, but I also have been holding
10 roundtables and meeting with various veteran groups
11 and individuals one-on-one. The goal here is to hear
12 from them directly to see what works, what's not
13 working, or how can we improve the systems within. I
14 specifically did hold a roundtable of woman veterans
15 where they mentioned that this was the first time
16 that they had held a roundtable at DVS that focused
17 specifically on woman veterans and what they go
18 through. And the stories that they were telling and
19 sharing were very- it was of concern, heart-breaking,
20 but at the same time of resilience. That is what I
21 am trying to bring into DVS, to make sure that I can
connect with groups, hear them out to be able to
establish better systems in place, because there is a
lot of work that us as DVS do have to do, and I

1
2 acknowledge that, and I am willing to listen to every
3 group and work with the City Council to help improve
4 the systems that we also have in place.

5 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: I've expressed to
6 you before and said publicly that I think your
7 commissionership and your role has got to me one of
8 the more frustrating ones in city government, because
9 unlike the Police Commissioner that gets to tell
10 police what to do, the firefighter that gets to
11 preside over the Fire Department, so many of the
12 benefits that veterans get are dependent on state and
13 federal services and so much of what you guys do at
14 DVS is steering people towards what the federal
15 government's doing, what state government is doing,
16 and the opportunities that may be available for
17 veterans there. So, if those agencies aren't living
18 up to their end of the bargain, that is something
19 that a lot of times you could be powerless to stop.
20 Given that, what are your short-term, mid-term, and
21 long-term goals for the agency as you take the helm?

18 COMMISSIONER MATA: Thank you for the
19 question. Well, as the new Commissioner, as I
20 mentioned, I am looking at the system. That is one
21 of the short-term goals that I do have in mind to,

1 again, hear directly from the veteran groups and for
2 them to let me know, again, what's working, what's
3 not working. So, that is one of the short-term goals
4 that I do want to re-evaluate the agency. And
5 re-evaluate our relationship with the veteran groups.
6 Mid-term goals is to ensure that once these systems
7 are in place, that we can actually produce- when I
8 say produce is I understand that there's groups that
9 would like to see more of DVS whether it is out
10 there, whether it is for us to better report to them
11 when it comes to data. I am hoping to be able to
12 deliver that particular aspect of htat. But a
13 long-term goal is to- for veterans to feel- not just
14 veterans but for us to do a better job for them to be
15 able to self-identify. And once that happens for us-
16 for there to be more connection and resources
17 available for veterans for them to be able to know
18 where to go such as create better partnerships with
19 nonprofits, better partnerships even across city
20 agencies with other commissioners, and that's what
21 I'm doing. I am- the next step is to hold meetings
with various commissioners and bring veterans to the
table, because as you mentioned in your testimony,
it's not just veteran [inaudible]-- veteran issues

1
2 include health care. They include aging. They
3 include various other issues. I want to make sure
4 that we could also bring other commissioners to the
5 table to help us.

6 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: I want to
7 acknowledge as well our colleague and a member of
8 this committee, Council Member Vickie Paladino who's
9 joining us via Zoom, and if you look up the word
10 fight in the dictionary, there is a giant photo of
11 Council Member Paladino, and the veterans of this
12 city are very, very lucky that she is a fighter for
13 veterans and veterans' issues, and if Council Member
14 Paladino has any questions that she'd like to ask,
15 feel free to either text me or email our Committee
16 Counsel Alejandro. Commissioner, obviously, a lot of
17 people have been focused on the mayor's savings plan.
18 Given the mayor's recent announcement that a Chief
19 Savings Officer will be appointed at each mayoral
20 agency to identify city funds savings of 1.5 percent
21 in Fiscal 2026 and 2.5 percent in Fiscal 2027, as I
alluded to earlier, I'm very concerned about the
potential impact on DVS and the services that it
provides for the city's veterans and their families,
especially given the agency's budget is already

1
2 criminally small. In the Fiscal 2026 Adopted Plan,
3 \$675,000 in baseline city funding was added for nine
4 new positions at the agency to provide direct support
5 to veterans with benefits, and we are particularly
6 concerned if any of those positions have not yet been
7 filled, they could now be at risk. Are any programs
8 or aspects of DVS' budget exempt from this
9 requirement? If so, which ones?

8 COMMISSIONER MATA: Thank you for the
9 question, and I will be passing it next to my
10 colleague Jack, but before I pass it on to him, at
11 DVS we are working very closely with OMB to ensure
12 that the agency can continue not being interrupted.
13 So, those are ongoing conversations that I am having
14 with OMB, especially as a new commissioner. I am
15 learning again the systems and the interest of- for
16 DVS is always to ensure that we can continue
17 providing uninterrupted services. With that being
18 said, we have in mind our current budget where we are
19 at the moment, and that is where our mindset is to
20 just keep that in mind. This is where we are now,
21 and let's not interrupt anything. I understand that
during post-allocation, there's- the Dwyer funding
will roll over. The Dwyer funding will also be

1
2 implemented, but also when it comes to discretionary
3 funds- like, when it comes to the post-allocations, I
4 know that there's going to be- we will be back into
5 hole, but right now what I'm trying to do is just
6 understand where I am at as the agency to ensure that
7 we don't interrupt any services. I will now pass it
8 on to Jack.

9 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR BRODIE: Thank you,
10 Commissioner. Thank you, Council. Good morning.

11 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: And if you would,
12 please just state your name for the record.

13 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR BRODIE: Yes. Sure.
14 So my name is Jack Brodie. I am the Executive
15 Director of Finance at DVS. It's a pleasure to meet
16 you all this morning. To kind of confirm what the
17 Commissioner said regarding any cost-savings, we are
18 working closely with OMB. No decisions have been
19 made as of today, and these discussions are ongoing.

20 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Is there a time
21 table for when those decisions will be made?

COMMISSIONER MATA: So, at the moment, we
are working with OMB. To my knowledge, we are
supposed to be implementing a plan by this week.
However, as DVS, I am still continuing as of today

1
2 these conversations with OMB, because my goal is to
3 ensure we can continue providing services to veterans
4 uninterrupted.

5 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: And could you share
6 what programs and services might see reduced funding
7 from the savings exercise, or is that too premature
8 as well?

9 COMMISSIONER MATA: So, as DVS- again, I
10 am still continuing those ongoing conversations with
11 OMB. I am- I understand that as DVS, we are per say
12 small agency with a small budget. So, as DVS, I am
13 ensure that I can be- that I can inform OMB as much
14 as possible as to why DVS should continue not being
15 interrupted. So those are ongoing conversations and
16 they're still continuing as of today.

17 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Are you aware- or if
18 you could say at this point how many of the nine new
19 positions added at adoption have been filled, and if
20 any remain vacant, could they potentially be
21 eliminated as part of the mayor's vacancy mandated?

COMMISSIONER MATA: At the moment, we
have 50 authorized positions at DVS. We do have four
vacancies, and as the new commissioner, I am
re-evaluating the systems in place to- and also to be

1
2 able to provide better services to veterans. So,
3 with that being said, I am as a new commissioner
4 ensuring that I can communicate this to OMB the
5 importance of continuing not being interrupted but as
6 well to help us be successful for Fiscal FY27.

6 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: One of the things I
7 have most enjoyed as a City Council Member in the 11
8 months that I've had the good fortune to be one is
9 the Vallone VSO Officers that if people are unaware
10 of or if the public is unaware of come to our office
11 one a month and they will help veterans get steered
12 towards services that they're entitled to but may
13 have questions about or may not know how to navigate,
14 and the folks that have been in our office, Eddie,
15 Amy, Ryan have been top notch and really become a
16 part of our district office family. And one of the
17 few complaints that I heard about this program, and I
18 think it's a real crowning achievement of the City
19 Council that we were able to implement this program,
20 is that well, you know, these VSOs are just
21 duplicating services that are available from other
nonprofits and DVS. Is there a need for the VSO?
So, on the question of duplication of services, given
the mandate to find savings, does DVS believe any of

1
2 its services are duplicative to what other levels of
3 government or CBOs do? Have these areas been
4 examined as possible places for DVS to shift money
5 towards other services?

6 COMMISSIONER MATA: Thank you for the
7 question, and actually, that is an excellent
8 question, because that is- as soon as I came into
9 DVS, that is the first question I asked. Again, we
10 are re-evaluating our systems. I want to make sure
11 that if we are reporting, we are also reporting
12 accurate data and do to ensure that, because this
13 data also will help other veterans to obtain the
14 services that they need or also can provide support
15 to the nonprofits that may need funding, and this
16 will have this accurate data. So, as a new
17 commissioner, I am looking into this system to make
18 sure that there's no duplicate data, but with that
19 being said, I do know that the Vallone program, it's
20 finally off the ground. As a new commissioner, I do
21 come from the organizing and the grassroots movement,
and I do know how important it is to get programs
like that off the ground, and I've talked directly
with Ryan [sic] who is one of the people leading
this, and I could attest like the care that he- he

1 handles the care that his team is handling. So, with
2 that being said, I am trying to work closely with
3 those individuals that are working within the Vallone
4 program, but as well listening to other grassroots
5 groups or groups and individuals and nonprofits to
6 also help us understand is this being duplicative?
7 Then, what can we do as an agency to not do that so
8 we can then focus on another way to further support
9 the Vallone program or other services that on a state
10 and a city level are being provided to veterans. I
11 will now pass it to my colleague Nicole to further
12 explain on that.

13 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Thank you,
14 Commissioner, and thank you Council. I'm Nicole
15 Orlando. I'm the Deputy Chief of Staff here. And
16 just to add to that question about the duplicative
17 services, one thing I do want to highlight separate
18 of the VA and the services they provide, is that for
19 us as a city agency, we are not only helping those
20 that are VA-eligible. We know that there is a whole
21 entire population here in New York City of veterans
who are not VA-eligible or may have a dishonorable
discharge, or we also assist family members,
caregivers and supporters. So, for us, we have a

1
2 little bit of difference, of different federal and
3 state agencies, because we do serve a different type
4 of veteran population also.

5 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: With that, I will- I
6 have a number of other questions for you, but I don't
7 want to monopolize the Q&A. I'll invite my colleague
8 Council Member Wong to ask a couple questions.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER WONG: Yes. Thank you,
10 Commissioner for coming. I would like to start by
11 mentioning April 8th, 2016. It's next month. That
12 date is particularly special, because it was that day
13 that 10 years ago that this agency was founded under
14 Mayor de Blasio. And I'm looking at your budget
15 here, and at \$7.7 million, we've been operating for
16 10 years with a budget of \$7.7 million out of the
17 city's total budget of \$115 billion. Now, I
18 mentioned this slightly last time, but you do the
19 math. That's 0.0067 percent of our total city
20 budget, and I can say the- it's a rounding error to
21 many city agencies that this kind of- of your budget
that you're working with. And I think everyone here
in this committee will work with you to get more
resources for your agency, because I just don't see
how are you going to serve or do any outreach to

1
2 131,000 veterans with a budget that- there's like a
3 rounding error to many city agencies. And like I
4 mentioned last time, you'll be hearing from me, the
5 various schools, other city agencies that have data
6 that you may be able to utilize that you can reach
7 out to the 131,000 veterans and let them know the
8 services that you're offering, because my experience,
9 I think some of the veterans are not aware of the
10 services, or they may feel ashamed, you know. I pay
11 for everything I have, why do I need to ask the city
12 for money? You know, this is the mentality that I'm
13 getting when I speak to veterans. So, I don't have a
14 question, but I'm saying I work with you. The whole
15 committee work with you in doing better outreach and
16 we can certainly serve more than 1,509 veterans out
17 of the population of 131,000. Thank you,
18 Commissioner.

16 COMMISSIONER MATA: Thank you, Council
17 Member. We truly appreciate that. As- and I always
18 like to emphasize this, again, as a new commissioner,
19 and the way that I lead, I do like to work very
20 closely with groups with the nonprofit communities,
21 because I know that they are the ones who really
carry the community, the veteran community, from the

1
2 bottom up. So, as DVS, I know that if additional
3 funding or support is further given to us, I do want
4 to make sure that I do amplify those groups, those
5 individuals, those nonprofits that are doing the
6 hardcore work, I would like to say. So, thank you
7 for that, because as DVS one of my goals is to
8 further also support those community leaders,
9 veterans who are doing this work, and they are really
10 outreaching even further to veterans. So, thank you
11 for that.

10 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Commissioner, we've
11 heard a great deal recently about the shrinking and
12 privatized federal services. Recent reporting has
13 detailed the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs
14 struggle to hire and retain mental health care
15 workers. This has led to staffing shortages and
16 sometimes deadly gaps in care for the veterans who
17 depend on these services. Moreover, the VA is moving
18 towards a privatized model of health care, shifting
19 funding from its in-house medical services and to
20 Community Cares, a program that allows veterans to
21 receive care from private providers through the VA
health insurance. Many veterans advocates say this
privatized care is lower quality. I'm curious, how

1
2 has DVS seen the effects of these changes to
3 veterans' benefits at the federal level?

4 COMMISSIONER MATA: Thank you for the
5 question. Before I pass it on to my colleague
6 Nicole- that is a very important question, because I
7 thik that also goes to why the Dwyer funding is super
8 important, because the Dwyer funding does focus
9 primarily on providing that mental health support to
10 other veterans like peer-to-peer groups. They're
11 reaching out to veterans in the way they would like
12 to be reached. Again, all of us like to be reached
13 differently, whether it's through the arts, whether
14 it's through cooking, right? So, this is one of the
15 initiatives that's really important, but also at DVS
16 we do have our Executive Director of Community and
17 Mental Health, and the Executive Director, what she
18 does is built coalitions with other groups or
19 agencies that are providing mental health services or
20 can provide any other support to veterans. So, that
21 is something that we do have at the agency. And
further- a way that we also further provide mental
health support to families is through the family- the
military family advocate. That is a way to work
with- which again was first starting in Staten Island

1
2 to be able to walk families through how to deal- how
3 to walk military families through whatever they're
4 going through. So, this is an initiative that we
5 also have at DVS, but I just wanted to focus on that
6 right now, the city what we're doing, but I'm going
7 to now pass it on to my colleague Nicole.

8 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Thank you for the
9 question, Council. So, it's no surprise to anyone
10 that there are a lot of veterans here in the city who
11 do rely heavily on VA benefits, whether that be their
12 educational benefits, the disability compensation,
13 and health care in general. So, for us, we know that
14 there's a reliance and need here in New York City on
15 those types of benefits. So, a lot of the data that
16 we look towards from the VA is in Fiscal Year 24.
17 That gives us a little more insight into these direct
18 expenditures, and I think what it tells us is that
19 there is a significant need there, and that when
20 there's an issue with a veteran accessing those
21 benefits or them becoming privatized or not being
there, that's going to create a significant gap in
services. So, for us, as being the City Department
of Veteran Services, what we want to be sure is that
we're keeping our veterans connected. So it may not

1
2 be with those federal programs, but what we can do is
3 make sure that different city systems, state programs
4 are being leveraged to fill that gap.

5 COMMISSIONER MATA: And just to provide
6 some data on this, the importance of DVS ensuring
7 that veterans are connected- in 2024, New York had
8 about 315,315 enrollees into the VA health care, and
9 197,384 unique patients that were treated, and 5,932-
10 I'm sorry- 5,932,401 total visits, including 5,150-
11 going back again. I'm sorry. 5,152,633 visits at
12 the VA facilities. So, that just shows the
13 importance of the VA health care numbers in New York,
14 but also the importance of DVS to ensure that we can
15 continue connecting veterans to these services.

16 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you.

17 COMMISSIONER MATA: And I apologize for
18 the numbers.

19 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: No, no, that's okay.

20 COMMISSIONER MATA: It just- now, I
21 [inaudible] I don't know how to count.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: And I would just
ask, just to remind Mr. Brodie and Ms. Orlando for
the ease of the transcribers and anybody that may be

1 tuning in late, if you could just every time you
2 speak, just restate your name for the record?

3 Obviously, we all know who you are, but the people
4 tuning in late may be saying who's that. Speaking of
5 people joining us, I also want to acknowledge the
6 student from Brooklyn Apple Academy who are observing
7 us today. Brooklyn Apple Academy is a terrific
8 homeschool resource and community center in Brooklyn
9 which really unlike any community center and
10 homeschool resource center goes out of its way to get
11 its students real world experience, and I think
12 you'll get quite an education in hearing the
13 testimony from the folks that you're hearing from
14 today. So, welcome, and thank you for being here.
15 I'm looking forward to meeting with you guys
16 afterwards. In terms of what DVS would like to see
17 in the Fiscal 2027 budget, the November Plan didn't
18 include any changes to DVS' budget and the
19 Preliminary Plan included one small adjustment which
20 we've touched upon a bit already. Is there anything
21 specific you would like to see for DVS in the
Executive Plan released in May?

COMMISSIONER MATA: Thank you for the
question. So, as DVS at the moment- again, as the

1 new Commissioner, I am working very closely with OMB.
2 I am being honest to OMB of where we are as an agency
3 and the support that is needed. These are ongoing
4 conversations, but I do reiterate to OMB the
5 importance of ensuring that DVS continues providing
6 services uninterrupted. As DVS at the moment, I am
7 focusing at where we are right now to ensure that we
8 just continue providing steady services, continuing
9 aligning with the nonprofits. With that being said,
10 the goal is to ensure that [inaudible] services don't
11 continue being interrupted. I- and that is something
12 that I continue reiterating to OMB, but additionally
13 to that, that is why I continue having roundtables
14 and meeting with various leaders in the community to
15 ensure- to understand what are further the needs. I
16 know that, again, with the goal of being
17 uninterrupted, I do hope to ensure that we do have
18 better systems in place at DVS. I am looking at
19 every system in place. I- looking into whatever the
20 partners or individuals tell me, you know what, this
21 is what DVS needs to work on. I'm- that is where I
am at the moment. But to your question is my goal as
of right now is to ensure that we do- are not
interrupted.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: You in your
3 testimony said that 1,509 veterans have been served
4 and that there were documented service interactions
5 tied to Next Steps. When DVS says a veteran was
6 served, what specifically qualifies? How many of
7 those 1,509 veterans achieved a concrete outcome like
8 housing, employment or benefits approval?

9 COMMISSIONER MATA: Thank you for the
10 question. So, at DVS, when we provide services to an
11 individual, it's just not a one hand-off per say.
12 What ends up happening, especially whether it is a VA
13 claim, I'm going to use that as an example, it's not
14 just a one-day thing. It's something that needs to
15 be followed through. It could take weeks. It could
16 take months, but even though that process, an
17 individual might want additional resources whether it
18 is to connect them to the VA for health care or to-
19 that they would like entrepreneurship. So, when we
20 do intervene, it is in- and I believe, too, at DVS we
21 do have to do a better- we have to do better to
further elaborate what it consists of every time we I
would like to say intervene, right? Because I think
that is a story that is not fully being told or
documented. So, that is further something that I'm

1
2 trying to work on to ensure that we can report on
3 that. But I will now pass it on to Nicole so she can
4 go further and elaborate on that.

5 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Thank you for the
6 question, Council. This is Nicole. So, I think for
7 us what we've noticed is that it is a spectrum when
8 someone is coming to us for services, and can really
9 range with the service that they're requesting. So,
10 on the housing side of it, they may just need that
11 initial counseling and assistance with what their
12 plan is, what their goals should be, or it may be
13 receiving a voucher or just needing to use their VA
14 home loan. So, it's a very wide spectrum of what
15 success for each veteran looks like, especially on
16 the employment side. Sometimes it is just needing
17 help with a resume. Sometimes it's connection to
18 different career prep programs. For us, it's just
19 making sure that we're taking that personalized
20 approach so that when someone comes through our doors
21 they have a plan of action moving ahead and we're
helping them make those different referrals to
whatever services that they need.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Somewhat related, of
the veterans that DVS engages, do we know how many

1
2 actually complete the process and receive the
3 services or benefit that they were referred to?

4 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Yeah, so thank you
5 for that question. For us, it's the same situation of
6 where we are referring out to different partners. It
7 is then on the parents to report back what the
8 outcomes are. Internally, for some of those services
9 that we provide, specifically on the housing, the
10 employment, entrepreneurship, we have a more direct
11 hand in what those outcomes are, because we provide
12 more of those direct services, but that is something
13 that we are actively working on through our Vet
14 Connect system to ensure that we're having more
15 accurate outcomes data.

16 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: I want to ask about
17 Vet Connect in a moment, but in your testimony,
18 Commissioner, and in my remarks, we talked about the
19 people that are not self-identify, and I know that's
20 been a struggle for everybody. And you said that you
21 serve veterans who are not connected, including those
22 who don't self-identify. Do we have an estimate of
23 how many veterans in New York City are not engaged
24 with DVS at all? And what specifically are we doing
25 to reach them?

1
2 COMMISSIONER MATA: Thank you for the
3 question. And when it comes to self-identification,
4 I think the conversations prior were always why
5 aren't veterans self-identifying. I think with me
6 coming in here and working with the rest of the team
7 and listening to various other leaders in the
8 community, it's not so much why aren't veterans
9 identifying, but what are we doing to make it easier
10 for them to identify or to make sure that we have
11 better communication systems in place to- for them to
12 self-identify. Again, we all come from different
13 backgrounds. We also have different ways that we
14 would like to be reached. So, that is something that
15 I am working actively. I- the roundtables that I've
16 held and the meetings that I've had one-on-one, I'm
17 listening to veterans and helping- and for them to
18 help me understand, like as DVS, how should we do
19 better communication whether it is through awareness,
20 but how do we do it? Again, the roundtable that I
21 had with woman veterans, and it was one of its kind
at DVS, woman were being very clear on how they
wanted to be identified, but also what they went
through- some of them had very- some experiences that
were very heart-breaking, and I could see why they

1
2 didn't want to self-identify. So, this is- we are in
3 a place where- and as a new Commissioner, I'm in a
4 place where I could right now begin implementing
5 certain systems in place so we can start off at the
6 right foot. So, that is where I am at right now. I
7 do hope that within the next year we're not having
8 this conversation about self-identification, that we
9 can actually have conversations that say, perfect,
10 how many people actually increased in
11 self-identifying. So, my goal next year is to ensure
12 that we're not having the same conversation.

11 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Me too. Given the
12 budget gap that we've all been talking about that the
13 city is currently facing, are there any changes to
14 the programming, organization, or workflow at the
15 department that you'd like to see that don't require
16 additional financial resources?

16 COMMISSIONER MATA: At DVS, at the
17 moment, as I mentioned, I am doing the best along
18 with my team- and Jack, he likes to be called to be
19 Jack- his name is Jacque [sic]- with Jack to make
20 sure that we can continue having close communication,
21 because the goal is to ensure that we are not
interrupted. I think there's so much happening

1
2 whether it is at a federal level, state level, and at
3 DVS I am just focused on ensuring that we continue
4 being uninterrupted, that we continue working,
5 aligning along with the veteran groups and what are
6 their needs, too, and whether that means- maybe it's-
7 whether it's not budget- funding, but what is it that
8 the veteran groups need, and my goal is to bring more
9 awareness to them. I am meeting with various
10 Commissioners, and I am trying to hold roundtables
11 with veteran groups with other commissioners and
12 other agencies, because often times it's DVS that is
13 just whether- and thank you, Council Member, for
14 hosting the Black veterans table. That was very
15 important, and I think we need to see more of that
16 from various other Council Members and various other
17 commissioners, too. Again, this is not also just a
18 Staten Island issue or a Queens issue or a Brooklyn
19 issue. It's a New York City issue. So, I- what I am
20 hoping to do is ensure that I can bring awareness to
21 all of these other great leaders that are on the
ground doing the work and that they could have
face-to-face with City Council Members and
Commissioners.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: You were talking a
3 bit about the cuts, the proposed cuts, in your
4 testimony. Setting aside potential rollovers and
5 discretionary funding, how does the reduction from
6 \$7.7 million to \$6.6 million affect your operations
7 today? Are there services that would be impacted if
8 additional funding doesn't materialize?

9 COMMISSIONER MATA: So, for FY26, we are
10 at \$7.6 million. That is a Preliminary Budget
11 snapshot at the moment for the- that and the FY27
12 budget that is \$6.6 million. That's a Preliminary
13 Budget- what- the apparent drop is driven mainly by
14 funding that is either time-limited or not yet
15 reflected. When it comes- and two specific items
16 that are relevant here is the Dwyer funding. The
17 FY26 reflects that the state Dwyer dollars including
18 funds available for the rollover. The FY27
19 Preliminary Budget does not yet show the approved
20 rollover that we expect to be reflected as plan. And
21 also, for the City Council discretionary, that is
funding that is still not seen right now as the
Preliminary Plan, but we do hope to see it in the
post-allocation.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: One of the points
3 that I've been making to the public, to the Speaker,
4 to the Mayor's Office is that the money that we spend
5 on DVS is an investment, because of the increased
6 potential for self-identification. Do you have an
7 estimate of how much additional support the city and
8 the veterans see on average per person that
9 self-identifies and is connected to benefits, and
10 comparatively, do you have an estimate of how much it
11 costs DVS on average in outreach, case management,
12 and other support services required to identify each
13 new veteran the agency is able to identify?

14 COMMISSIONER MATA: Yes. Thank you for
15 the question. Before I pass that question to my
16 colleague Nicole- at DVS at the moment as a new
17 commissioner I am looking- again, and I know I keep
18 saying this, but I am looking into the systems that
19 we do have in place, because I am looking at the type
20 of services, one that we provide, but also the type
21 of partnerships that we provide. I think you did
22 mention before that about duplication, right?
23 Whether I am looking into that with our partners,
24 because if it's something that doesn't need to be
25 duplicated or perhaps maybe duplicated, that DVS can

1
2 have a better approach of outreaching and providing
3 better services, or to ensure that the staff is
4 provided the support that they need. So, with that
5 being said, at DVS right now, I'm looking into the
6 system to see the programs, the partners that we
7 have, the cost of each program or the cost of each
8 service that we are providing, whether it is- and
9 when I say the cost of each service, whether it is
10 that we are subcontracting, and if we do subcontract,
11 like, how is that further being reported. So I am
12 looking into all of the systems in place, and I'm
13 happy to get back to you on that as I keep looking
14 into systems and developing the agency to meet the
15 needs of the veterans.

13 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Thank you for that
14 question. So, for us, I think the difference is in
15 definitions. So, for self-identification versus VA
16 benefits, it's a big difference of- someone can be
17 receiving their benefits, but still not socially
18 self-identifying. So, I think for us the greatest
19 data sets that we have is that in fiscal year 24 for
20 VA benefits, \$152.2 million was spent in the Bronx,
21 \$202.8 million in Brooklyn, \$117.1 million in
Manhattan, and \$191.1 million in Queens, and \$73.2

1 million in Staten Island was paid out by VA federal
2 benefits. So, we know that we have data on that,
3 because these are someone who's enrolling in
4 services. They're receiving the benefits. It's
5 easier to capture that data and that dollar amount.
6 So, for us, we're doing more on how much we can-
7 almost like the acquisition price of a veteran that
8 we're interacting with. So, for us, that's some work
9 that we're focusing on doing is what that dollar
10 amount would look like, especially when we're
11 thinking about someone who maybe isn't receiving
12 benefits, isn't eligible to receive benefits, and for
13 our interactions with them.

12 COMMISSIONER MATA: And I think further,
13 Council Member, I'm glad that you brought that
14 question, because I think that's what I mentioned-
15 that is what I mentioned earlier, that we also have
16 to do a better job at DVS when we do say that we did-
17 we did intervene. And what does intervening mean?
18 What does it entail? The time that it- that takes-
19 for example, again, I bring up DVA claims. Like,
20 that does take- that's just not a one-day support or
21 two days or a week. No, it could take months. So,
we do need to do better on tracking that and

1
2 showcasing the time as well that it takes to provide
3 these types of services and support.

4 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Let's speak a bit
5 about Mission Vet Check. For people that may be
6 unaware, Mission Vet Check is a partnership between
7 New York Cares and DVS, and they recruit volunteers
8 to make supportive buddy check wellness calls to
9 veterans across the City. And according to the PMMR,
10 Mission Vet Check was paused for the first four
11 months of Fiscal 2026, but was scheduled to restart
12 on December 21st, 2025 ahead of the holiday season.
13 First, why was Mission Vet Check paused?

14 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Thank you for that
15 question, Council. So, Mission Vet Check operates in
16 partnership with New York Cares and our agency which
17 works on the basis of recruiting volunteers to make
18 these supportive buddy wellness checks across the
19 city. So, it was paused for the first four months of
20 fiscal year 2026 due to issues with retaining
21 volunteers for this program and being able to have
the infrastructure to crisis care managers on the
line when God forbid something did happen where
someone was on the line and needed support and there
needed to be connection. So, there were just some

1
2 things that were being worked out in terms of the
3 flow of the program.

4 COMMISSIONER MATA: And further, to add
5 to that, this is what I try to reiterate that as a
6 new Commissioner I'm looking at how do we create
7 better partnerships, but also how do we do support
8 those individuals that do come and volunteer, right?
9 Oftentimes when I want to make sure that volunteers
10 are supported as well when they are either
11 volunteering with DVS and to- so that is something
12 that when it comes to volunteers or working with
13 other partners, I am trying to solidify better,
14 stronger relationships. I know we have work to do,
15 and I am open and honest about that, and I am- that
16 is why I continue meeting with various groups to hear
17 directly from them. And but again, at DVS we do have
18 the Executive Director of Community and Mental
19 Health, and she has been great at creating- building
20 coalitions with various other agencies and nonprofits
21 to hear directly from them. So, we continue working
hand-in-hand with our ED to make sure that we can
have better systems in place.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Did the program
3 restart on December 21st of last year as was stated
4 in the PMMR? If not, when did it restart or will it
5 restart?

6 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Thank you for the
7 question. Yes, the program did restart ahead of the
8 holiday season, and they have been continuing to
9 operate throughout the start of this year.

10 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: In order to ensure
11 that Mission Vet Check doesn't get paused again, what
12 do we need to do? Is it a question of more
13 volunteers, or is it something else?

14 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Thank you for that
15 question. I think that definitely we're open to any
16 volunteers. We encourage you all to also
17 participate. This is a program that can be done in
18 the comfort of your own home. There's a training
19 that you would just need to receive in order to be
20 able to just have a basis of what the program is and
21 does, but it's definitely something we open all
volunteers to participate with us.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: How do people
volunteer?

1
2 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: So, they could get
3 connected to our agency, and we would put them in
4 touch with our Executive Director of Mental Health
5 who then will provide the trainings and being able to
6 give more information about the timing of these
7 sessions and things of that nature.

8 COMMISSIONER MATA: And Council Member, I
9 thank you for that question, because it further shows
10 the work at DVS that we do have to do to further
11 amplify this program, and this is what I meant that I
12 am looking into the system to do better outreaching
13 at that, and this is an opportunity to also work with
14 you all at the Veterans Committee to share this even
15 amongst various other Council Members of how can we
16 come together to support this. So, again, thank you
17 for highlighting that.

18 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Let's talk about NYC
19 Vet Connect. DVS links service members, veterans,
20 survivors, caregivers, and military families to a
21 range of services provided by various organizations,
nonprofit community groups and government agencies,
all accessible through the NYC Vet Connect platform.
In the first four months of fiscal 2026, 1,046
veterans and family members were served through the

1
2 Vet Connect platform. That's a 14 percent decline
3 when compared to the 1,218 individuals served in the
4 same period in fiscal 2025. If you can say or if
5 you're aware, why did the number of individuals
6 served through Vet Connect decline compared to last
7 fiscal year?

8 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Thank you for that
9 question. We believe that there has been the 14
10 percent decrease in the first four months of the
11 fiscal year compared to last year just due to the
12 fact of fluctuating based on the timing and the
13 cycles. I think what we see is that a veteran is
14 going to reach out sometimes in the last moment when
15 they need that assistance or support, and it is
16 always changing and always fluctuating. So, what we-
17 what we're doing here is monitoring closely what
18 those trends are and adopting our outreach strategies
19 to match what those trends are and to see how we can
20 increase that engagement even more, but we do believe
21 that it's just the factor of timing.

22 COMMISSIONER MATA: And further to add
23 that, Council Member, that is something that I am
24 further looking into as to how do we even- how do we
25 do better reportage on that as well, like, whether it

1
2 is that- I would like to see what- I am diving into
3 this report further to see as to what is it as DVS we
4 do have to do to ensure that we provide better data
5 or services to veterans. So, just, I want to flag
6 that, that I am looking into that.

7
8 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Is DVS facing any
9 barriers in relation to using this platform or
10 connecting with constituents? Anything we can do to
11 help?

12
13 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Thank you for
14 that question. That is something that we are working
15 with our different subject matter experts internally
16 to the agency on to ensure that services that they're
17 providing or connecting our veterans to are as
18 effective as possible, as well as also re-evaluating
19 the organizations and groups that we work with that
20 are referral partners on that connect platform.

21
22 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: I know you guys
23 recently switched to updated Vet Connect software.
24 How's that going?

25
26 COMMISSIONER MATA: Yes, and thank you
27 for flagging that, too. From- I know that when we-
28 as a new commissioner I was looking into that system,
29 and that system was down for some time period, and

1
2 that is what the team currently right now is working
3 on to ensure that we did not- that there was no
4 interrupted services, data per say, right? So, at
5 the moment, the team is making- it's back up, but we
6 are- I'm working closely with the team to ensure that
7 we don't- that we are even in the future better
8 prepared if this does happen. Like, how do we make
9 sure that there's no data interrupted. So, that is
10 one. Thank you for flagging that, because that was
11 one of the major issues. However, again, we- I
12 always do like to take responsibility and say that
13 there should always be a backup plan. So that is
14 what I'm working on right now.

15
16 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Alright. I'm told a
17 few folks are so bored with hearing me drone on with
18 questions, that they're actually knitting as they're
19 watching us. So, I will turn it over to my colleague
20 Council Member Wong who has a few more questions.

21
22 COUNCIL MEMBER WONG: Thank you, Chair.
23 I just have a follow-up. It's my understanding the
24 VA's goal is to be the legal guardian of veterans.
25 There are a lot of veterans out there that live
26 alone, and quite often they cannot make their own

1
2 medical decisions. How are you addressing those
3 issues, and how would that affect the work of DVS?

4 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Thank you for that
5 question. So, this is an issue that we are
6 monitoring very closely, understanding that there are
7 a lot of voices in the community, whether that be for
8 or against this policy, and this is something that
9 has recently come out within the last couple of
10 weeks. So, for us, it's us fully understanding the
11 system, understanding what the community and
12 advocates feel about this situation and then being
13 able to ask appropriately, legislatively, if it comes
14 down to that.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER WONG: And my second
16 question is, do you- do you agree with my statement
17 that DVS would be able to do more work with more
18 funding?

19 COMMISSIONER MATA: Funding is always
20 welcomed. I would never say no to funding. And
21 further, it's not just DVS- thank you, Council
Member. It's not just further DVS, but I- this would
help us amplify those groups that are on the ground.
I want to make sure that they can get the support
that they need to. So, I do hope that as an agency

1
2 as we keep growing, that DVS does further fulfil into
3 its mission to support those veteran groups and
4 nonprofits that are doing the work.

5 COUNCIL MEMBER WONG: Thank you. And a
6 question that just texted me from my constituents.
7 What positions is being removed in your fiscal year
8 27?

9 COMMISSIONER MATA: So, at the moment we
10 have 50 authorized positions. There has been no
11 changes made in agency regarding vacancies. We do
12 have four vacancies, but I am still- I'm
13 re-evaluating the agency per say. I am learning
14 about the agency first and speaking with the partners
15 to better understand too, like, our systems- I mean,
16 our- the resources that we're providing or programs.
17 So, that is an ongoing conversation.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER WONG: Okay. Thank you.
19 Thank you, Commissioner. Thank you, Chair.

20 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: I didn't think you
21 can have a conversation about what veterans are
22 experiencing in this city without at least touching
23 upon the issue of homelessness and housing, and at
24 the same time, I think that's one of the great
25 successes that DVS has had. 72 homeless veterans and

1 family members received housing through the DVS
2 Veteran Peer Coordinator program in the first four
3 months of fiscal 2026. That's an increase of 18
4 percent when compared to the same period last fiscal
5 year when 61 placements were made. According to the
6 PMMR, this was achieved through collaboration with
7 the Department of Homeless Services, Department of
8 Social Services, New York City Housing Authority, and
9 community-based organizations, as well as ongoing
10 strategic outreach efforts DVS has made to property
11 owners and brokers seeking to house veteran tenants.
12 How are you guys able to achieve this 18 percent
13 increase?

14 COMMISSIONER MATA: Before I pass it to
15 my colleague Nicole, I do want to take a moment to
16 amplify individuals within the agency, specially the
17 Executive Director of Housing and her team. She is a
18 combat veteran. Her story is very powerful what she
19 has been through as a woman veteran, combat veteran,
20 and she takes great care of each person that she does
21 connect with. And I was- when I did look into these
numbers, I could- and again, I want to bring more of
the human side to it, and I'll pass it on to Nicole,
but this is someone that understands directly what

1
2 veterans are going through because of what she went
3 through. And this is the type of care that when you
4 do have veterans who are working within DVS, who are
5 very culturally-competent in order to do this type of
6 work, and furthermore through her work, I want to
7 amplify that in FY26 the first four months,
8 prevention after care was 578 veterans. Like, that
9 services per say- let me reiterate that- services.
10 So, I just- that just shows the work that the
11 individual is doing, but also we ended up doing the
12 whole count with the five borough vets, and we were
13 able to see firsthand any veterans that were
14 homeless, but it just- it's- it is very heartbreaking
15 to see that. I say this because of the importance of
16 putting that human side of how much there is care
17 within the Housing Department within DVS, and this is
18 why our numbers are increasing, and we are placing
19 veterans where they need to be. I'm going to pass
20 this to Nicole.

17 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Thank you for the
18 question. And Chair, to your point when you
19 mentioned earlier about our nine positions from the
20 new needs request from last year, so those positions
21 did include additional housing specialists. So, with

1
2 the team expanding on the housing side, it allowed
3 more of our team members to be in the shelters in
4 alternate locations, being able to help veterans
5 everywhere. So, it's less of them just coming into
6 our office or calling our phones, but now our team is
7 being offensive and they're being out there in the
8 communities, in the shelters. So, the expansion of
9 the team has helped with that increase as well.

10 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Commissioner, in
11 your testimony, you made the point that DVS does not
12 duplicate the VA. I'm wondering if that's an
13 opportunity for those of us that are policy-makers
14 and law-makers. Where do you see the limits of the
15 connector model for DVS? Are there areas where the
16 city should be directly providing services instead of
17 relying on referrals?

18 COMMISSIONER MATA: Thank you for the
19 question, Council Member. That is why I- as I speak
20 with various veteran groups, I am listening to them
21 on what are the needs in the veteran community. What
22 would be a great partnership is to have various other
23 commissioners in line to also help them understand.
24 And I know this is perhaps- also, this is where DVS
25 does come in to provide that cultural competency,

1 because what is happening is that, again, any veteran
2 issue just comes to DVS, right? But veteran issues
3 are everywhere. It's even in the culture. We have
4 many veterans who are very interested and are to do
5 great work. Like, for example, we have a film
6 festival at DVS that we had last year, and there were
7 many veterans who were showcasing their story through
8 that. So, in order for us to- whether it is prevent
9 duplication or to provide better services, it does
10 require various support to work various other
11 agencies, and that is what I'm trying to have-
12 rebuild those relationships, but I do want to work
13 alongside with the veteran groups for them to be able
14 to tell their story and as to why this is important.
15 And I mean, I'm just going to give an example. Just
16 to give an example, when it comes to SBS and my old
17 nonprofit, when it came to SBS, we did have a
18 contract that focused specifically on providing OSHA
19 and SST, rihgt, cards. That is a card that so
20 construction workers can work on-site. And we were
21 just required to do it in Spanish and that was part
of our contract, and we did that. What was happening
was that as myself who was an enlisted soldier who
was an NCO at the time, a Sergeant, I had many

1
2 soldiers under me. And because they knew I worked at
3 the organization that I did, that I worked on and
4 focused on workforce development, they would say can
5 we also partake in this? And I was like, absolutely.
6 It's open to everyone. It's just in Spanish. So, I
7 had many veteran soldiers that went into my
8 organization even though it was not
9 veteran-designated per say. That would get these
10 services also to be able to get their OSHA and SST
11 card so they could work in the construction site. I
12 say this to bring it back to this, because
13 oftentimes, even contracts don't realize that they
14 are serving veterans, and that's just an example of
15 ways that we are missing the opportunity to reach
16 veterans or to have them self-identify.

14 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: My final question is
15 somewhat related. Which is if you could change one
16 thing in the city's approach to serving veterans,
17 what would it be? And related, how can the Council
18 help in that respect?

18 COMMISSIONER MATA: Thank you for the
19 question. I am very grateful that you are Chair of
20 the Veterans Committee and that all of the
21 individuals on the committee are also- out of the

1 Council Members are part of this committee, because I
2 do- I've met with each one of you and I see the care
3 that each one of you has towards veterans. And I
4 know often times veterans are overlooked, and I think
5 you perhaps did touch up on it early on that whether
6 it is people think that veterans are okay because
7 they served, they're strong, and that is true, right,
8 but I- there does need to be further care, because
9 we- veterans also need support. So, with that being
10 said, I would like to continue having this
11 partnership with you all, a strong partnership as
12 DVS, and I think also the roundtables that you held
13 that you were listening to veterans directly, that is
14 something very important. So, I do hope to see more
15 of that. But furthermore is for us to be able to
16 work with various other commissioners so they can
17 also become culturally-competent, and this would also
18 include how do they also track veterans in their
19 contracts, because this will be also very important
20 data to all of the groups on the ground, because that
21 can help them understand where they can provide
services, what type of services are needed, but also
for them to advocate whether it is for funding,
whether it comes from various other funders. I know

1
2 at my own nonprofit data was super important, so I
3 can advocate for funding for my organization. So, I
4 want to make sure, I guess to your point, is building
5 those strong relationships with various other City
6 Council Members and commissioners.

6 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Well, thank you
7 very, very much, and I think the folks of this city
8 are very, very lucky that you're fighting on behalf
9 of veterans just as hard as you've been fighting as a
10 uniformed member of the military, and just as you
11 fought in the nonprofit sector for so many years.
12 So, thank you for your testimony and for your service
13 to the city and our country.

12 COMMISSIONER MATA: Thank you, Council
13 Member, and thank you all for giving us the
14 opportunity to testify today and to all the groups
15 here today.

16 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Mr.
17 Brodie. Thank you, Ms. Orlando. Alright, I am now
18 going to open the hearing for public testimony. I
19 will remind members of the public that this is a
20 formal government proceeding and that decorum shall
21 be observed at all times. As such, members of the
public shall remain silent at all times. The witness

1 table is reserved for people who wish to testify. No
2 video recording or photography is allowed from the
3 witness table. Further, members of the public may
4 not present audio or video recordings as testimony,
5 but may submit transcripts of such recordings to the
6 Sergeant at Arms for inclusion in the hearing record.
7 If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please fill
8 out an appearance card with the Sergeant at Arms and
9 wait to be recognized. When recognized you will have
10 three minutes to speak on today's hearing topic
11 which, of course, is the Preliminary Budget for DVS.
12 We will hear all in-person testimony first, then turn
13 to testimony on Zoom. If you have a written
14 statement or additional written testimony you wish to
15 submit for the record, please provide a copy of that
16 testimony to the Sergeant at Arms. We will call the
17 first panel in a moment. If you don't testify, then
18 don't complain about what is or is not in the city's
19 budget. Before we proceed, I also want to take a
20 brief moment to acknowledge the passing of Chuck
21 Norris. Many people knew him as an actor, a martial
artist, a cultural icon, and frankly the subject of
more jokes than just about anyone in modern history.
But before all that, he was a veteran. He served in

1 the United States Airforce, and like so many
2 veterans, he built the foundation of his life on
3 discipline, service, and commitment to something
4 greater than himself. It's easy to focus on the
5 actor, the larger than life persona, Walker Texas
6 Ranger, but at his core he was someone who wore the
7 uniform of this country with a great deal of pride
8 like so many do, and that's something we never lose
9 sight of, especially on this committee. And we spend
10 a lot of time talking about programs, budgets and
11 policies, but behind all that are individuals, people
12 who served, people who sacrificed, people who went on
13 to live full lives in many different ways, and Chuck
14 Norris was one of those individuals. So, today, as
15 we continue the hearing, as we begin public
16 testimony, I think it's appropriate that we pause,
17 reflect, and honor not just his life, but his
18 service. So, may he rest in peace and condolences to
19 his family, his friends, and all of his fans.

20 Alright. We will now call the first panel. Ryan
21 Graham from VFW District One, Ashton Stewart from
MJHS Hospice and Palliative Care, and Coco Culhane of
the Veteran Advocacy Project, come on up. It's
wonderful to see all of you again. Thank you for

1
2 being here. Thank you as always for being such a
3 great advocate on behalf of our city's veterans.
4 You're going to have three minutes to testify, but if
5 you have remarks that exceed that, you're certainly
6 welcome to submit them in writing. And if no one
7 minds, I might sneak in an extra minute or two for
8 you guys as well. Ryan, we'll begin with you.

9 RYAN GRAHAM: Good morning. Yep, good
10 morning. Actually, fun fact, you mentioning Chuck
11 Norris, my father- well, he's been gone for a long
12 time. He was also U.S. Airforce veteran, Security
13 Forces, but they call it now, back then was Air
14 Police, but he actually worked with Chuck Norris.
15 They were stationed together in Korea in the late
16 50's.

17 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Close to the mic,
18 though, if you would, Ryan. We don't want to miss an
19 anecdote about Chuck Norris or otherwise.

20 RYAN GRAHAM: Good morning. Thank you,
21 Chairman Morano and the rest of the City Council
Veterans Committee for this opportunity to speak.
Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge Operation
Epic Fury and the troops currently deployed in
support of combat operations, including those

1 families who have someone deployed, along with those
2 who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in service to
3 the United States. It has been nearly a quarter
4 century since the terror attacks on 9/11 and the
5 start of the Global War on Terror, and we continue to
6 send troops into harm's way across the globe. To
7 introduce myself, I'm Ryan Graham. I'm representing
8 the largest combat veterans organization throughout
9 the nation and globe. The Veterans of Foreign Wars
10 as a State Vice Chairman of the VFW Department of New
11 York Legislative Committee, as well a Legislative
12 Chairman for VFW District One here in New York City,
13 and I am also here as an advocate and Chairman of the
14 New York City Veterans Advisory Board. Also beside
15 me- well, he's going to speak. Ashton is also the
16 Secretary of the VAB for the city. Since its
17 inception just over 10 years ago, to include its
18 predecessor, the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs,
19 the New York City Department of Veteran Services has
20 been an agency tasked with working to assist the
21 nearly quarter-million veterans calling the five
boroughs their home. But the agency and its staff is
severely underfunded. Out of the \$116.8 billion
total current city budget, DVS is allocated just \$6.6

1 million. As Council Member Wong has said, that is a
2 drop in a bucket. It's like 0.00005 percent. From an
3 operational and programming viewpoint, the needs of
4 the agency and community partners is well below the
5 necessary funding to operate at a feasible and
6 desirable amount. As we know, New York City is
7 suffering through a large difficult housing crisis,
8 and although a smaller demographic of the New York
9 City population, the veteran community is also going
10 through the same cycle of potential housing
11 insecurity along with potential homelessness. The
12 housing services with DVS have been seeing an influx
13 with these numbers as well, enough to overwhelm their
14 staff and agency. Transition services is another key
15 unit within DVS, assisting service members and their
16 family members with the necessary guidance and
17 resources to navigate the civilian sector.
18 Transitioning service members and their family
19 members face a less than optimal environment when
20 they leave military service. Without the correct
21 number of resources, these service members and their
families face instability on various fronts. These
are just a few of the divisions within the New York
City Department of Veteran Services in dire need of

1 funding to bring this agency to its full capacity.
2 Furthermore, continuous funding of important programs
3 such as the Vallone Veterans Initiative, which was
4 mentioned earlier which I'm actually the project
5 manager on that, is important to the veterans
6 community. Since just last year, July 1st, the
7 Vallone Veterans Initiative in partnership with the
8 state VFW has processed 261 claims up until the end
9 of February 2026. So, that's just the claims
10 numbers. The money that obviously the cycle, how
11 long it takes for a claim to come back, we start
12 seeing a little bit of it. It's definitely in the
13 millions by now. Initiatives and programs such as
14 this are important investments into the New York City
15 veterans community. With the 25th anniversary of
16 9/11 a few months on the horizon, as well as the
17 homecoming parade for post-9/11 veterans, and a
18 monument about to break ground in Queens remembering
19 New York City's post-9/11 veterans lost on the battle
20 field, now more than ever can we honor the contract
21 for our fellow veterans and neighbors who risk their
lives for something greater than themselves, not just
as veterans but as New Yorkers. It is recommended
that the New York City Department of Veteran Services

1 budget be increased to \$15-\$20 million to be able to
2 further its mission to the New York City veterans
3 community. As I've always said in the past, we have
4 enough funding to send troops to the battlefield, but
5 yet, we always just don't seem to have enough money
6 once they come home. And I'm going to add one little
7 tid bit on the housing side, obviously, the nature of
8 my job working for the VFW in partnership with the
9 Council. I'm going to say on a- once or twice a week
10 on average I get emails from different City Council
11 offices. Obviously, we don't deal with anything
12 housing related. I send it over to the wonderful
13 Donae [sic] who's sitting right behind me. They're
14 overwhelmed. I've seen it. One of her predecessors,
15 Lamar, when he testified in front of the Veterans
16 Advisory Board last year, when the prior Chairwoman
17 Mercedes asked what do you need. He said I need more
18 money. I need more people. And that's- I just
19 wanted to touch on those two parts, the transition
20 services which I know Nicole's been running point for
21 the agency, and Donae [sp?] on housing, and those are
just two of the divisions within DVS that they
definitely can use a big oomph [sic], so to speak.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Yeah, Ryan, thank
3 you first of all for your testimony and especially
4 for your work with the VFW and with the Vallone
5 Veterans Initiative. We've been lucky enough to have
6 these VSOs in our office on a monthly basis including
7 you and I could say firsthand how helpful you
8 personally have been as well as your compatriots
9 who've been in our office. Quick question, though,
10 based on what you said. I think, you know, you're not
11 going to get in an argument from me that we should
12 increase the Veterans Services budget to \$20 million.
13 In order to improve the actual lives of veterans-
14 let's say we were to go from \$6.6 million to \$20
15 million. What would you like to see that money spent
16 on? Where do we get the most bang for our buck in
17 terms of improving outcomes?

15 RYAN GRAHAM: Circling back to what I was
16 saying before, definitely really expanding out the
17 housing unit. We know housing's the number one issue
18 in New York City, and it's heartbreaking. I've- me
19 personally, I've been there. I've been couch surfing
20 on a few occasions before I went in after I got out,
21 how I got out right after the market took a crash in
2008, and it's not a great feeling. So, that's when

1 I see those emails, I always remember what the
2 previous director for the housing unit, Lamar, said,
3 we need more people, because I- we saw their numbers.
4 I think they had a lot of like- backlog of about four
5 months. We literally have people coming to us with-
6 like, they're literally about to be homeless
7 tomorrow. But definitely the housing side.
8 Transition services, that's another big one. I know-
9 she can correct me if I'm wrong. Nicole was handling
10 transition services. She wears a lot of different
11 caps. The first six to 12 months, I'd probably even
12 say longer, is very vital for a veteran. We're
13 talking- all it can take is a matter of a week.
14 Everything goes wrong for you, and they might be
15 like, that's the end of it, I'm done. And I think
16 you get what I'm saying. Obviously, we always see
17 the 22 a day. I think it's become more symbolic.
18 That's also heartbreaking. A close friend of mine
19 from Ozone Park, served in Afghanistan and Iraq,
20 committed suicide. His wife came home and found him
21 dead. We don't need to see any more of that. That's
why the transition services side can help, not just
the veterans but for the families. They're just as
important, the spouses, the children. Like, there's a

1
2 lot of services out there that DVS can provide. I
3 can't speak to some of the other divisions that I
4 already know from knowing a lot of people in DVS.
5 They wear several different caps, and I know- I've
6 never worked in government.

7 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Covers.

8 RYAN GRAHAM: Huh?

9 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Several different
10 covers.

11 RYAN GRAHAM: Yeah, like this cover. But
12 the one thing I could say, I come from a corporate
13 background, Fortune 500, Aerospace Now nonprofit.
14 Well, I've been doing nonprofit for free for years.
15 It drives my wife nuts. She always asks me, like,
16 how much did you get paid. Any time I come home from
17 my post or anything. It's- the work needs to be
18 done. But ultimately, burnout's a thing. I've seen
19 it in the past 20+ years I've been working, and when
20 you have people doing too many things, that leads to
21 retention issues. We want to avoid that with DVS,
expand out their capabilities, and especially with
the 10-year mark coming up, now's the time to do it.
Let's- and there's a certain person in this room, I
heard it from him, Joe Belo, a while back and I

1
2 always use it: handshakes and pancakes. I think
3 we're beyond that now. Let's go into something that
4 is going to bring back dividends. And the reason why
5 I also brought up the Vallone initiative, that's
6 going to be money going right back into the
7 community. Things like that, and then the recently
8 passed 100 percent bill by State Senator Joe Addabbo,
9 that's going to keep veterans in the state. Yeah,
10 they're- veterans going to save \$10,000 on property
11 taxes, then it's going to go right back into the
12 economy. So, it's- we'd rather them stay here and
13 spend that money than going to Florida, Virginia,
14 Texas. Yeah, I'm going to say it, New York City and
15 New York State's the best place in the world, but we
16 don't want them to leave. We want them to come here,
17 spend that money, keep it here.

18 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Ryan.

19 Appreciate it. At this point, I want to first
20 acknowledge my colleague Council Member James Gennaro
21 who is joining us on Zoom. We're very lucky to have
the added benefit of his wisdom on Zoom in terms of
cumulative service. He is the longest-serving City
Council Member we have, very much kind of the dean of
the City Council. But it's unfortunate for him that

1
2 he's on Zoom rather than in-person because of my
3 continuing efforts to woo him to join the Italian
4 Caucus, he's going to miss out on the St. Joseph's
5 cakes that I brought in with the expressed desire to
6 persuade him to join Italian Caucus today. So,
7 Councilman Gennaro, that is to your detriment. But
8 we're also very fortunate to be joined by a real
9 warrior not only for his service in the Navy, but a
10 real warrior on behalf of veterans and veterans
11 health care needs, and that is Ashton Stewart of MJH
12 Health Systems. Stewart, hello.

11 ASHTON STEWART: Chair Morano, thank you
12 so much for that intro. My goodness. Ashton
13 Stewart, Veterans Program Manager with MJHS. It's an
14 honor to be here today, and I thank the Chair Morano
15 and members of the Veterans Committee. Recognizing
16 that veterans have unique needs at the end of life,
17 MJHS Hospice, a not-for-profit health care agency,
18 created a clinical care program grounded in
19 compassionate listening, trauma-informed care,
20 respectful inquiry and acknowledgement of military
21 service. Our veteran support program is funded by a
grant which has been reduced for the second time in
two years. This comes at a time when in 2020 it was

1 reported that over 70 percent of New York City
2 veterans are over the age of 65, highlighting the
3 urgency of our work. This urgency is further
4 underscored by the data recently shared in the VA
5 Annual Veteran Suicide Prevention Report which shows
6 veteran suicide in New York State surged to its
7 highest rate in 20 years. At MJHS, we see the value
8 of upholding We Honor Veterans program. As a VSO,
9 our work has exceeded expectations as we continue to
10 strive to connect with veterans which supportive
11 services from each of the three tiers of the VA, the
12 Veterans Benefits Administration, the National
13 Cemetery Administration, and the Veterans Health
14 Administration. Many of the veterans we serve are
15 unaware of the services that are available to them,
16 services that can foster a more peaceful end of life,
17 and MJHS Hospice helps these families receive the
18 support they need. In 2025, our award-winning We
19 Honor Veterans program assisted 323 veteran
20 households and provided 167 total referrals
21 addressing a wide range of aging veteran and survivor
needs, including approved DIC claims resulting in
significant financial stability for surviving spouses
and children, including monthly tax-free benefits of

1
2 over \$1,600 per month and retroactive lump-sum
3 payments exceeding \$10,000 in some cases. These
4 benefits enable families to remain housed and manage
5 funeral and medical expenses. I was fortunate to
6 have secured the Veteran Initiative before when I
7 secured it for SAGE Vets while serving as their
8 program manager, and we had the initiative between
9 2019 and 2022. MJHS is primed to be a responsible
10 and responsive partner to the Committee on Veterans
11 as we continue to grow as a leader in the veteran
12 space. Earlier this month, MJHS was invited to take
13 part in a roundtable discussion with Commissioner
14 Yesenia Mata and her team at the New York City
15 Department of Veteran Services, and several other
16 veteran advocates. MJHS presented at the most recent
17 DVS Mental Health Coalition webinar and we continue
18 to collaborate constructively to meet the needs of
19 veterans we connect with in the community. I am
20 actively serving as Secretary in the New York City
21 Advisory Board and a State Veterans Nursing Home at
St. Albans where I'm able to share trends that we
seen with veterans receiving hospice services. MJHS
humbly requests that the Committee on Veterans
invests in supporting and sharing our resources, the

1
2 veteran support playbook with city agencies and
3 veteran- thank you so much- with veteran advocates.
4 The veteran support playbook pocket card for
5 clinicians was designed by the MJHS team in
6 collaboration with the New York State Department of
7 Veteran Services. They are helping to distribute the
8 card across the state with 4,000 distributed thus far
9 since November, and we would be honor to collaborate
10 with the City DVS at the local level and to cohost a
11 continuing medical education webinar this fall to
12 further promote this essential resource. We meet far
13 too many veterans who have been admitted into the
14 MJHS Hospice program who have slipped through the
15 cracks. Supporting veterans requires an all hands on
16 deck approach, sharing the veterans support playbook
17 with more clinicians in New York City is an important
18 step, and we respectfully ask the Committee on
19 Veterans to consider investing in us because I want
20 to be the squeaky wheel.

17 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: I know that MJHS is
18 requesting \$50,000 from the FY 2027 Veteran Services
19 Initiative under the Veterans community development
20 line. What did MJHS Hospice receive in the fiscal
21 year 2026 Veteran Services Initiative budget?

1 ASHTON STEWART: Well, we did apply last
2 year. We were not granted any support. We also
3 applied for smaller grants from several Council
4 Members in addition to the \$50,000 to try to make up
5 for the 75 that we're looking for total to hire
6 part-time person. I've had really great luck with
7 volunteers over the last year who have helped
8 tremendously, but they can only do so much. We need
9 somebody to not only oversee that, but also do more
10 boots on the ground outreach. On April 8th, on the
11 anniversary of DVS, we're going to do a posthumous
12 ceremony where somebody presented an American flag on
13 the birthday of the recently passed veteran to his
14 wife and family. This is something very unique, but
15 we need to more of these, because when we connect
16 with families that way, we learn so much more about
17 the history of the veteran. And sometimes we can
18 uncover eligibility for further support with DIC
19 claims, or sometimes if it's a service-connected
20 death, we can get some of the reimbursement for
21 funeral expenses up to \$2,000. But it's just like
we- we're so recognized now that we're getting called
upon to do presentations and to collaborate, and
that's taking more time away from me connecting with

1 families one on one. And I want to make sure that
2 that doesn't fall short, because there's just so many
3 families that need that connection. There's
4 Congressional gold medals that we found out that
5 people are eligible for for Merchant Marines who
6 served during World War II. We connected a Montford
7 [sp?] Point Marine family to get a Congressional gold
8 medal, posthumously, of course, but these things are
9 so meaningful to families, and it's about time that
10 they get the recognition that they so deserved when
11 they were here, but if we can do something
12 posthumously, we're all for it. We're all in.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Well, please keep me
12 posted on all of that. Thank you for your testimony
13 and the great work that you're doing. My lone
14 disappointment in your testimony is that you did not
15 end or begin it by saying, "Beat Army," which I was
16 counting on.

ASHTON STEWART: Beat Army.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: At this point, I
17 want to welcome Coco Culhane who is with the Veteran
18 Advocacy Project and does terrific work there.

COCO CULHANE: Hi. Thank you for your
19 time today. So, instead of- I have 13 pages of
20
21

1 footnotes. So, I'm going to skip reading that. Just
2 wanted to touch on a few points. Obviously, I think
3 everyone in this room is in agreement that there need
4 to be increases. Just want to point out with DVS, I
5 think they've- their staff has enlarged by like 15
6 people with a really similar personnel budget, and I
7 think part of that growth is the claims team which,
8 to speak to your question about being duplicative,
9 could not possibly be more needed. People are
10 waiting months and months to get services. VSOs are
11 closing down. Numbers are dwindling. So, every
12 single claims rep is so important. And you know, you
13 don't need a lawyer, you need a rep. So, claims you
14 need, but- so, so important. Which leads to another
15 point which in my testimony about how many laws have
16 been passed asking DVS to do various things, and no
17 one really paying attention and following up. There
18 are so many- you know, a peer hotline. I mean, I
19 can't even- there's just so many things they've been
20 asked to do that no one's followed up on, and I don't
21 know that they're doing. I don't think they are. And
with the claims teams, there's actually legislation,
Local Law 214 in 2018 said they were not to do these
claims. So, I'm not arguing that they should not be

1
2 doing them, but there's a law saying they shouldn't,
3 right? So, we need to be paying attention to that.
4 We need to be understanding of what we're asking
5 them, and we need to fully fund it. Their claims
6 team would argue needs a lot more funding so they can
7 hire supervisors and really be in all of the
8 communities and reach different veterans around the
9 city. Just to touch on the federal dollars and
10 discharge upgrades that we do in partnership with
11 DVS. I can't state how important it is to bring
12 these federal dollars into the City. You're talking
13 about less strain on city systems. It's health care.
14 It's housing subsidies, education, you know, the GI
15 Bill. Housing allowance right now is \$5,000 month in
16 New York City zip codes. There's also employment
17 training with stipends. You know, it's just- it's
18 actually life-changing if we can get a veteran in.
19 And while there are a lot of changes with
20 privatization and, you know, the shift towards
21 private community care where research shows that
lower income veterans in particular are hurt by this.
They lose the wraparound care. But any way you look
at it, we as, you know, locally need to support
veterans. We need to make sure our medical providers

1
2 are culturally-competent, that they're trained to
3 recognize these issues. You know, we partner with
4 community health care network, and we want- you know,
5 there are social workers to note someone's who's in
6 their late 60s and has diabetes, was in Vietnam, they
7 should be getting compensation for that. If I could
8 just-

9 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: [interposing] Please.

10 COCO CULHANE: add that- sorry. Those
11 claims- and then mental health, that we need to do
12 more. Mission Vet Check, I understand, has won
13 awards and it's not a mental health program, though,
14 right? It's outreach. It's checking on people.
15 It's volunteers. It's not mental health care. It's
16 not services. And so as terrific as it is, I don't
17 want us to point to that as if, you know, that's
18 fulfilling all of the Local Laws that have been
19 passed. The City Council has asked, you know, with
20 last year's mental health road map or two years ago,
21 I guess, and all these things, you know, where no
one's asking DVS to deliver the services, but to be
the connector and to make sure that they're funded
and able to complete those tasks and mandates. Thank
you for your time.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, as usual,
3 Ms. Culhane. The only thing more impressive than
4 your intellect is your passion and your skills as an
5 orator. Thank you very, very much for being here. I
6 hope you'll submit all 13 pages of your testimony,
7 and I promise that I and the members of this
8 committee will review it thoroughly. Thanks very
9 much. At this point, I'd like to thank all three of
10 you. I'd like to welcome our next panel, Bill Gross
11 from SAGE, Charlotte Martin from the Intrepid Museum,
12 and the amenable Joe Bello from New York Metro Vets.
13 As Rod Roddy would say, come on down. Alright, we
14 will, when you're ready begin with Mr. Gross.

15 BILL GROSS: Thank you and good morning,
16 Chair Morano, members of the Council. My name is
17 Bill Gross. I am the Chief Services Officer at SAGE,
18 which is the nation's largest and oldest organization
19 dedicated to improving the lives of LGBTQ+ older
20 adults. It's a pleasure to follow Ashton Stewart, a
21 SAGE Vets alum. Since our founding in 1978, SAGE has
worked tirelessly to advocate for policies, programs
that empower LGBTQ+ elders, ensuring that they can
age with dignity and security and support. For
LGBTQ+ older veterans, the military's long history of

1 anti-gay, anti-trans policies, followed by the
2 discriminatory Don't Ask Don't Tell Law, has created
3 many barriers between them and their federal VA
4 benefits. This has contributed to LGBTQ+ veterans
5 facing stigma and significantly higher levels of
6 economic and housing instability. For instance,
7 rates of homelessness for trans veterans are three
8 times of cisgender veterans. LGBTQ+ veterans are
9 four times more likely to face financial challenges.
10 Through our SAGE Vets program, we help LGBTQ+ older
11 veterans navigate the VA to get the benefits they
12 deserve. We offer support groups, social activities,
13 workshops, and perhaps most importantly, we provide
14 assistance with discharge upgrades for those who
15 received Other Than Honorable Discharges due to their
16 sexual orientation or their gender identity.
17 Additionally, our SAGE center network, four centers
18 throughout the boroughs, serves as a safety net for
19 LGBTQ+ elders including veterans. We provide
20 programming that reduces isolation, improve accesses
21 to services by offering benefits counseling, legal
and financial planning, educational workshops, health
and wellness programs, support groups, and nutritious
meals. These vital services are made possible from

1
2 our partnership with the New York City Council. In
3 fiscal 27, SAGE requests the restoration of New York
4 City funding at fiscal 26 levels, along with
5 additional support to sustain and enhance our vital
6 services. Thank you so much for this opportunity.

7 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Mr.
8 Gross. At this point, I want to acknowledge and
9 welcome my colleague, Council Member Linda Lee, who
10 in addition to representing the great borough of
11 Queens is also the Chair of the City Council Finance
12 Committee, and your eyes do not deceive you, she is
13 on the cover of this week's City and State magazine
14 where there is a delightfully accurate profile of her
15 skills as a public servant. Welcome, Chair Lee.
16 Thank you for being here. Mr. Gross, thank you for
17 your testimony. You alluded to your work with LGBTQ
18 veterans who may have gotten a Less Than Honorable
19 Discharge. I'm wondering if you can speak to how
20 large that population is, the pre-Don't Ask Don't
21 Tell, or the pre-change in service- in military
policy with respect to LGBT members and- when they
were not able to serve openly. How many New Yorkers
that you've helped fit into that category?

1
2 BILL GROSS: Yes. Thank you, Chair
3 Morano. I'm happy to get you the specific numbers,
4 research that. I know that amongst our network of
5 over 600 veterans that we are in contact with through
6 SAGE vets, there's a substantial portion, and a
7 substantial portion that we successfully navigated
8 through the service upgrade, discharge upgrade
9 procedure. But I can get you the specific number.

10 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: I'd appreciate it.
11 Thank you very much. At this point I want to welcome
12 Charlotte Martin from the Intrepid Museum. Ms.
13 Martin?

14 CHARLOTTE MARTIN: Thank you for holding
15 today's hearing. My name is Charlotte Martin,
16 Director of Access Initiatives at the Intrepid Museum
17 where I have the privilege of overseeing the museum's
18 Veterans Access Initiative. I want to take a moment
19 to acknowledge the generous support of the City
20 Council. Our programs would not be possible without
21 your support. So, thank you to Chair Morano and the
committee members and staff for your efforts to
connect veterans with one another and with cultural
resources like the Intrepid Museum. Our mission is
to advance the understanding of the intersection of

1 history and innovation in order to honor our heroes,
2 educate the public and inspire future generations.

3 As part of this mission, the museum serves as New
4 York's cultural home for veterans and military
5 families, welcoming more than 14,000 veterans each
6 year through free admission and programs that foster
7 connection, purpose and community. Now in its 11th
8 year, the Veterans Access Initiative has grown into a
9 comprehensive veterans-informed model of engagement
10 that supports reintegration through cultural
11 participation, care connection and sustained civic
12 involvement. The initiative reflects consistent
13 growth, measurable impact, and trusted relationships
14 across New York's veteran community. At our
15 cornerstone veterans-only program, Intrepid
16 Afterhours, veterans of all branches, service areas,
17 and backgrounds explore the museum, get a
18 behind-the-scenes experience or workshop and then
19 connect over a catered dinner. For the past year,
20 we've had a veteran representative of the local VA
21 system available during dinner, and we have renewed
our relationship with the New York City Department of
Veteran Services to also have a veteran DVS
representative at upcoming programs available to

1 answer questions and share resources. We have heard
2 from veterans how meaningful it has been to learn
3 about resources and opportunities from other veterans
4 in a non-clinical setting. Several have gone on to
5 become volunteers at the Intrepid Museum and other
6 organizations. Veteran volunteers consistently
7 describe Intrepid as the place where they regain
8 purpose while contributing to civic life. This
9 connection also extends to families. Active military
10 families have an opportunity to explore the city, and
11 recently returned veterans have a way to spend time
12 and reconnect with loved ones. The museum's
13 exhibitions and tours give families and entry point
14 to talk about their veteran service. Military and
15 veteran families also receive free and priority
16 admission to museum festivals, family days, and
17 public programs with access to smaller sub events
18 like lounges or astronaut meet and greets where they
19 and connect without the stress of crowds. We have an
20 ongoing partnership with Exit [sic] 12 Dance Company
21 to host therapeutic workshops for veterans and family
members, culminating in a public performance on
Intrepid this year on May 29th. This work is
informed by our wonderful Council of Veteran

1
2 Advisors, several of whom are here today. Increased
3 funding for the Veterans Community Development
4 Initiative will help us sustain and extend our
5 impact. We aim to expand our off-site and virtual
6 programming at VA hospitals, veteran's homes and
7 memory care centers serving isolated veterans. These
8 funds will also help ensure that our programs are
9 accessible to veterans with disabilities, with
10 captioning, assistive listening systems and
11 afterhours programs. We will be able to continue to
12 strengthen our engagement with student veterans,
13 women veterans, veterans of color- thank you- and
14 other historically under-represented veteran
15 communities through expanded partnerships. This
16 investment ensures the Veterans Access Initiatives
17 continues to operate as a citywide resource without
18 meeting growing demand and expanding access rather
19 than limiting participation due to capacity
20 constraints. Thank you.

17 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Ms.
18 Martin. And as someone whose office funds the
19 Intrepid Museum, I can attest firsthand to the great
20 educational work that goes on there, but you've
21 clearly built a model that connects veterans in a

1
2 way- and this is one of the themes of this whole
3 hearing- in a way that government often struggles to
4 do so. If the City wanted to replicate what you're
5 doing at Intrepid in communities across the five
6 boroughs, what would that look like, and what do you
7 think it would take to scale it?

8 CHARLOTTE MARTIN: Oh, wow. Thank you
9 for asking that, and thank you again for your support
10 for this initiative as well as our CASA programs and
11 others. You know, I think a lot of this came through
12 identifying what about our organization is special,
13 what's different, what would appeal to people to come
14 here. We have a content connection, but we also are
15 not a traditional veteran's space, so those who might
16 not already be connected to traditional veteran
17 spaces and organizations might find it intriguing or
18 feel welcomed in a way they might not in other ones.
19 And so, for us, it's really about building
20 relationships with the city, with city services like
21 DVS and the Council, as well as others. Like, we've
worked a lot with SAGE vets. We've worked a lot with
others in this room to be that bridge, and we find
that a lot of the way that people- that veterans who
come to our programs find resources is through casual

1
2 conversation in addition to the resource tables that
3 we have available. Our veteran Intrepid Afterhours
4 finishes with dinner, and the number of times I've
5 heard from veterans there that they learned about a
6 new program or a new resource from someone they just
7 met there, not through a formal presentation, but
8 through this informal gathering of people of
9 different experience and backgrounds and connections
10 to these services has made a big difference.

11 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you very much.
12 Mr. Joe Bello?

13 JOE BELLO: Okay. Chair Morano, members
14 of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to
15 testify. As always, it's often said that the city's
16 budget is more than a financial plan, it's a
17 statement of values. It reflects what we prioritize,
18 what we invest in, and ultimately what we choose to
19 support. In this testimony, the City Comptroller,
20 Mark Levine warned that recurring city expenses are
21 increasingly outpacing the recurring revenues,
creating structural imbalances that threaten
long-term physical stability. His office also
projected widening budget gaps in the coming years,
underscoring the need for responsible fiscal planning

1 and clear prioritization. At the same time, the
2 administration has been proposing across-the-board
3 reductions requiring the agencies to cut 1.5 percent
4 this fiscal year and 2.5 percent in the next. For an
5 agency as small as DVS, these reductions have an
6 outsized impact. DVS is one of the smallest agencies
7 in city government and even its current staffing
8 levels do not fully reflect its authorized capacity.
9 This places significant strain on staff while
10 limiting the agency's ability to effectively serve
11 veterans across the five boroughs. For several
12 years, my concerns have remained consistent, staff
13 taking on responsibilities beyond their original
14 roles, which we heard today, a small agency expected
15 to deliver citywide impact, and ongoing challenges
16 with communication and transparency. These concerns
17 are not anecdotal. They're reflective in the
18 Council's own analysis of the agency performance.
19 Key service indicators shows significant
20 inconsistencies. The utilization of the Vet Connect
21 platform has declined in the current fiscal year
compared to the same period last year. In other
areas, performance targets appear to be set well
below actual incomes, raising questions about how

1 success is defined and measured. These fluctuations
2 make it difficult to assess whether programs are
3 truly effective or simply being reported in a way
4 that obscures performance. The Council's budget
5 report suggests that DVS is making progress with
6 limited resources. However, the Comptroller's audit
7 raises more fundamental concerns, whether the data
8 underlining that progress is reliable, whether
9 service is being delivered consistently, and whether
10 the department is meeting even its basic operational
11 responsibilities. As the administration is reducing
12 DVS funding, it must also be honest about what the
13 agency can realistically accomplish under its current
14 mandate and resources constraint. Additionally, as
15 Coco Culhane mentioned, transparency concerns are
16 also troubling when it comes to compliance with Local
17 Law that have been passed, including Local Law 38,
18 the Mental Health Road Map, and as discussed at the
19 last year, Local Law 37. These laws were intended to
20 improve coordination, accountability, and
21 transparency. When reporting deadlines pass without
explanation it undermines not only the legislation,
but also the trust of the veterans community. Recent
findings from the Comptroller's Office further

1 reinforce these concerns. These issues are not
2 merely administrative. They directly impact whether
3 veterans are able to assess timely assistance and
4 other critical services. When intake and response
5 systems break down, the entire service delivery model
6 is compromised. Finally, the audit found that DVS
7 failed to submit several legally-required reports to
8 the City Council and the Mayor, only doing so after
9 auditors intervened. At a time when the city is
10 being asked to make difficult financial decision,
11 these findings raise fundamental questions about
12 whether existing resources are being effectively
13 managed, and whether additional investments will
14 translate into improved outcomes. Finally, funding
15 issues. Over the past two fiscal years, the council
16 has allotted more than \$540,000 to the Paul Vallone
17 Initiative. This funding embedded a legacy veteran
18 service organization in every Council office. But I
19 have to point out, there was no request for proposal
20 was ever issued, and a significant portion of the
21 funds were eventually redirected elsewhere without
any publicly available data demonstrating impact to
New York City Cares. Paul was a dear friend of mine,
and I believe he would be disappointed by how this

1 funding is being managed. If DVS intends to
2 continue handling disability claims, the agency needs
3 to provide data of demonstrating its effectiveness.
4 To date, the Department has not publicly reported any
5 claim success rates since 2020. The city's
6 effectively funding initiatives with taxpayer dollars
7 without publicly available data demonstrating its
8 either outcomes or impact. Meanwhile, the Council's
9 Veterans Initiative which supports critical services
10 such as homeless prevention, job placement, legal
11 assistances, mental health services, community
12 development, which you've heard from here, has not
13 seen a meaningful increase in years and remains
14 insufficiently funded despite growing needs. For
15 many years, DVS has highlighted its accomplishments,
16 yet the veterans community continues to experience
17 the same underlying challenges, limited transparency,
18 inconsistent communication, and a lack of clear
19 outcomes across clear [sic] programs. As the Council
20 ends this fiscal year 27 budget negotiations,
21 physical constraints cannot be used an excuse to
neglect veterans and their families. Nor, is the
solution simply to increase funding or even maintain
the status quo. The real challenge would be to ensure

1
2 that resources are aligned with outcomes, oversight
3 is strengthened, and every dollar that is benign
4 deployed effectively to serve those who served.

5 Without that alignment, we risk continuing the cycle
6 of underperformance, limited transparency, and missed
7 opportunities to support veterans and their families.

8 Thank you.

9 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: First of all, thank
10 you, Mr. Bello, for such comprehensive and thoughtful
11 testimony. Even if I may disagree with a couple of
12 your conclusions, I can't say that you didn't give us
13 a great deal to think about. A couple of quick
14 questions for you, and just because we have a few
15 other people to testify, try to keep your answers
16 brief if you can. The accountability question that
17 you raised, you're raising serious concerns about
18 inconsistent metrics and even overstated service
19 data. Do you believe the Council is currently
20 getting an accurate picture of DVS performance, yes
21 or no?

22 JOE BELLO: No.

23 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: In terms of the
24 Comptroller's audit, right, the Comptroller's audit
25 found that 27 percent of housing assistance requests

1
2 were not responded to within five days. In your view
3 is that primarily a resource problem, a management
4 problem, or both?

5 JOE BELLO: I wouldn't know. I'm not
6 inside of DVS to know what goes on in their housing
7 unit.

8 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Lastly, the- before
9 we could talk about increasing funding, can you point
10 to one specific DVS program where additional funding
11 has clearly led to measurable improvements in
12 outcomes of veterans?

13 JOE BELLO: No.

14 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Alright. I
15 appreciate your testimony very much. Well, actually,
16 before I let this panel go, Council Member Lee, Chair
17 of the Finance Committee, has a question.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER LEE: No, just more wanted
19 to acknowledge some of your comments, because the
20 whole point of why- when I was Chair of Mental Health
21 wanted to include veterans was so we could get better
data. And Paul Vallone was a very dear friend of
mine too for many, many years in Queens, and you
know, one of the things that was surprising to me
when I joined the Council was, you know, Queens has

1
2 one of the highest numbers of veterans, but there's
3 such a lack of services and coordination, and I have-
4 you know, that- so that was something that was
5 important for us to try to dig into. So, I
6 appreciate the fact that- and you're right, the
7 reports do need to get to us. And just one comment I
8 wanted to make also on the initiative funding, so
9 interestingly, there's a bunch of Council Members on,
10 you know, the budget side who are really interested
11 in looking at what metrics and data are we not asking
12 for that we should be asking for, understanding also
13 that a lot of the nonprofits have constraints. Like,
14 I come from that side, too, and I was the one that
15 had to do all these reports in the past. And so
16 understanding that it's a lot of work, how do we get
17 better data, though, to make sure that we're
18 understanding if these dollars are being used
19 effectively. So, we're actually taking a look, and
20 this is not an overnight project because we have over
21 180 initiatives on the Council with actually less
than a billion dollars that we control on the funding
side, because most of it is with the administration.
So, I will say that we're trying to take a deeper
dive in looking at do some of these initiatives make

1
2 sense? Should we change maybe the scope? Should we
3 change what it is that we're asking for? And we're
4 trying to do it with some of the older initiatives
5 that have been around for a while, but then also
6 working our way through. So, it's obviously a
7 long-term project, but I just wanted to say that it
8 is something that a small group of us on the Council
9 are trying to work on together.

10
11 JOE BELLO: If I may real quick?

12
13 COUNCIL MEMBER LEE: Sure.

14
15 JOE BELLO: I've worked in the Council as
16 ledger [sic] budget under Amanda, and one of the
17 things going back to the veterans initiative is that
18 there really does need to be a reset with that
19 initiative, because for example, SAGE is sitting in
20 the legal services. They should be in the community
21 development services. And then one of the things
that we saw happen over the last several years was
former Councilman Holden started kind of siphoning
money from different groups to fund other groups.
So, in essence, you're literally adding three pounds
into a two-pound bag. And so I think there needs to
be kind of a reset with the initiative itself to take
a look and see who's where and doing what.

1
2 COUNCIL MEMBER LEE: Right. No, totally.
3 Thank you.

4 JOE BELLO: Thank you.

5 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you very much.
6 Have a good weekend. Alright, at this point, I will
7 be welcoming our final in-person panel consisting of
8 Timothy Pena of the Veterans Justice Project, Mr.
9 Pena. We'll move to our Zoom testimony if no one
10 else has any in-person testimony. If anyone else has
11 in-person testimony, please fill out one of these
12 cards and give it to the Sergeant at Arms. Thank
13 you. Mr. Pena, you can begin when you're ready.

14 TIMOTHY PENA: Finally. My name is
15 Timothy Pena. I run an organization here in New York
16 City called Veterans Justice Project and the
17 Forgotten Veteran. I am a disabled veteran for PTSD.
18 suffered while I was serving in the Persian Gulf
19 during the Iranian hostage siege in 1980. In fact, I
20 was there for the rescue attempt that claimed the
21 lives of eight Marines. I'd also like to state that I
came to New York City after completing- doing a study
on incarceration and suicide amongst veterans at the
time, and I still believe this despite the increases
in suicide, New York does a great job, especially

1 with criminally-charged veterans in their veterans
2 courts, and one of the reasons why you have such a
3 low suicide rate compared other states in this
4 country. Just a quick shout out. We're talking
5 about our communities and our financing. You know,
6 last week we did a help count with DVS. I was there.
7 That day, JP Morgan Chase was kind enough to donate
8 288 hygiene kits for veterans in this city. No one
9 has mentioned that at all. So, I will go on record
10 to personally thank JP Morgan and Chase for stepping
11 up for our veterans. I'm here today because what is
12 happening to honorably discharged veterans in New
13 York City is not a failure of resources. It is a
14 failure of oversight and accountability. In 2024,
15 the New York City Department of Investigation issued
16 a report identifying serious deficiencies within the
17 Department of Homeless Services. That report should
18 have triggered immediate aggressive oversight,
19 especially for veterans placed in their care.
20 Instead, it was acknowledged and then set aside.
21 Today, veterans are being placed in secluded,
violent, minca [sic] shelters under the justification
of mental health stabilitation [sic]. In reality,
many of these environments are re-traumatizing.

1
2 Veterans are isolated, exposed to unsafe conditions,
3 and denied access to veteran- specific vet services
4 and pathways to housing. Even more concerning,
5 non-veteran case workers are withholding transitional
6 services under what they call "tough love." Let me
7 be clear, this is not care. This is punishment. I've
8 spent five months at Borden Avenue when I chose New
9 York as a veteran who served this country. I chose
10 New York City because ultimately it saved my life. I
11 would not be alive if I had stayed in Phoenix.

12 That's it. Instead of a supportive, grant per diem
13 program funded by the VA, I was sent to a violent
14 mental health shelter in Long Island City and then
15 told I had to provide my own transportation to my VA
16 appointments and forced into drug rehab, as they
17 called it. There is no alternative pathway for
18 homeless veterans to access VA transitional services
19 outside of DHS. Borden Avenue is the only one, and
20 as Council Member Wong noted the last time, there are
21 no services for women veterans through the VA in this
program- in transitional services in this city. I
don't understand why we are putting such an emphasis
on self-identification when we need to start looking
at reasons for veterans to want to step up and be

1 proud enough to say that they are veterans. Council
2 Members, you both have a flyer from the Stand Down. I
3 was there last week. That was my sixth time at a
4 Stand Down. And I think they served 1,600 veterans
5 in two days with something like 100 vendors that
6 showed up. These are the types of activities that
7 bring veterans together to their community, as well as
8 to other veterans. We feel proud when this type of
9 thing is done. Council Member Morano, you do this in
10 Staten Island. Hats off to you. You're the only one
11 that's doing that in the manner that you are putting
12 it together where you have outside organizations in
13 the community who are actually showing- who are
14 actually coming in to serve the veterans. I would
15 personally be honored if you would consider my input,
16 my resources to very successful stand downs in
17 Arizona to help get this one here expanded to be more
18 inclusive. I'm asking as you look through the
19 brochures that I gave you, take note of the fact that
20 Institute for Community Living which is responsible
21 for feeding the veterans, honorably discharged
veterans, many of them Vietnam- they're administered
with feeding us over there. That budget, \$2.20.
Their fundraiser in May is requesting \$750 a plate.

1
2 That's 340 meals, three months. And I don't get it.
3 I don't understand why these- why they are getting \$5
4 million+ a year to take care of us, to make sure that
5 we're healthy, to make sure that we're not killing
6 ourselves, to make sure that we're not overdosing and
7 dying in the shelters, making sure that we have
8 access to the resources and the services that we've
9 heard about today. I don't get it. So, I'm asking,
10 again, because I've done this before. DHS needs to
11 be investigated. They need to be audited. They need
12 to be held accountable, and ICL needs to do- as be
13 done the same. Commissioner Park is out. She and
14 Jodi Rudin [sp?] from ICL who- Jodi Rudin makes
15 nearly a half a million dollars a year, and it's
16 ridiculous that I come from- I come from a state and
17 an area that has strong grant per diem programs, such
18 strong VA programs, and a little less on the
19 community. I come into a place where this- this city
20 loves its veterans, loves the veterans, but yet, I'm
21 put into a violent shelter. So, thank you very much
for your time.

19 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Mr. Pena, very
20 quickly- and thank you for your testimony. I'm sorry
21 for what you've gone through, and I thank you for

1
2 your service to the country. If you could change one
3 policy tomorrow to create a real pathway out of
4 homelessness for veterans, what would it be? What do
5 we need be doing? What do we need to be focused on
6 that we're not?

7
8 TIMOTHY PENA: As the City Council, I
9 would yank the contract from Department of Homeless
10 Services immediately, and give it somebody like
11 Tunnels to Towers or Catholic Charities, or any of
12 the other nonprofits out there that are able to do
13 that. New York City is the only Department of
14 Homeless Services that runs a veterans program in
15 this country, the only one.

16
17 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: So, you argue in
18 your testimony- and I will look through all this
19 literature- thank you- that the current system is
20 more of a trap than a pathway. What would a properly
21 functioning system look like from intake to permanent
housing for a veteran?

22
23 TIMOTHY PENA: One and namely, I was told
24 at the VA that the criteria to get into our VA- the
25 grant per diem program is a program established by
26 Congress that pays organizations anywhere from I
27 think it's around \$72 a day to provide eligible

1 veterans with resources and services to help them
2 transition into the community. Borden Avenue is a
3 MICA shelter. Mental health, chemical abuse. So,
4 you can't get access to services unless you violate
5 your privacy and admit to either mental illness or
6 chemical abuse. We all know that they do not accept
7 people with mental health issues with NYPD, FDNY. So
8 if you want a job ultimately with one of those
9 agencies, you have- you can't be in this program
10 because that's the criteria that they've placed upon
11 that. So, first off, if you want to keep it a MICA
12 shelter, get the veterans out of there and put them
13 in a hotel. Put them anywhere where they can get
14 access to the VA and not have to go through case
15 worker with, you know-- who is more concerned with
16 keeping their job than the success of the veterans.
17 And then get them in front of the agencies and the
18 organizations that are actually going to help them.
19 DVS has a problem with- we've all heard budget. It's
20 made a lot- that dollar goes a lot further where
21 they're in an environment where they're not butting
heads with people in the shelters. We have no access
to outside organizations. We had last year- I think
it was last year, \$10,000 in donations was basically

1
2 dropped off at the front door of Borden Avenue, and
3 an NDA was signed. Let us- let organizations come in,
4 see the veterans, meet the veterans, get to know
5 them. That's community engagement. You're going to
6 have a much robust success. The Mana [sic] House
7 which is one of the main sponsors of the Stand Down
8 and where I worked as a front desk clerk for a year
9 and a half, boasts anywhere between 85 and a 90
10 percent successful exit rate. That's compared to 60
11 percent for Borden Avenue. 20 percent of the
12 veterans who leave Borden Avenue we never hear from
13 again.

14 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Yeah.

15 TIMOTHY PENA: And you know, frankly,
16 it's insulting when you have to- because of the
17 nature of the facility, I had to sleep five months
18 next to guys who were smoking cigars, playing music,
19 smoking meth. We had three veterans die in 11 days,
20 two from overdose, and one from a hit-and-run. This
21 is a VA facility. If that were to happen in the VA
hospital, there'd be hell to pay.

CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Mr. Pena, I'm going
to ask you to wrap up and then we can continue to
stay in touch.

1
2 TIMOTHY PENA: Sure. you know, if you
3 have any other questions, I'm more than happy-

4 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: [interposing] Thank
5 you. We'll stay in touch via email, and I appreciate
6 your insight here today and- and via email as well.
7 Thank you very much, sir.

8 TIMOTHY PENA: You're welcome. Thank
9 you.

10 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Alright, at this
11 point, we are going to turn to the Zoom testimony,
12 and we will begin- again, if there's anyone else that
13 has any in-person testimony, please fill out one of
14 these cards and present it to the Sergeant at Arms,
15 and we will get to you. But seeing no one, we will
16 begin with Jennie Bucove via Zoom, and Jenny, if I
17 mispronounce your last name, please correct me.

18 JENNIE BUCOVE: Don't worry. Everybody
19 does. It's Jennie Bucove [, and thank you very much
20 for having me. Thank you, Council Member Morano and
21 the rest of the Committee. I'm Jennie Bucove,
Executive Director of Gallop NYC. We're New York
City's largest therapeutic equine-assisted nonprofit,
and we're based in Queens. Each week, we serve over
400 New Yorkers, including approximately 40 veterans

1 and their family members through riding and unmounted
2 programs. Everyone that comes to us receives a
3 subsidy, and no one is turned away for cost. Our
4 veterans programs provide hands-on equine care,
5 riding instruction, and opportunities to build
6 connection and community in a setting that feels
7 comfortable and non-clinical. We partner directly
8 with the VA, New York Harbor Health Care System,
9 serving veterans from both the St. Albans and
10 Brooklyn campuses each month. They come to us every
11 week. They alternate. And we're expanding this work
12 through our veterans family program that brings
13 together veterans and their children to rebuild
14 connection, strengthen family relationships, and
15 build community. As one of our veteran participants
16 shared, "As a veteran with no prior horse experience,
17 Gallop NYC restored a sense of camaraderie that was
18 missing from civilian life. The relationships with
19 the horses and instructors have been a powerful
20 source of healing for my anxiety, depression, and
21 trauma-related challenges." We request your support
in three areas: \$150,000 in DVS funding to sustain
and expand our veterans programs which are provided
for free to all our participants. Demand continues

1 to grow particularly through our VA partnerships.
2
3 Second, we're requesting capital funding for an
4 indoor arena, including \$250,000 from the Council as
5 part of a broader \$3.25 million public funding
6 request. This project is already partially funded
7 and will allow us to operate year-round, eliminating
8 cancellations, and ensuring the consistency that
9 veterans and their families rely on. Third, and
10 beyond the scope of the Veterans Committee, but very
11 much for the Council, we're requesting \$200,000 in
12 autism programming, supporting the third of our
13 participants that have an autism diagnosis, and we
14 provide structured, consistent programming that they
15 and their families rely on. And these providers in
16 particular benefit from routine and predictability
17 which the indoor arena which I just mentioned will
18 help ensure. Gallop NYC is a cost-effective,
19 high-impact model that improves mental health. It
20 strengthens families and expands access to care
21 outside of traditional clinical settings. Thank you
for your support and your opportunity to testify, and
we would love to invite all the Council Members to
come visit us at our facility in Queens so you can
see the programs that your money helps to support.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Ms.
3 Bucove, and since all of the Council Members other
4 than me that were part of this hearing today are from
5 Queens, I can promise you we will be taking you up on
6 that very generous offer.

7 JENNIE BUCOVE: Great. We love- we
8 really love visitors and a chance to show off our
9 programs.

10 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Absolutely. Count on
11 it. Thank you very much. Have a good weekend.

12 JENNIE BUCOVE: Thank you.

13 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: At this point I want
14 to welcome also via Zoom, Christopher Leon Johnson.
15 Mr. Johnson, go ahead when you are ready.

16 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

17 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: It's
18 Christopher Leon Johnson. First off, I want to give
19 my credit due to the Commissioner Yesenia Mata for
20 trying to do way better than the last commissioner
21 and try to make sure that the veterans get their fair
share in the budget. Hopefully that it will be more
money allocated to the veterans community, to
veterans, New York City veterans this FY cycle. But
I want to make this clear that I hope that this

1 commissioner really start fighting for the veterans
2 when it comes to being the street vendors and
3 deliveristas, because I hope that she looks back at
4 the FY 24 budget cycle hearing public testimony, and
5 there was a 16-minute segment with Justin Brannan-
6 shout out for Justin Brannan for allowing me to speak
7 for that long, because he would have cut [inaudible]
8 just because he called out the Street Vendor Project,
9 they call it the SVP [sic], that these guys who are
10 veterans who always get harassed by the NYPD, more
11 than the so-called migrants, that they have a real
12 seat at the table and they get their voices heard.
13 And I believe that the Veterans Commissioner, Ms.
14 Yesenia Mata, need to lobby to the City Council,
15 starting with you, Mr. Morano, to make it to where
16 that the DSNY is not allowed to start harassing
17 veteran street vendors. I know that Shekar Krishnan
18 had passed a bill to where the NYPD is not allowed to
19 criminalize the street vendors. Shout out to Shekar
20 Krishnan, but there need to be a conversation brought
21 up in the months to come and the years to come to
where the DSNY is not allowed to criminalize street
vendors. But they need to start making aware that
the DSNY is not allowed to criminalize, harass, and

1
2 ponder [sic] veteran street vendors, because this is
3 what's going on in the city, mainly Times Square, is
4 that the veterans always get harassed. But when it
5 come to the more like people that are Indian, Arabic,
6 and Muslims and the [inaudible]-- like the Mexicans
7 like that, they never get harassed. So, going
8 forward, I think that the veterans they- there's a
9 lot- I think you have more hearings like this come to
10 veteran street vendors and veteran vendors of small
11 businesses, you will have more of these guys and gals
12 come out to these hearings and comb this stuff out,
13 mainly Street Vendor Project, because they're the
14 ones that enable it. SJP they're the so-called de
15 facto advocate for street vendors, but they do
16 nothing to really help out the veteran street
17 vendors. They protect more of the migrant street
18 vendors, mainly ones from Africa and Mexico and
19 Guatemala, the Latin/Hispanic ones, more than the
20 people that actually served our country in the first
21 place. I believe that- I know Ms. Mata, she's a
veteran. I thank her for her service, and I want to
apologize about coming at her hard about the whole
ICE situation. Fuck ICE. Fuck ICE.

1
2 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Mr.
3 Johnson. Please, please. I will warn you once,
4 please don't use that kind of language.

5 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Okay, I won't
6 do it again. Sorry about that. But at the end of the
7 day, she needs to- hopefully that coming forward that
8 she really brings to attention when it comes to
9 veteran street vendors, because these guys and gals
10 just like the migrants, they're trying to make some-
11 they're trying to make money for their families, but
12 it's not worth trying to make money for families when
13 you got to worry about if you park outside City Hall,
14 because I know there's a lot of vendors outside City
15 Hall, [inaudible] Broadway-

16 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: [interposing] Thank
17 you, Mr. Johnson. I appreciate your testimony. I
18 appreciate your advocacy on behalf of veteran street
19 vendors. Have a good weekend. Thank you. Alright.
20 If there is anyone else either in-person or via Zoom
21 that has not had the opportunity to testify, speak
now. If you're on Zoom, you can go ahead and raise
your hand if you wish to do so. Seeing no hands
either virtually or in real life, I'd like to note
again that members of the public can submit written

1 testimony to testimony@council.nyc.gov. That's
2 testimony@council.nyc.gov. I'm speaking especially
3 to those of you that are catching this hearing on
4 Channel 74, the CUNY TV channel and have some ideas
5 for how we can improve the status of the budget,
6 especially as it relates to DVS. Remember, if you
7 don't testify, you've got no right to complain about
8 what's in the budget. Testimony@council.nyc.gov.
9 And ideally, if it's related to this hearing, please
10 do so within 72 hours of this hearing. To conclude,
11 I'm grateful to everyone that attended today's
12 hearing, especially Commissioner Yesenia Mata, and to
13 the Veterans Committee staff for working so
14 diligently on creating such a great and diverse
15 program today. Alright, with that, this hearing is
16 now adjourned.

17 [gavel]
18
19
20
21

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

C E R T I F I C A T E

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



Date March 29, 2026