

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

Jointly with

COMMITTEE ON WOMEN AND
GENDER EQUITY

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March 4, 2026
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HELD AT: 250 Broadway-8th Fl.-Hearing Rm. 1

B E F O R E: Frank Morano
Chairperson

Amanda C. Farías
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Carmen N. De La Rosa
James F. Gennaro
Vickie Paladino
Phil Wong
Shirley Aldebol
Jennifer Gutiérrez
Kayla Santosuosso
Lynn C. Schulman

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

Yesenia Mata
Department of Veterans Services Commissioner

Donee Smalls
Executive Director at DVS

Nicole Orlando
Deputy Chief at DVS

Ashton Stewart
MJHS Health System

Ronald Reid
SAGE

Derek Coy
New York Health Foundation

Michael Matos
Five Borough Vets

Coco Culhane
Veteran Advocacy Project

Remolia Simpson

Joe Bello
New York Metro Vets

Christopher Leon Johnson

2 This is a microphone check for the
3 Committee on Veterans, joint with the Committee on
4 Women and Gender Equity, recorded on March 4th,
5 2026, located in Hearing Room one by Nazly Paytuvi.

6 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Quiet, please. Thank
7 you. Good evening and welcome to the New York City
8 Hybrid Hearing on the Committee on Women and Gender
9 Equity, jointly with the Committee on Veterans.
10 Please silence all electronic devices at this time.
11 Also, please do not approach the dais. If you have
12 any questions, please raise your hand. One of us,
13 Sergeant at Arms, will kindly assist you. Chairs,
14 we're ready to begin.

15 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Good afternoon,
16 everyone. I'm Frank Morano. Very, very pleased to
17 welcome you to this hearing, which is very special.
18 We'll get into all the reasons why. Particularly
19 special for me, because this is my very first hearing
20 that I'm chairing. As the new Chairman of the City
21 Council Veterans Committee. I'd just like to say a
word about that role and this committee, and then
talk a little bit about the topic that we're going to
explore today before welcoming the Commissioner and
our Co-chair, Council Member Farías. I really am so

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2 honored and privileged to be chairing this committee,

3 and I can't thank Speaker Menin enough for this

4 opportunity. And I'll just say to the public and to,

5 you know, anybody watching either here or wherever,

6 that I intend to make a very, very big splash with

7 this committee. I intend to use this committee to

8 help a lot of folks. I never served in the military

9 myself, and I've always felt a bit guilty about that.

10 Very- I've always been proud to be the grandson of a

11 Purple Heart recipient, but I view this honestly as

12 my way to give back and to really go to war with

13 bureaucracy in order to help the people that have

14 worn our nation's uniform and literally put their

15 lives on the line for our freedom. And I'm looking

16 forward to doing some very, very big things. Now a

17 lot of the ways that different committee chairs work

18 is you can get by relying on the great work that the

19 committee staff does, and we do have a terrific

20 committee staff with the Veterans Committee,

21 Alejandro and Manur and the entire team at the

Veterans Committee has done a yeoman's job, not only

in preparation for this hearing, but everything the

Veterans Committee does. They will research the

topic, they'll suggest topics, they will even write

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2 questions for witnesses that are in many cases much

3 brighter than anything I could come up with. But I'll

4 tell you, I have no intention while I'm holding this

5 gavel of just being a plug-and-play committee

6 chairman. I intend to drive this committee into a

7 place where we're going to be a leading voice on

8 veterans issues in the city, this region, and this

9 country. I'm intending to come up with some great

10 legislation that is going to improve the lives for

11 the men and women that have served in uniform that

12 live in this city. And they're facing a lot of

13 challenges. We're going to hear about some of them

14 today, and I am determined to make sure that we have

15 a big impact for the next few years. This particular

16 hearing is of great interest and great importance to

17 me, because we're exploring the issue of how we can

18 do a better job serving women veterans. Even though

19 I'm not a woman, I am a lifelong fan of women, and as

20 my wife and I are expecting a little girl in July,

21 the subject has even more resonance for me. So I'm

very, very excited to be here and to help a

population that I don't think has gotten, the- what

they deserve in terms of city services over the last

few years. I'm looking forward to working with all

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2 the members of the Veterans Committee, all of whom I
3 know and have worked with before, all of whom are
4 great advocates for the men and women that have
5 served the military. Before I introduce and welcome
6 the Commissioner, I also want to personally tell
7 folks how privileged I am to be able to co-chair this
8 particular hearing with Chairwoman Farías. When I met
9 with her one-on-one for the first time, I told her,
10 and it has the added virtue of being true, that she
11 is exactly the type of council member and the type of
12 leader in this body that I'd like to emulate. And
13 while we may differ in terms of voting records and
14 different opinions on things, I think you'd be
15 hard-pressed to find a harder working and a better
16 council member, and I couldn't think of a better
17 chairperson person to learn from, from my first
18 hearing. With that, I will give you Chairwoman
19 Farías.

16 CHAIRPERSON FARÍAS: As a lifelong fan of
17 women myself, I'll say that-

18 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: [interposing]
19 Enthusiastic-

20 CHAIRPERSON FARÍAS: I'm a big fan of
21 Chair Morano. Thank you so much for your kind words

1 COMMITTEE ON VETERANS & COMMITTEE ON WOMEN AND GENDER EQUITY 8
2 and for chairing this hearing with me. Good
3 afternoon, everyone. As mentioned, I'm Councilmember
4 Amanda Fariás, and I chair the Committee on Women and
5 Gender Equity. And I'm proud to convene this joint
6 oversight hearing with the Committee on Veterans on
7 Serving Women Veterans today. I want to thank again
8 Chair Morano for partnering on this really important
9 conversation. I would like to also recognize
10 committee members from Women and Gender Equity,
11 Council Members Gutiérrez, Schulman, and Aldebol for
12 joining us. Today's hearing is not just about
13 numbers. It is about visibility, dignity, and
14 responsibility. Women are the fastest growing
15 population within the veteran community nationwide,
16 and with more than 2 million women having served our
17 country, here in New York City, we are home to one of
18 the largest concentrations of women veterans in the
19 country, approximately 12,800 women who wore the
20 uniform and made the same oath to serve as their male
21 counterparts. Yet despite their service, sacrifice,
and leadership, women veterans continue to return
home to systems that were not built with them in
mind. As more women enter and advance through the
ranks of our military, our post-service

2 infrastructure has not quite kept pace. The agency
3 programs and cultural assumptions that shape veteran
4 services were historically designed around the
5 experiences of men. As a result, women veterans are
6 too often navigating healthcare systems that do not
7 fully address gender-specific needs, mental and
8 behavioral health services that fail to account for
9 trauma-informed care, housing systems that overlook
10 safety considerations, and workforce pipelines that
11 do not reflect their skill sets or lived experiences.

12 We must also name what is often left unsaid: the
13 compounded impact of racism, sexual discrimination,
14 harassment, violence, heterosexism, and systemic
15 bias. These realities shape the military experience
16 for many women, particularly women of color, LGBTQ+
17 women, and immigrant women, and they do not disappear
18 once service ends. If we are serious about equity,
19 our policies must acknowledge and respond to those
20 intersecting barriers. Nationally, one in three women
21 veterans report experiencing military sexual trauma.
Women veterans face disproportionately high rates of
intimate partner violence, housing instability, and
suicide compared to non-veteran women. Many report
struggling to make ends meet despite having served

2 their country honorably. These are not isolated
3 statistics. They are indicators of structural gaps
4 and in care and in support. Women veterans deserved
5 more than gratitude. They deserve systems that
6 recognize the full scope of their service and meet
7 them with competent, culturally responsive, and
8 trauma-informed care. They deserve a transition from
9 service member to veteran that affirms their
10 identity, their health, their safety, and their
11 economic security. Today's hearing is about
12 accountability. It is about asking whether New York
13 City is truly meeting this moment, how we're ensuring
14 veterans are aware of and able to access the benefits
15 they have earned, how are we addressing
16 gender-specific healthcare and mental health needs,
17 how are we protecting women veterans from
18 homelessness and violence, and how are we collecting
19 the data necessary to understand whether our
20 interventions are actually working. There is clearly
21 more work to be done, not only nationally but right
here in New York City. It is also my distinct
personal privilege to congratulate our newly
appointed Commissioner of the New York City
Department of Veterans Services, Yesenia Mata.

2 Commissioner Mata's appointment is a meaningful
3 moment for our city, and I look forward to working
4 closely with her to ensure that all veterans,
5 especially women veterans, for today receive the
6 respect, care, and resources they have earned through
7 their service. Leadership matters, and I'm hopeful
8 that under her stewardship, we will continue
9 strengthening how New York City shows up for those
10 who have served. I want to thank the members of the
11 Committee on Women and Gender Equity who have joined
12 us today, as well as our committee staff, Julia
13 Goldsmith-Pinkham, Katie Salina, Taylor Francisco,
14 and Ali Stauffer, and my own team, Dan Curtin and
15 Josephine Kauras, for their preparation and
16 commitment to this issue. And thank you again, Chair
17 Morano, for your partnership. I look forward to a
18 thoughtful and solutions-oriented discussion. I will
19 now turn it back over to you.

20 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Chair
21 Farías. I want to before we hear from our first
folks, I want to pick up on what my colleague
mentioned in terms of the importance of the topic
we're exploring today. Women veterans represent one
of the fastest-growing segments of the veterans

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2 population, and for a long time, the experiences of
3 women veterans haven't been fully reflected in policy
4 discussions. And while a lot of the challenges they
5 face are the same as what men are facing, many of
6 them are specific to them, including access to
7 gender-specific healthcare, mental health services,
8 childcare, and protection from gender-based
9 discrimination and harassment. And what I'm hoping is
10 that this hearing is an opportunity to review what's
11 working, see where gaps remain, and how agencies and
12 community partners can better connect women veterans
13 to services. And, also we can examine whether current
14 outreach efforts are effective. Now, in addition to
15 our oversight topic today, we are going to be hearing
16 the following pieces of legislation, both of which
17 I'm privileged to be a sponsor of, Reso Number 0014,
18 sponsored by Council Member Joann Ariola, which would
19 call upon the New York City Housing Authority to
20 include an admission preference for public housing in
21 its next proposed agency plan for for all veterans of
the U.S. military, and Reso number 0131, sponsored by
my colleague Council Member Paladino, which would
call on the New York City Department of Education to
observe Veterans Day the Friday before November 11th

2 if it falls on a Saturday, and the Monday after the
3 11th if it falls on a Sunday. Council Member Ariola
4 is not able to join us this afternoon, but we
5 certainly look forward to hearing and discussing her
6 resolution. Let me invite my, colleague from Queens,
7 Council Member Paladino, to speak about her
8 resolution.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Thank you,
10 Frank. Thank you, Chairman. Sorry. Anyway, good
11 afternoon, everybody. It's a privilege to be here at
12 the first Veterans Committee hearing. Being on the
13 Veterans Committee for the last four years, starting
14 my 5th year now, it was a pleasure to meet the
15 Commissioner in my office the other day. We had a
16 very productive conversation and much needed, and I
17 look forward to a very good working relationship
18 moving forward. This is indeed an extremely important
19 topic, one that is overlooked and just taken for
20 granted most all the time. So, get- to go to my Reso.
21 The reso is kind of cute, because it was brought to
my attention by the kids in my school districts. And
how important- because I honor the veterans once a
year in my office. We do a veterans breakfast, and
you cannot believe- I have 27 schools, and out of

2 those 27 schools, they write the most phenomenal
3 cards, and my vets take it away with them at every
4 single breakfast. So one of which was, why can't we
5 get the day off from school to acknowledge Veterans
6 Day? If Veterans Day falls on a Saturday or a Sunday,
7 It's so important what a veteran does. These are kids
8 telling me this, mind you. These are grade school and
9 middle school kids. And I said, you know what, you're
10 right. And I said to my, chief let's put together
11 legislation whereas we can honor our veterans should
12 the holiday fall on a Saturday or Sunday. If the kids
13 are smart enough to know how important Veterans Day
14 is, well then, so should we be. So I'm looking
15 forward to passing this Reso. Thank you very much,
16 everybody.

14 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Council
15 Member Paladino. I'm looking forward to today's
16 testimony and to strengthening support for women
17 veterans throughout New York City. I do want to
18 acknowledge, my colleagues in addition to Council
19 Member Paladino who are here today. From the
20 Veterans Committee, you have Council Member Phil
21 Wong. Hello, Council Member Wong. We have Council
Member Carmen De La Rosa. And, I believe, Chair

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2 Farías acknowledged them as well, but from our
3 counterpart committee, we have Council Members
4 Gutiérrez, Schulman, Aldebol, and joining us via
5 Zoom, Council Member Santosuosso. Hello, everybody.
6 Thank you, everybody, for being here. All right,
7 before we get started, I do want to thank as well the
8 incredible staff of the Veterans Committee. I
9 mentioned a few folks before, but I don't want to
10 omit every- anybody. I to thank our Legislative
11 Counsel Alejandro Carvajal, our Policy Analyst Manur
12 Butte, and Financial Analyst Margaret Barnsley for
13 their work in preparing for this hearing. I'd also
14 like to thank my entire staff for their work as we
15 continue to serve our constituents and the city as a
16 whole. With that, I'd like to turn it over to our
17 Committee Counsel to administer the oath to witnesses
18 from the administration.

19 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, Chair. I'll
20 call on you one by one. Please raise your right
21 hands. Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole
truth, and nothing but the truth in your testimony
before these committees, and to respond honestly to
council members' questions? Commissioner Mata?

COMMISSIONER MATA: Yes, I do.

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2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Deputy Commissioner
3 Villarreal [sp?]? That's- could- would you mind
4 stating your name? This is the slip we got.

5 COMMISSIONER MATA: Executive Director
6 Donee Smalls.

7 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Executive Director
8 Smalls?

9 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: Yes.

10 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Nicole Orlando?

11 DIRECTOR ORLANDO: I do.

12 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. And as a
13 reminder to all of our witnesses, please state your
14 name prior to your testimony for the record.

15 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, everybody.
16 Before you begin your testimony, I do want to say a
17 word about our brand new DVS Commissioner. For
18 starters, I am a little irked because clearly we
19 missed the memo to wear pink today, which is one of
20 my favorite colors as a lifelong fan of women. But, I
21 do wanna mention specifically that we're very, very
excited to have a Commissioner and a Veterans
Committee Chairperson that are both from the great
borough of Staten Island. Staten Island often gets
forgotten in terms of city services, and we have a

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2 very large veterans population, and I think it says a
3 lot about our priorities that we have two prominent
4 veterans leaders, both from Staten Island. But about
5 this Commissioner specifically, Commissioner Mata
6 went out of her way to meet individually with every
7 single member of the Veterans Committee, visiting
8 each of them individually in their office. And I may
9 be relatively new to the City Council, but I'm not
10 new to being an observer of city government. That's a
11 pretty rare thing for a brand new citywide
12 Commissioner to do, and I think it says a great deal
13 about her commitment to veterans in this city and her
14 willingness to work with each of us on this
15 committee, even though we may not necessarily see the
16 world the same way. So, on behalf of Staten
17 Islanders, Commissioner, and my fellow committee
18 members, thank you very, very much. I'd love to hear
19 your remarks.

20 COMMISSIONER MATA: Good morning, Chair
21 Morano, Chair Fariás, and members of the committees.
Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My
name is Yesenia Mata, and I have the honor of serving
as Commissioner of the New York City Department of
Veterans Services. I also have the honor of serving

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2 as Captain in the United States Army Reserves.

3 Today's hearing matters to me personally because it

4 focuses on women veterans. I still remember when I

5 first enlisted. I started as an enlisted soldier,

6 became a sergeant, and later became a captain. In

7 each rank, I try my best to support other women

8 soldiers and veterans, because there are still not

9 many of us in leadership ranks. I also want to

10 acknowledge military spouses and children. They

11 serve, too. I know that deeply as a military spouse

12 myself and what it feels to be separated from your

13 partner. Women veterans and military families do not

14 all have the same story, but we share the same core

15 truth: we served. And when a woman veteran is not

16 seen or supported, it affects more than just her. It

17 affects her family, too. That is a reality this

18 hearing is confronting. Women's service is growing,

19 yet women veterans are still too often overlooked in

20 how systems identify them. Today, I want to offer an

21 overview and what role the city can play alongside

the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. More than

2.1 million women veterans live in the United States.

580,000 veterans live in New York State, about

131,000 in New York City, including 15,678 women

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2 veterans. Research focused on New York shows two
3 themes: our veteran population is more racially and
4 ethnically diverse than the national average, and
5 many veterans, especially women and minority
6 veterans, report difficulty navigating the systems
7 designed to serve them. And I'm going to repeat that
8 number again. More than 2.1 million women veterans
9 live in the United States. 580,000 veterans live in
10 New York State and about 131,000 in New York City.

11 And again, including 15,678 women veterans are vetted
12 here and have registered here in New York City. Women
13 are also the fastest growing group within the veteran
14 population. That matters here in New York City where
15 diversity is the norm and where support is spread
16 across federal, state, and local systems that do not
17 always feel connected from the resident's point of
18 view. That is what I want to focus on today:

19 visibility and how it affects access and outcomes.

20 Often support starts with a simple question: have you
21 served in the U.S. military? If that question is
never asked or if it does not feel safe to answer,
doors stay closed. When veterans do not
self-identify, they are less likely to be connected
to benefits and care they earned, and they are less

2 likely to be counted in systems that shape policy and
3 funding. For women veterans, there is an added layer.
4 They are making those decisions in a culture where
5 the public image of a woman is still too often male
6 by default. So, self-identification is not just a
7 checkbox. If self-identification is a front door, the
8 next question is why so many women veterans do not
9 walk through it. One part of the answer is the
10 handoff after service. Research shows that efforts to
11 support women's transitions have too often been
12 treated as a health-focused supplement rather than a
13 whole-of-life handoff that accounts for the full
14 realities of leaving services. There are a few common
15 barriers we should keep in mind. First, not everyone
16 sees themselves reflected in veteran messaging. Many
17 women veterans describe not being recognized,
18 including not being seen as real veterans in the way
19 the public imagines military service to be. Second,
20 practical barriers compound hours of operation, child
21 care needs, privacy, and comfort in check-in and
waiting spaces all affect whether someone follows
through. Third, access is not just whether care
exists, it is whether someone can actually reach it.
Phone access matters, long holds, drop calls, and no

2 call box Callbacks can turn people away. And for many
3 women veterans, access is all about trust.

4 Nationally, VA screening data have long shown that
5 about one in three women who use VA healthcare report
6 experiencing military sexual trauma. That reality
7 shapes how people approach this. Finally, for some
8 women veterans, service is not something they want to
9 narrate to strangers. That includes trauma. It also
10 includes the simple reality that many people want to
11 remove— want to move forward from their service, but
12 life happens. Later, those same individuals may need
13 healthcare benefits, housing stability, or help
14 navigating systems. RAND has warned that the VA may
15 still fall short in meeting women veterans' mental
16 health needs, particularly for care related to combat
17 trauma and military sexual trauma. The result is
18 straightforward: when the path to support feels
19 unclear, unwelcoming, or unsafe, people stop trying,
20 and systems can confuse low utilization for low need.

21 Where the VA fits: I have talked about what women
veterans experience on the ground. I also want to
briefly name the federal systems they depend on. The
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is a primary
federal agency responsible for veterans' healthcare

2 benefits such as disability compensation and pensions
3 and cemeteries and memorial benefits. Over time, the
4 VA has built more formal structures to address women
5 veteran needs. For example, Congress established the
6 Advisory Committee on Women Veterans in 1983 and
7 created the Center for Women Veterans in 1994. Even
8 with these improvements, participation in VA
9 healthcare still shows a gap. In 2023, about 930,000
10 women veterans were enrolled in VA healthcare, and
11 about 650,000 sought VA medical care. Those numbers
12 tell a story. The system is serving many women and
13 still not reaching many others. Enrollment and
14 utilization are not the same. Getting someone
15 enrolled does not automatically mean they are
16 connected, comfortable, and consistently accessing
17 care where the city agency fits. With that as a
18 backdrop, I want to bring the focus back to what we
19 can control at the city level. Our job is practical.
20 We help women veterans move from eligibility to
21 access, and we do it in a system where support is
spread across federal, state, and local lanes that do
not always feel connected from the resident's point
of view. In 2025, DVS served 1,509 veterans across
our core service areas. Of that total, we served 393

2 women veterans through housing stabilization,
3 employment support, VA claims assistance,
4 entrepreneurship services. The most common needs we
5 see are benefits navigation, housing stability, and
6 employment support. That aligns with New York-based
7 research showing that navigating systems, especially
8 for women and minority veterans, is often the biggest
9 hurdle. Our role is to simplify that path. We connect
10 veterans to the right federal, state, local
11 resources, explain the process in plain language, and
12 stay engaged with them. We do not assume women
13 veterans will find us through traditional channels.
14 We build pathways with other organizations that
15 already have trust and credibility with women
16 veterans, including Women Veterans in Columbia
17 University, the National Association of Black
18 Military Women, and the Women Veterans Alliance, and
19 the Pink Berets. We also collaborate with city
20 partners including the Mayor's Office to End Domestic
21 and Gender-based Violence, Mayor's Office for People
with Disabilities, and Health and Hospitals because
women veterans needs are often intersectional and
because safety, stability, and access care are
connected. We also see clearly that women veterans

2 are not only seeking services, they are building
3 enterprises and creating jobs through our BASA
4 Veteran Entrepreneurship Program. 28 percent of
5 winners across three cohorts are women, women
6 veterans. Looking ahead, we are also monitoring
7 federal development that may impact women veterans'
8 access to reproductive healthcare because shifts at
9 the federal level often show up first as confusion at
10 the local level, and confusion is a barrier. And
11 because many women veterans do not self-identify in
12 the first place, the work begins even earlier. We
13 have to help women veterans feel seen and included
14 before they ever need us. What DVS does for women
15 veterans: At DVS, we approach support for women
16 veterans through a simple frame, Connect. We connect
17 women veterans to the right place, including VA
18 healthcare benefits assistance, mental health
19 supports, housing navigation, and trusted community
20 partners, with an emphasis on warm handoffs and clear
21 next steps. Reduce barriers: some barriers are
informational, some are logistical, and some are
cultural. We try to reduce all three by explaining
the systems plainly and meeting people where they are
at. Respect lived experience: Women veterans are not

2 a monolith. They are diverse across race, ethnicity,
3 age, era of service, family structure, disability
4 status, and identity. Our job is not to force a
5 single veteran's story. It is to make sure women
6 veterans can access support without having to fit
7 someone else's stereotype. What we are asking for at
8 this stage, based on what we see every day, there are
9 three areas where partnerships from the Council would
10 make a real difference. First, normalize asking the
11 question everywhere. Women veterans are not always
12 going to volunteer their veteran status. Systems
13 should ask respectfully and routinely in ways that
14 feel safe and purposeful. Have you served in the US
15 military? Making that question standard practice
16 across city touchpoints. Second, help veterans
17 understand who does what. When veterans do not
18 understand the split between, uh, city navigation and
19 federal provisions, they often think this is not for
20 me, I will get it later, or do I want the hassle?
21 Clarity is a form of access. We welcome opportunities
to work with the City Council on materials and
messaging that clearly explain what DVS does and what
the VA does. And thirdly, support pathways that work
in real life. Access is not just about eligibility,

2 it is about logistics. That means scheduling
3 flexibility, child care support, privacy
4 considerations, and phone access. These are the
5 practical details that determine whether someone can
6 actually use the care and benefits they earn. We ask
7 the City Council to support policies and programs
8 that take these real-world constraints seriously when
9 designing services for women veterans. And now I will
10 close with this: women veterans have always been
11 here. Our responsibility now is to make sure women
12 veterans do not have to fight a second battle at home
13 just to get care, benefits, and support. That
14 standard— the standard will start here today by
15 making them visible. It continues with
16 self-identification that feels safe and worthwhile,
17 and it depends on coordination between the VA, the
18 city, and trusted community partners. Thank you for
19 the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to
20 continuing this work with the committees and
21 answering any questions you may have.

18 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you,
19 Commissioner. Well done. I'll invite my colleagues
20 who have questions to ask you them in a moment. But
21 you emphasize that support often begins with a simple

2 question: have you served in the U.S. military? Which
3 specific city agencies currently ask that question as
4 part of their intake process, and which don't? And is
5 there a plan to standardize that question across city
6 agencies?

6 COMMISSIONER MATA: So in 2024, there was
7 a Local Law 37, Intro 1237, that was passed that
8 makes agencies responsible to implement that
9 question. It's a voluntary survey question. At DVS,
10 that is one of the priorities that we're going to be
11 focusing on this year to ensure that all city
12 agencies ask this question.

11 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: You mentioned that
12 many women veterans are not always recognized as
13 veterans in the first place. From what you're seeing
14 on the ground here in New York, where does that gap
15 show up the most? Is it in healthcare? Is it in
16 housing access? Is it in employment service? Or is it
17 somewhere else?

17 COMMISSIONER MATA: It's actually all
18 across. As I said in my testimony, there are 131,000
19 veterans in New York City, and only 15,678 women
20 veterans in New York City have been identified. So
21 that shows that at all city agencies, at all

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2 services, that women veterans are not being
3 self-identified.

4 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: For the public's
5 edification, your agency occupies a very unique role
6 because unlike, say, the Commissioner of the Police
7 Department who can just tell the police what to do,
8 or Commissioner of the Fire Department who can tell
9 the firemen what to do, you're in a position where so
10 much of the benefits that New York City veterans are
11 dependent upon are either federal benefits or state
12 benefits, and your agency has a very, very difficult
13 role to play in that you have to almost be a steering
14 committee for a lot of these folks and steering them
15 to federal agencies or state agencies. How does DVS
16 work with the Department of Veterans Affairs? We have
17 a close relationship with the Department of Veterans
18 Affairs. We make it very clear that at DVS we are not
19 the provider, but we are the sole connector. And as a
20 sole connector, we also make sure that all city
21 agencies that we partner up, up with are familiar
with veteran issues, such as when it comes to the
Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, or when
it comes to the Department of Aging, or in general
when it comes to any other city agency, we make sure

2 that they are aware of what is happening at a federal
3 level too. So that makes us the connector.

4 COMMISSIONER MATA: Is there any specific
5 coordination that goes on with the VA in supporting
6 women veterans, specifically? So as DVS, we are not
7 responsible what the VA does. Again, we are the sole
8 connector, but we do make them aware of what is
9 happening on the ground, that there has to be a
10 better support of self-identification. Again, we, we
11 are doing the best that we can to ensure that we can
12 stay in communication because it's alarming that only
13 15,678 women veterans have been identified in New
14 York City. You pointed out that enrollment in VA
15 services doesn't necessarily mean someone's actually
16 accessing care. Do we have any sense here in New York
17 City of how many women veterans are enrolled in VA
18 services but not actively using them, and what the
19 barriers tend to be in those cases? So I'm going to
20 pass that question to my Deputy Chief of Staff
21 Nicole, but before that what we are noticing is that
in one of the services that we do provide, what is
through the VA Claims Unit, when women veterans do
come, they either are coming for disability or
unemployment, but through that process, then we are

2 able to see that at times they are- they're coming
3 for other services too, whether it is that they would
4 like to be connected in the community or in their
5 neighborhood, or even that they experienced some sort
6 of sexual trauma and that they would like additional
7 services and support. So that is- generally when
8 people do connect with DVS, whether it's through the
9 phone or through partnerships that we have, we not
10 only ask them for the benefits, but we also give them
11 the opportunity to let us know what other types of
12 services they need because we want to make sure that
13 they're supported holistically. So now I'll pass that
14 question to my Deputy Chief.

15 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: So in regards to
16 the number of women veterans- and thank you, Chair,
17 for the question. In terms of the women veterans who
18 are enrolled in VA healthcare or utilizing a VA
19 benefit, it's a little bit harder to tell on the
20 number who are actually in terms utilizing it because
21 that definition is so fluid. Some can be enrolled in
healthcare going to a VA hospital once a year, every
six months, every week, versus those who may be using
a VA educational benefit or maybe are enrolled in the
hospital but use private healthcare. So there's less

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2 specific numbers on how many are enrolled actively
3 using it, because it's something that is always
4 changing.

5 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Two final questions
6 for me, and then I'll invite any of my colleagues who
7 have questions to have at it. But you spoke about
8 practical barriers like childcare and scheduling.
9 Have you seen any models either in New York or
10 elsewhere where childcare or flexible scheduling has
11 significantly increased women veterans' ability to
12 access services?

13 COMMISSIONER MATA: Well, I do— well,
14 currently with the, with the new mayor that we have,
15 I know that childcare is one of his biggest factors
16 that he wants to ensure that women are supported at
17 all levels. We do know that when it comes to child
18 care, that is something that when it comes to veteran
19 issues, people or individuals feel that that's not an
20 issue that us women care about, or women that are
21 currently serving in the military. So with that, we
are looking forward to working closely with the mayor
and with the other city agencies to ensure that we
can connect— that we can reach out to women veterans
and help them get connected with any child care

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2 services that they need. But I'm going to pass this
3 question out to my Deputy Chief.

4 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Something that we
5 do notice is that within the women veteran
6 population, women veterans unemployment sits around
7 seven percent here in New York State. And what we
8 believe a major barrier to that is the childcare
9 issue and not being able to access childcare as well
10 as stable childcare. So that is also why we're really
11 excited to have women veterans utilize the programs
12 under Mayor Mamdani.

13 COMMISSIONER MATA: And just to add to
14 that question, childcare is also very personal to me,
15 too. I've been able to serve with various other women
16 who- there's a difference when a woman is active or
17 is in the National Guard or is a reservist, but I've
18 been able to witness various capable, amazing women
19 not being able to attend either their drill weekends
20 or be able to attend training because they aren't
21 able to access childcare. And this also sometimes
restrains them from either getting promoted or- get
promoted or for them to fulfill their duties. So
childcare is definitely something as an agency we're

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2 going to be looking at and to make sure that women
3 veterans get the support that they need.

4 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: And obviously,
5 Commissioner, you know, there's no way I could have
6 both you and Ms. Orlando here without asking at least
7 one Staten Island-specific question. So, are there
8 any unique challenges or service gaps that you're
9 seeing among women veterans on Staten Island
10 specifically, and are there partnerships there that
11 you think this council might be able to strengthen?

12 COMMISSIONER MATA: As a Staten Islander-
13 as a Staten Islander, I'm going to make sure that we
14 can strengthen the relationships and the partnerships
15 that we do have on Staten Island. What we are seeing
16 is that Staten Island is often the forgotten borough,
17 and as the new Commissioner of DVS, I'm going to make
18 sure that the voices of our partners are included in
19 these services. And I know that my colleague here
20 will be able to answer the further questions on that.

21 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Additionally, I
22 think Staten Island sometimes sits at a little bit of
23 a disadvantage in the work that we do because we work
24 very closely with student veterans. So, there's 120
25 different schools and universities across the five

2 boroughs. But as we know that now there's only two
3 schools on Staten Island. So I think for us, we're
4 working to build out, which we have strong
5 relationships with CUNY organizations as well as with
6 Wagner. And then I think just separate of all that,
7 working more closely with community boards that our
8 team has started some of those initiatives and being
9 able to continue on those as well.

8 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thanks very much.

9 Chair Fariás?

10 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: Thank you so much,
11 Chair Morano. I have a couple questions before we
12 kick it over to our virtual council member for her to
13 get her question in. In terms of the work that you
14 folks do at DVS with the U.S. Department of Veterans
15 Affairs, can you give me an overview of what that
16 looks like?

15 COMMISSIONER MATA: So at DVS, we— so DVS
16 plays the sole connector to the services or that the
17 VA provides. An example is that as a sole connector,
18 we connect— I'm gonna focus on women veterans at this
19 moment— women veterans, if they come into— if they
20 come into our agency or they give us a call call that
21 they are in need of disability or unemployment, we

2 are able to walk them through that process of what
3 the services that are being provided, but as well,
4 like, the intake and follow-through on the process,
5 in a sense, like case management. But then even at
6 that, we are able to connect them with the VA
7 hospitals that are in the VA Bronx and VA Harbor, the
8 hospitals and the clinics, to help them navigate that
9 process, but also sometimes so they don't have to
10 themselves, and then we are able to connect them with
11 partners in the local communities. That is just one
12 example, and I'm giving disability, but also when it
13 comes to housing, if the- if someone comes in into
14 our agency or calls our agency or is able to meet us
15 at a partnership event, if they are in need of
16 housing, the- what DVS does, which is one of the
17 major navigation, um, referrals that- and services
18 that we have is that we help them with the intake, we
19 walk them through the entire process, it's in a case
20 management. If they are able to be placed at a
21 housing, we, even though we're not the provider, we
make sure that they are placed, and then after that,
there's an aftercare process, and I'm going to let
the Executive Director of Housing explain on that.

2 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: Thank you,
3 Chair and members of the committee. After veterans
4 are housed, we do follow up with aftercare services.

5 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Just get nice and
6 close to that microphone if you would.

7 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: After veterans
8 are housed, we do provide aftercare services where we
9 also reach out to our community partners for
10 long-term care because we are a referral agency. So,
11 but we do follow through with aftercare for 22 months
12 and after if needed.

13 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: So, sorry, just to
14 interject for a second, so I guess where my thought
15 process has been going is, is there a natural
16 connection between the department— U.S. Department of
17 Veterans Affairs to DVS here to say this quarter, you
18 know, or this end of month, here's a list of veterans
19 that are— have told us they're making their way to
20 their family in New York or New York State, New York
21 City. This is now hopefully a good partnership for
you folks to take over and help us be that connector?
And then if so, how often is that playing into our
communication with the self-identification, for
example? Because I'm not— the difficulty I'm having

2 is where's the other missing part with- we don't have
3 folks that are self-selecting in, which we know even
4 just with city government services that is always a
5 challenge to get people to opt in, even to the free
6 stuff, let alone with- I don't know where's the
7 miscommunication part. So can someone talk to that
8 lens?

9 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: Yeah, yeah.

10 COMMISSIONER MATA: We are- As DVS, we do
11 get a headcount of individuals that are transitioning
12 out of the- out of the service. With that headcount,
13 what DVS does is tries to reach out to them to be
14 able to help them with the service, like services, or
15 just to be aware of what's available to them. To
16 that, I know DVS has been in partnership in ensuring
17 that their employment is one of the biggest factors,
18 and we want to tackle that on very first, first
19 head-on because we do know that if someone is not
20 financially stable, that can lead to homelessness or
21 to further mental health issues. So I know my
22 colleague here will be able to provide certain
23 examples around that.

24 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: So we've received
25 two different types of data of those transitioning

2 out of service. So one of them is the DD-214 data,
3 which is the document that someone gets when leave an
4 active duty service. And then we also get the
5 DD-2468s, which is the document that someone can fill
6 out up to 18 months before transitioning out that
7 notifies the state that they will be coming home to
8 that state. We recently have language updated in the
9 National Defense Authorization Act that instead of
10 someone not filling out the box to share the
11 information with the state, it automatically would
12 opt them out of it. Now, if they don't check that
13 box, it automatically opts them in. So we will
14 receive that data. So that is a new update that we're
15 hoping to have.

16 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: How recent?

17 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: That happened two
18 or three months ago.

19 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: Okay.

20 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Yeah.

21 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: Is there any way that
we can reach out to, like, US Department of Veterans
Affairs to see if they can backdate some of that
contact info or anything?

2 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Yes. So for those
3 specifically, since someone can fill it out like up
4 to 18 months in advance, a lot of the information
5 that we're getting is someone who still hasn't gotten
6 out yet. So they are able to backdate in that sense,
7 and we're working very closely with them to make sure
8 we're getting as much data as we can on that front.

9 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: Okay, that seems
10 like a great improvement to better our communication
11 with at least the folks that are coming in to our
12 city and our state. And then I have some questions
13 around gender-specific outreach strategies that DVS
14 employs. What does that look like for the agency?

15 COMMISSIONER MATA: So at DVS, again, we
16 are— I would like to say that we're like the sole
17 connector to the services that women veterans may
18 need. Again, if someone calls the agency or someone
19 sees us at a community event, per se, or at a
20 community board meeting, they are able to let us know
21 that what service they're looking for. Oftentimes
they don't even know all the services that are
available to them until they are— until they meet
with the staff or they see us at a particular event.
So with that being said, we connect them to all city

2 agency services or make them aware, but additionally
3 to that, we also make them aware of any sort of
4 support in the community, such as connecting with,
5 with nonprofits. For example, if there's a family
6 who's having veteran concerns- the veteran families
7 concerns, like how can they integrate back into the
8 community? We have the Military Family Advocate
9 program that was actually launched in 2023 in Staten
10 Island. And We're trying to put- do that across all
11 five boroughs. And I think that will be a great start
12 to begin talking about self-identification because,
13 um, I think to your point that you- to your last
14 point about self-identification and those are
15 transitioning out, oftentimes when they're
16 transitioning out, they don't know where they could
17 put their skills at, at sometimes the military- in
18 the civilian world, sometimes they feel like the
19 military skills are not transferable when in reality
20 they're some of the best employees that agencies or
21 the nonprofits can hire. So, with that, we try to
holistically help, like, the individual. And that's
why in my testimony I really wanted to emphasize the
military families and their children.

2 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: Yeah, that makes
3 total sense. And then in terms of supporting their
4 transition from women service members to women
5 veterans, what does that look like, or is that a part
6 of what you just explained?

7 COMMISSIONER MATA: Yes. So when it comes
8 to veterans, oftentimes people feel that it is those
9 served. But even in the military, there's still-
10 there's veterans even within the military. Sometimes
11 some of them extend their contracts. So, and if they
12 extend their contract, some of them wanna serve up
13 to- it just depends what kind of service they wanna
14 have, right? So, what- there is a missing point is
15 that when people think about women veterans, they're
16 just thinking of those that did- that they- that
17 served, and they're just focused on that pool, which
18 that is great. However, we need to make sure that we
19 can also reach women veterans while they're in
20 service to ensure that they can transition out
21 smoothly. Because oftentimes that is what happens,
that once they get out, people feel that their
military service skills are not transferable, and
that causes a lot of, a lot of, anguish, a lot of
issues.

2 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: I appreciate that
3 response. I'm going to reserve the rest of my
4 questions for after council member questions, and
5 I'll kick it over to council member Chair Morano to
6 call on the members.

7 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Chair
8 Fariás. Let me first begin with Councilmember
9 Santosuosso of Brooklyn joining us via Zoom. Council
10 Member, can you hear us? Council-

11 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: [interposing] Can
12 someone on the Zoom-

13 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: There she goes.

14 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: There we go.

15 COUNCIL MEMBER SANTOSUOSSA: They unmuted
16 me now. I'm here. Hi. Thank you, Chairs Morano and
17 Farias for convening this hearing, and thank you to
18 our new Commissioner, who I'm so happy to see in that
19 position, and congratulations. I just wanted to
20 briefly discuss an issue that I'm running into for
21 constituents at least near my district. So I have a
22 district that used to include the Brooklyn VA
23 Hospital which now I'm just the neighboring district
24 for the hospital. But, I was recently made aware that
25 many veterans and active service members who are

2 women who are seeking OB-GYN care and basic maternal
3 health are not actively seeking that at the Brooklyn
4 VA and are actually opting for private hospitals.

5 Now, I understand that that could be for a whole
6 variety of reasons, but I was told that that is
7 partially because of a lack of available services at
8 Brooklyn VA. I have not investigated this myself, so
9 I guess the question that I pose to you is, do you
10 all track the availability of services and, you know,
11 the wait times perhaps at the Brooklyn VA, or why
12 someone would be choosing to, you know- or forced to
13 seek these services at other facilities? And would
14 just be grateful for any thoughts you have on that.

15 COMMISSIONER MATA: Yes, before I pass
16 the mic to Nicole- and I'm not gonna call you
17 colleague, Nicole- before I pass the mic to Nicole,
18 what- due to federal cuts there has been- facilities
19 have been understaffed. So what can essentially
20 happen is that they can be as well referred out to
21 city hospitals such as H&H Hospital or DOHMH. And we,
as a matter of fact, we just had a conversation
yesterday with the commissioner with the DOHMH to
make them aware of this situation and to further
collaborate to ensure that we can bring those

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2 concerns up to the facilities and to make sure that
3 the women veterans are supported. So we are trying to
4 create a strong partnership on that, because if the
5 services are not provided at the VA, we want to make
6 sure that they're accessible at a city level.

7 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: For us, with our
8 mission being to connect, mobilize, and empower, for
9 us, we just want to make sure that our women veterans
10 are connected to the services that they need. So we
11 understand that different cuts in federal programs
12 that they may need access to aren't able to be
13 accessed. So that, like Commissioner said, for us,
14 it's just important that at the end of the day, the
15 women veteran is getting the service that she needs,
16 whether that be in a VA facility if possible, or
17 whether that be at a Health + Hospitals with the
18 DOHMH reproductive hubs, just to make sure that she
19 is indeed getting the services that she deserves.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER SANTOSUOSSO: Definitely.
21 And I very much appreciate your role as that sole
connector. I guess I would also sort of push that
perhaps DVS could play a role in exposing if there
are those shortages due to federal cuts or what have
you. You know, given the subject of this hearing

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2 being women and veterans and talking about equity, it
3 would be a real shame if what we found out was that
4 in a lot of VAs- I'm sure there are, there are many
5 cuts that are taking place to critical services, but
6 if the cuts were disproportionate to women's health,
7 I think that would be a very big red flag and
8 something that the administration might want to at
9 least expose and draw attention to in terms of trying
10 to figure out what federal funds need to be allocated
11 and what else we can do to make sure that treatment
12 is available. And you know, I would make that push
13 both for, you know, basic women's health, maternal
14 health, but also fertility treatment and, you know,
15 fertility services, should they be wanted by women
16 veterans. So I thank you for your time. I just wanted
17 to make that plug.

18 COMMISSIONER MATA: Absolutely. Actually,
19 we would like to stay connected with you because-
20 with your office- because yesterday, as I mentioned,
21 we did have the meeting with the commissioner from
DOHMH, and we actually did flag this. So I think
having your input or your community's input- and that
is something that as the new Commissioner, I am
making sure that I can actually hear directly not

2 just from elected officials but also from the
3 community itself on issues that are happening. And
4 the goal is to create that partnership across with
5 all commissioners, because when it does come
6 healthcare, absolutely, as a Commissioner of DOHMH,
7 but when it comes to aging, right, it's important for
8 me to work with the Department of Aging. It's like, I
9 want to make sure that all commissioners are involved
10 because it's definitely a responsibility of all of
11 us.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER SANTOSUOSSO: Well, I
13 know- I know you now, Commissioner Mata, to be a
14 strong advocate, and I am extremely confident that
15 you in that role will help bring about the equity
16 that is so rightly deserved and warranted. So thank
17 you so much.

18 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you,
19 Councilmember. And Commissioner, I'll note that
20 Councilmember Santosuosso is a- as a trial lawyer and
21 a very experienced trial lawyer, a trained
cross-examiner. So if you can handle her questions,
you can handle anybody's. Let me welcome the
distinguished Council Member from Queens, who I

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2 believe represents more veterans than any of us in
3 the City Council, Councilmember Paladino.

4 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Thank you very
5 much. We- when you were in my office, we talked a lot
6 about the transitioning process. We talked about the
7 Borden Street Shelter. We talked about a lot of
8 things that were lacking. Also here today, we're
9 talking a lot about data. So I wanna just go to
10 something here. In a recent report issued by the
11 Office of the New York City Comptroller Mark Levine,
12 discrepancies were identified in DHS records
13 suggesting a need to strengthen staff oversight,
14 training, and recordkeeping practices. What
15 corrective actions has DVS implemented in response to
16 these findings, and how is the agency ensuring
17 sustained compliance and improved data accuracy
18 moving forward?

19 COMMISSIONER MATA: So as a data-driven
20 person myself, I am- as a new Commissioner, and I've
21 only been in there for two weeks, but I'm telling
22 you, I hit the ground running. I am making sure that
23 I can have- that could speak directly with all of the
24 staff to make sure that data is inputted properly.
25 But as well, if the systems that we even have in

2 place are actually working. I think that is also- I
3 am working closely with community partners. I still
4 have various meetings ahead of me, but I'm also
5 hearing directly from them. They're letting me know
6 what works, what doesn't work, but I'm also verifying
7 each partnership that we have, but each event that we
8 go to and the people that we target to make sure if
9 our systems can adequately handle that information,
10 or- and even if are- if we are doing the VA, if we
11 have the VA claims unit that focuses on disability,
12 unemployment, but even when it comes to housing, I
13 just want to make sure that when it comes to that,
14 that we know that the data that we are receiving can
15 actually fit within the systems that we have in
16 place. So that is an outgoing conversation, and I
17 think as we continue having these hearings, I think
18 it is important to continue asking that question, how
19 is data put in and what systems do we need to change?

16 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: With the short
17 staffing that we all know you have, to accommodate-
18 it's only six- would you say 57,000 women identified,
19 56,000?

20 COMMISSIONER MATA: Only 15,678 women
21 veterans in New York City have been identified.

2 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: So, in every
3 borough, what are we doing to try to hit at least a
4 small proportion in every borough?

5 COMMISSIONER MATA: So I do know that as
6 the new Commissioner myself, I do want to emphasize a
7 lot on self-identification.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Right.

9 COMMISSIONER MATA: And not just— and I
10 know I've been looking at the past hearings and I
11 know people brought up that self-identification,
12 self-identification, but I feel that oftentimes the
13 burden is put on the veteran that you need to
14 self-identify. No, I think it should be the other way
15 around. We need to make sure that we make it as easy
16 as possible for them to self-identify. So one, I am
17 making sure that I can continue meeting with all
18 commissioners to ensure that Local Law 37, Intro
19 1237, is fully implemented so it can be— so whenever
20 they go to any city agency service, they are able to
21 volunteer if they want to identify. But secondly, I
do want to continue working with all of your offices.
I know that we do have the Vallone Veteran Resource
Center. We want to fully continue that program and
fully support it and revamp it. We're— I definitely

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2 want to continue speaking with the advocates to see

3 how can we make that even stronger. And thirdly, what

4 I would like to do is, like, when it comes to

5 self-identification, is not just are you a veteran,

6 but we also identify differently. And I think that's

7 why I did talk about different backgrounds that we're

8 women, we, we have different- we have- we come from a

9 different race, we have different ages. Like, when

10 you are talking about that, you have to make a

11 targeted approach.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Yeah.

13 COMMISSIONER MATA: So, again, I think to

14 your point, I'm really looking forward to working

15 with your office because even in your- with your

16 constituents, you also know what is the best way to

17 reach them. I mean, when I was in your office, I just

18 saw how people were coming in and how they were able-

19 they just- they felt safe in that spot, in that area,

20 right?

21 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Yeah, they

really did.

COMMISSIONER MATA: So I think I have-

these are ongoing conversations.

2 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: That was my
3 biggest concern was, you know, because my, my office
4 right now, we have it going on, The Veterans Resource
5 Day is today and we used to have it once a week, and
6 then we were cut to twice a month. Now I'm down to
7 once a month and my office right now is jam-packed.
8 And, you know, I know we go back to self-identifying.
9 I'm not even going to go there. The 56,000 that have
10 identified, how are we reaching them? How- what do we
11 do present day now to reach those women?

12 COMMISSIONER MATA: So I can only speak
13 on the- I'll pass the mic to Nicole shortly, but I
14 could only speak that the way that we were able to
15 get that number- particularly that number, is 15,678
16 either was through reporting, but- and data, but also
17 through our services that we provide at the agency
18 through the VA claims unit, whether they were coming
19 in for disability or unemployment, or through the
20 partnerships that we had with the Mayor's Office to
21 End Domestic and Gender-based Violence. It just
depends on the type of service that they're looking
for. But Nicole, can you elaborate more on that?

2 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Then I'm
3 guessing you lose track of a lot of people in- with
4 everything that you just named, right?

5 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: So a specific
6 event that I think has been super helpful to point
7 towards, just to give an idea of how we try to engage
8 that population, is that we host in partnership with
9 the Mets every year a transition or military summit
10 to bring all of our resources and partners into one
11 space. We actually have a specific track that goes
12 for women veterans, so bringing in different groups
13 that speak to the unique challenges that women
14 veterans face. So we try to market in that sense.
15 We've done postcard mailings to make sure that those
16 older veterans are being touched as well. And then we
17 also do social media pushes and just really try to
18 emphasize that all of our- all of our partners will
19 be in the same place. I think to your point of, you
20 know, people falling through the cracks or losing
21 people, what we try to make sure is that we have
comprehensive and holistic services to where if
someone is filing their claim with our claims
specialist, they're gonna come back because they need
help with getting a job, or maybe they want to start

2 their own business, or maybe they want to be involved
3 in our Dwyer peer programs. So for us, it's making
4 sure that we have enough offerings and services that
5 will keep them coming back, as well as, as Donee's
6 team runs the aftercare, even when they're housed,
7 following up on them. So being really intentional
8 about what that next step is after they're helped
9 initially.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: How many are
11 there doing this? Like, this is very noble, your
12 cause. And not- it's an understatement. And you're
13 working on a very tight budget. So as the Veterans
14 Committee, we've lived through four years as far as
15 I've been on this committee, and we're constantly
16 reiterating the underfunding. So what can we do if we
17 join forces with Amanda's committee? What can we do
18 to advocate for you so that you actually able to get
19 the funds that is necessary so that these workshops
20 can happen? You know, Queens is- what do we have, 2.3
21 million people living in Queens. That- I'd love to
help more. How do we go about setting up these
workshops, especially if we're talking about young
women, young women who are in their prime, 30 years
old, 40 years old, even early 50s. You know, it's

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2 never too late to start your own business. It's never
3 too late to stand on your own two feet. You need the
4 help that you need in order to get this off the
5 ground. So how do we go about it? I mean, a little
6 resource center in my office or in any one of the 51
7 offices that we have throughout the city, what can we
8 do to go beyond all of that? And financially, what is
9 your bottom line number? What is your budget?

8 COMMISSIONER MATA: So right now we are
9 at \$5.9 million.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Five point-

11 COMMISSIONER MATA: 5.8 million.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: 5.8.

13 COMMISSIONER MATA: About 5- 4.9 goes to
14 PS and OTPS. And I know that's going to be a hearing
15 on March 20th. Uh, but to your point that you
16 mentioned, what can- what can this committee do,
17 right? It's like, What we would like to do this year
18 is to make sure that intro 1237 is fully implemented
19 at all.

18 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Tell everybody
19 what 1247 is.

20 COMMISSIONER MATA: Correct. Yes, 12-
21 exactly, and that it must be implemented to ensure

2 that voluntary question if you served in the military
3 or someone in your household served in the military
4 is fully implemented in all city services in that
5 questionnaire. And secondly is also, it is important
6 to tell our stories. I think, to- to tell our
7 stories. I think what is very unique here in this
8 hearing, we were able to showcase that when people
9 think about veterans in itself, they always think
10 about just that one image, right? That they're men.
11 Um, but in reality is that it's coming in different,
12 in different shapes, different sizes. So I think
13 telling our stories in the sense of when you are in
14 the budget hearings, but as well giving the
15 opportunity to the advocates themselves- they have a
16 lot of ideas in mind that perhaps that we can support
17 them on making sure that their deliverables are met
18 with whatever city contract that they may have.
19 Because they maybe they may have certain contracts
20 that are not with DVS, but they have it with someone
21 else. So I think amplifying those services that
they're giving and making sure that their
deliverables are fully supported and fully supported.
And- well, Nicole ended up saying that- well, go
ahead, Nicole.

2 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Yeah. So I think
3 even for us, just, you know, putting the budget piece
4 of this to the side, I think for us what's important
5 is that we have a lot of great programs and services
6 that go on now. And what we would just like is for
7 that the highlight of those programs, I think whether
8 it's hosting our flyers in your office or a QR code
9 that links to the work that we're doing, I think for
10 us it's all about amplification of what we're doing.
11 I think that, that for us is something that we can
12 reach more people being locally in your offices, in
13 the communities. So as simple as just having a flyer
14 that someone may walk by and say, hey, that's
15 something I'm interested in, is— means a lot to us as
16 a small city government agency.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: I think
18 entrepreneurship— I'm all for small business, that's
19 what I come from. And I think with these young women
20 coming out and transitioning, I think the
21 transitioning really should start at an earlier
stage, way before they get out. We talked about this
in my office. And also how to get started in your own
business, to be self-sufficient, to stand on your own
two feet, whether you're married, you're not married,

2 fiancé, no- you got to be able to stand on your own
3 two feet. And these young women, especially those who
4 come out of the military, are so disciplined. And
5 they have the best training going.

6 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: On that note,
7 Councilmember, I just wanna try and get to some of
8 our colleagues.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Okay.

10 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: I'm happy to come
11 back to you.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: But We got to
13 work together on that.

14 COMMISSIONER MATA: Absolutely.

15 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: All right. I want to
16 welcome Council Member Schulman.

17 COUNCIL MEMBER SCHULMAN: Thank you. Thank
18 you very much. And welcome, Commissioner, and
19 congratulations, and look forward to working with you
20 in this new role. A couple of things. One is I wanted
21 to talk about what Council Member Santosuosso brought
up. I'm the Chair of the Health Committee, so
whatever I could do to be helpful there with the
Commissioner, I've been more than happy to do that. I
also wanted to mention that my great aunt was a

2 sergeant in the Women's Army Corps in World War II
3 and served very, very long in that and was- got a
4 number of accommodations and all of that. And I just,
5 what I wanted to ask you, so in my district I
6 actually have a- there's only one organization that
7 helps women veterans in particular, which is
8 Samaritan Daytop Village. So can you tell us what
9 kind of work that they do for women veterans?

8 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Thank you for that
9 question. So we are very familiar with the services
10 that Samaritan Daytop Village provides. We have a lot
11 of members in our community who speak the praises of
12 the work that they do. We also have previously
13 attended the graduation ceremonies, which are always
14 amazing to see. And I'll pass over to Donne for more
15 specifics, but I think for us it's highlighting that
16 work that they're doing. I know for women veterans
17 specifically, they hold different substance abuse
18 programs as well as mental health support, and that's
19 something that we've supported in the past as well
20 and look forward to doing so.

19 COUNCIL MEMBER SCHULMAN: Because I'm
20 going to be funding them for the first time this
21 year. So-

2 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: Yes, and we
3 also assist them with housing. So they make
4 referrals to our agency in regards to housing all
5 veterans, but especially women veterans.

6 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: And can you
7 elaborate more, like, on the services and the
8 housing, just so you could fully understand?

9 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: Yes. So at
10 DVS We house all homeless veterans, but I would— we
11 go through the intake process. We assist with
12 gathering documentation. We also provide guidance
13 throughout the whole process. So I have three staff
14 that works closely with the veterans to walk them
15 through the process, and then once we establish
16 housing for them, we also provide aftercare services.
17 Aftercare is for 22 months where we follow them for—
18 from day one move-in to the 22-month mark to make
19 sure that they're okay, they don't have any issues,
20 and if they do have issues, we can just basically
21 advocate for them and assist with any needs that they
have.

COUNCIL MEMBER SCHULMAN: I thank you
very much. I think it's important for people to know
that we have services like that specifically for

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2 women veterans, and I look forward to working with
3 you and them. Thank you.

4 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLSL: Thank you.

5 COUNCIL MEMBER SCHULMAN: Thank you,
6 chairs, very much.

7 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you,
8 councilmember. Council Member Wong?

9 COUNCIL MEMBER WONG: Thank you, chairs,
10 and thank you, Commissioner Mata, for meeting me the
11 other day and coming to this hearing today. I really
12 have two questions. Number one, uh, every city agency
13 collects data, like NYCHA have applicants identify
14 themselves as veterans, public schools, parents
15 identify themselves as veterans, and go on and on,
16 the homeless services applicants. Do you have access
17 to that data? Because sometimes I find that agency
18 may not share some of that with you because if you
19 have the data, you can do your outreach and say, hey,
20 we're the DVS, here are our services. I mean, do you
21 have access or you need help from us?

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: Yes, thank
you for that question. We work closely with DHS. Um,
they run Squares [sic] for every veteran or every
person that's going into the shelter system. They run

2 their name through the Squares system, which is
3 connected to the VA, to identify if they are a
4 veteran or not. We're partnering also with OCME and
5 other city agencies to see if they would run that,
6 program as well. To see if anyone coming through
7 their system- through their doors are veterans.

8 COUNCIL MEMBER WONG: Yeah, because this
9 way you can do more outreach. And I think that seemed
10 to be the problem here. Not only you, you have- you
11 don't have enough women identifying themselves as
12 veterans. They're not even aware of the services your
13 agency is offering. So I think I heard this a couple
14 of hearings ago, you know, if you don't have data,
15 you don't start collecting data, you can't even
16 identify the problem, right? So, please do your end.
17 And if there's any help, we can reach out to the
18 technology group and get the data that you need.
19 Yeah.

20 COMMISSIONER MATA: Thank you.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER WONG: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER MATA: Additionally, uh, as I
said, as the new commissioner, I am looking into, um,
intro 1237, Local Law 37, to make sure that that law
is, is fully imp- fully implemented, because right

2 now- thank you for mentioning that, because it has
3 been underreported. I'm- I don't know on the top of
4 my head of, of all the agencies that do actually ask
5 that question, but that is something that my team and
6 I will be looking into to make sure that we can
report back to you on that.

7 COUNCIL MEMBER WONG: Okay, thank you. I
8 have a follow-up. Thank you. Whenever there's a- I
9 live in Queens, and if I need to drive to City Hall,
10 I sometimes have to take the LIE, and if LIEs is all
11 jammed up, I take the Borden Avenue shortcut. So I
12 drive by the Borden Avenue shelter quite often, two
13 times a week, sometimes three times a week. And, uh,
14 my observation is that, uh, most of the residents
15 there are men, and it is my understanding it is a
16 shelter for both men and women. So my question is two
17 parts. One, do you have oversight on that shelter,
18 number one? And second, are you doing enough to
identify women, homeless women veterans that may
utilize the services offered by the Borden Avenue
shelter? Thank you.

19 COMMISSIONER MATA: You're welcome. Thank
20 you for that question. Borden Avenue is specifically
21 a men's shelter. No women are housed there. There's

2 no specific women's shelter because there are not
3 enough women coming through the shelter system to
4 just have shelter identified specifically for them,
5 but they are in the shelter system, and DHS do reach
6 out to us when women veterans come through the
7 system.

8 COMMISSIONER MATA: And Borden is
9 federal. Again, with DVS, we're just the sole
10 connector. We do have staff that does go to Borden
11 to, provide services. But again, I think that is a
12 distinction that we're trying to make. DVS is just
13 the sole connector. We provide services, but that is
14 not a shelter that we-

15 COUNCIL MEMBER WONG: Okay, thank you.
16 Thank you for the clarification.

17 COMMISSIONER MATA: You're welcome.

18 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Council
19 Member Wong. Chair Farías.

20 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: I just have one
21 clarifying question to a response you gave Council
Member Palladino earlier, and then one last question
on care coordinators. Just if I heard you correctly
on organizational capacity and budget, you said your
overall budget is \$5.8?

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2 COMMISSIONER MATA: \$5.9.

3 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: \$5.9., and you said
4 \$4.9 million of it goes to PS and OTPS?

5 COMMISSIONER MATA: Correct.

6 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: So you have about \$1
7 million to do what with?

8 COMMISSIONER MATA: We have \$1 million-
9 well, we don't have that many contracts per se to
10 provide to nonprofits, and I think that is one of the
11 One of the things I want to work on- I want to make
12 sure that I can hear directly from the veteran groups
13 to see that what is- what can we add? How can we
14 advocate? Right? So, that is- again, I even- when I
15 saw that number too, it was pretty alarming for me.

16 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: No, I mean, it's why
17 I asked. I heard it and I'm like, wanted to check.
18 And I know you folks will obviously talk at length
19 about your budget at your budget hearing, but I don't
20 sit on the Veterans Committee, so I will likely not
21 be there. So I just wanted to clarify that. Okay, so
there definitely is a need here other- in that
million, other than like what the council has with
the Vallone initiative. That's an additional
allocation per se for programming, but that's, all

2 you have for programming. Okay, so thank you for that
3 clarification. And then I just wanted to ask about
4 the VA assigning maternity care coordinators to
5 pregnant veterans through 12 months postpartum, and
6 just generally, like, at the Bronx VA healthcare
7 system and the Harbor healthcare system, how are
8 these coordinators serving New York City? What's the
9 relationship they have with you folks? Do we know how
10 they support veterans in other boroughs? If you can
11 just holistically talk about that.

12 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: Yes, thank
13 you for that question. My personal experience with
14 the women's care, both at the Bronx and VA Harbor— I
15 am an Army retired staff sergeant, also the women
16 veterans liaison for the agency. And my experience
17 with them has been nothing short but phenomenal. As a
18 woman veteran, the care and compassion I received
19 from the women's health team has truly made a
20 difference in my life. I received prenatal care
21 through the VA, and I began experiencing early
complications that ultimately resulted in a
miscarriage. Jay from the Bronx VA was instrumental
in ensuring that I received the care, attention, and
emotional support I needed during one of the most

2 difficult moments in my life. She helped coordinate
3 mental health services and made sure I did not have
4 to navigate the loss alone. In addition to the
5 experience, I have faced two breast cancer scares,
6 Both times. The staff in my primary care team acted
7 quickly, showed incredible professionalism, and
8 provided the reassurance and medical attention I
9 needed. Their responsiveness and dedication to my
10 health reminded me that I was not just another
11 patient. I was a veteran whose well-being truly
12 mattered. Because of these experiences, I can
13 confidently say that I am a walking testimony to the
14 commitment and compassion of the women's health team
15 at the VA. They consistently go above and beyond to
16 ensure that women veterans receive the care, dignity,
17 and support we deserve. Their work makes— their work
18 makes a real difference for women veterans like me
19 every day, to live every day in sync.

16 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: Well, I appreciate
17 that response, and-

18 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: [interposing]
19 You're welcome.

20 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: you know, hopefully
21 that is a really amazing testimony for other folks

2 that are watching, other veterans that deserve that
3 same level of treatment and resource, that they hear
4 that experience and are able to see that as their
5 push to self-identify and come get some services. I
6 will yield for my questions as I have— I don't have
7 any more, but thank you so much for answering our
8 questions today.

9 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: You're
10 welcome.

11 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: And, Executive
12 Director Smalls, thanks not only for your service to
13 the country but being so willing to share your
14 personal story with the committee. I know, it's gotta
15 be a very emotional and very challenging thing to
16 share in such a public forum, but I think it really
17 illustrates exactly what we're trying to get across
18 here today.

19 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: Thank you.
20 Um, you know, I, I tell the veterans that I come into
21 contact with, sharing my story gives other people the
opportunity to share their story. And sometimes, you
know, veterans like myself, we're scared because we
don't know who we can trust. Because we have endured
so many traumas, either due, you know, our personal

2 lives or serving, and just being able— being the
3 person that someone could feel comfortable with, I I
4 can share my story anytime. So yes, thank you for
5 hearing it.

6 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you. Uh,
7 Commissioner, the— you know, it's, it's no secret
8 that in spite of— and I know you're new, so, uh,
9 maybe you can't answer this question as fully as you
10 might be six months from now, but I'll go ahead and
11 ask it anyway. Uh, you talked about the Department of
12 Veterans Affairs and their data sharing and the
13 different things that they're doing. The— it's no
14 secret that in spite of the warm personal
15 relationship that the president enjoys with the
16 mayor, that there are a lot of fundamental
17 differences that the national administration has with
18 city government and state government in New York that
19 manifests itself in transportation issues,
20 immigration issues, finance issues. From what you can
21 tell, what level of cooperation overall are you
experiencing from the federal Department of Veterans
Affairs and any other relevant federal agencies?

COMMISSIONER MATA: So at DVS, and I
think that is a very important question because we're

2 trying to make that distinction of what DVS is,
3 right? So, at DVS, We are just a sole connector. We
4 are a city agency, a New York City agency. So that is
5 the— sometimes the confusion that people do have,
6 whether, they think of us as the Veteran Affairs and
7 they think that anything that happens at a federal
8 level, that we are also connected or that we have, I
9 would like to say some sort of pull to be able to
10 change whatever happens at a federal level. So I
11 think what we're trying to make clear is that at DVS,
12 we are just so the sole connector in that whatever
13 happens at a federal level, we try our best to
14 communicate it, whether that is through the city
15 agencies or the, or the city partners that we have.
16 And so I think to that response, I would just stick
17 to that we are just the sole connector at a city
18 agency and not responsible for what happens at a
19 federal level.

20 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: But then you wouldn't
21 characterize them from what you could tell as being
uncooperative thus far?

COMMISSIONER MATA: So to my
understanding, but what we are seeing is that when
there is something that does happen at a federal

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2 level, advocates themselves in New York City— when I
3 say advocates, veteran advocates— will make it very
4 clear what is the— what are certain changes that do
5 need to happen. And I think maybe an example can be
6 the, um, disability— how the disability was being—
7 the disability concern that, that just came up from a
8 federal of when you could—

9 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: [interposing] You
10 can just— is that the Richard Starr Act? No?

11 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: So this was
12 separate. This came up a couple of weeks ago where
13 there was some conversations around disability
14 benefits being pulled back once medication treated
15 some sort of illness. And this was something where
16 the advocates, whether that be from VFW, American
17 Legion, or individual veteran advocates, have spoke
18 up about what issues that can cause, how detrimental
19 to the community that can be. And that was actually
20 something that was automatically rescinded. So for
21 us, it's recognizing that we're hearing the community
on the ground level and being able to make sure that
they have the voice to speak their truth and what
they need to happen.

2 COMMISSIONER MATA: And, and I think just
3 adding to that, that was the sole responsibility of
4 DVS of what was happening at a federal level. We were
5 just letting them know, connecting them to that
6 information. But again, I think veteran advocates
7 will add- will make it very clear of what are their
8 needs. And I think that is a very- that's why it's
9 very important that many of them are here today to
10 emphasize what is working, what is not working, and
11 what needs to happen at a city level.

12 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: All right, my last
13 question is in your testimony, Commissioner, you
14 alluded to a lot of female veterans not
15 self-identifying because of stigma and past
16 experience. What can city agencies do to create a
17 safer and more welcoming environment for female
18 veterans to encourage that degree of
19 self-identification?

20 COMMISSIONER MATA: One, one of the
21 things that- I'm going to give an example. One of the
things that DVS has done is partner up with, um, the
Mayor's Office of People with Disabilities to provide
them with military cultural competency of what, what
is- because it's one thing when you are- when it

2 comes to disabilities, right, dealing with someone
3 who is from a veteran that experienced other sort of,
4 of physical harm when, when in the military, or
5 during their service per se. It- you need another
6 type of level of military culture competency. I think
7 it even comes when it comes to like, it- when dealing
8 with- there's many nonprofits, an example out there,
9 that provide amazing services, but because they are
10 not "veteran designated." There's many missed
11 opportunities for veterans to go and get the support
12 that they need there. But oftentimes too, if they do
13 go, there's not that cultural competency, right? So I
14 think at DVS, um, as the military family advocate
15 program that we do, that we launched out of Staten
16 Island, right? That is something that we're trying to
17 bring in all 5 boroughs. But additionally, as DVS, we
18 want to connect with- first, I want to talk to the
19 veteran groups first to know, like, how can we
20 provide services to city agencies and other partners,
21 uh, when it comes to military culture competency. I
also want to have their say on this, but that is
something that as an agency we're going to start
working on.

2 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you,
3 Commissioner, not only for your testimony here today
4 and for your service to the people of the city of New
5 York, but for you and your family's service to the
6 country in the military. Appreciate it very much.

7 COMMISSIONER MATA: Thank you all, and
8 thank you for giving us this opportunity. Again, as I
9 know my testimony also ran longer, but I think this
10 was an opportunity that oftentimes women don't get
11 the opportunity to speak out on what's going on. And
12 thank you for giving me that chance to talk about
13 what women veterans go through. And I'm really
14 looking forward to also hearing all the testimonies
15 from all the advocates too, to know what as an agency
16 we need to work on and how I can better support them,
17 too.

18 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thanks very much.
19 Thank you, Executive Director Smalls and Ms. Orlando
20 as well. All right, we are going to open the hearing
21 for public testimony at this point. I'll remind
members of the public that this is a formal
government proceeding and that decorum shall be
observed at all times. As such, members of the public
shall remain silent at all times. The witness table

2 is reserved for people who wish to testify. No video
3 recording or photography is allowed from the witness
4 table. Further, members of the public may not present
5 audio or video recordings as testimony, but may
6 submit transcripts of such recordings to the
7 Sergeant-at-Arms for inclusion in the hearing record.
8 If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please fill
9 out an appearance card with the sergeant-at-arms and
10 wait to be recognized. When recognized, you'll have
11 two minutes. Might- if we're feeling generous, might
12 give you an extra minute to speak on today's hearing
13 topic, which is serving women veterans. We will hear
14 all in-person testimony first and then turn testimony
15 on- turn to testimony on Zoom. If you have a written
16 statement or additional written testimony you wish to
17 submit for the record, please provide a copy of that
18 testimony to the Sergeant-at-Arms. And by the way,
19 thank you to the Sergeants-at-Arms for the great work
20 they've done today, as always. I'll now call the
21 first panel: Ashton Stewart, Derek Coy, Ronald Reid.
Please come on up and be heard.

ASHTON STEWART: Good morning. My name is
Ashton Stewart. Thank you, Chair Morano and thank
you, Chair Farías and members of the New York City

2 Council Committee on Veterans and Women Gender Equity
3 for holding this hearing. You'll see before you, I've
4 got a long four-page testimony. I'm just going to
5 highlight some of the things here. There is an
6 attachment that I will bring up as well. I am the
7 Veterans Program Manager for MJHS Hospice Palliative
8 Care and the MJHS Health System. We're the
9 not-for-profit organization and the second largest
10 hospital provider in the region. I'm also a Navy
11 veteran and a veteran who served in the First Gulf
12 War during Desert Shield. We have served hundreds of
13 veterans in our programs. Really, we've stepped it up
14 because I got my certification as a Veteran Service
15 Officer in 2024. We've served many women veterans,
16 including a 107-year-old from your council district,
17 Paladino, who served in the Women's Air Corps, whose
18 family informed us that she she was denied VA
19 healthcare, and we reminded them that despite her
20 income, that in 2023, they announced that all World
21 War II veterans are eligible for no-cost healthcare
at the VA. After admission to the MJHS Hospice, we
are able to secure additional support from the VA for
her, helping to take off some much-needed respite for
the caregivers, and we recognize her service. That

2 set the stage for future generations of female
3 service members. We presented her with the Veterans
4 Day proclamation signed by New York State Governor
5 Hochul. We helped get the medals that she would never
6 received, that she had earned 80 years ago. And it
7 was just such an honor to meet her and support her.
8 We also had another veteran who was one of the first
9 to get the COVID shot at the Manhattan VA. She was a
10 pediatrician in the Army and retired, and we helped
11 the family arrange for her to be reunited with her
12 husband after giving her also a veteran recognition
13 ceremony in the VA cemetery in Puerto Rico. This
14 pocket card is to address clinicians. We developed
15 this with the State Department of Veterans Services
16 because of the gap that was identified by a RAND
17 study in 2018 that only two percent of public and
18 private providers are even asking a question if
19 somebody served. We pared it down to seven simple
20 questions leading with our- did you serve in the US
21 military? And then the sensitive approach, "Is it
okay if I talk with you about your military
experience?" These QR codes are essential.

Restoration of Honor is for women who are victims of
MST. The transgender population who is getting booted

2 out of the service right now, the Restoration of
3 Honor will help them get upgraded to honorable if
4 they find themselves with another than honorable
5 discharge. It's wonderful legislation that is, of
6 course, advertised here as well. So early detection
7 is key and essential to supporting veterans. Thank
8 you so much for the opportunity to share this with
9 you today.

8 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you.

9 RONALD REID: Thank you. My name is Ronald
10 Reid. I'm the—

11 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: [interposing] Nice
12 and close, Mr. Reid, to the mic, if you would.

13 RONALD REID: Thank you. My name is Ronald
14 Reid. I am a veteran, Army veteran. I am the SAGE
15 Vets Program Manager, a New York State program that
16 supports LGBTQ+ adults over 50 at SAGE. SAGE is the
17 nation's oldest and largest organization dedicated to
18 LGBTQ+ older adults. Since 1978, we've worked to
19 ensure that LGBTQ+ elders, veterans, and older New
20 Yorkers living with HIV can age with dignity and
21 support. We provided services and advocacy that
combat isolation, promote health, wellness, expand
access to affirming housing and care, advance

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2 policies that protect LGBTQ+ elders. I would like to
3 share a story that speaks to these issues. We
4 recently worked with a 78-year-old white bisexual
5 veteran living in Manhattan. He served honorably in
6 the U.S. Army during the Vietnam era, a time when he
7 was being open about his identity would have cost him
8 everything. Decades later, he still lives with this
9 impact that- of that service, chronic back, neck, and
10 foot pain from intense physical training, along with
11 mental health disabilities that affects his daily
12 life, trying to find housing that is affordable with
13 an elevator or not a fourth-floor walk-up. Providing
14 veterans with a mission preference for public housing
15 is a direct way to honor their service and provide
16 them with stability and support needed to thrive in
17 civilian life. This is especially important for
18 LGBTQ+ veterans experiencing housing instability who
19 may have been denied access to benefits available to
20 others. Thank you.

17 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you for your
18 testimony, and thank you for your service as well.

19 DEREK COY: Hello, Derek Coy. Thank you,
20 Chairperson Fariás and Morano and members of the
21 committee for the opportunity to testify on behalf of

2 the New York Health Foundation. My name is Derek Coy,

3 and I'm a senior program officer at NY Health. I'm

4 also a former sergeant in the United States Marine

5 Corps and veteran of the Iraq War. For nearly 20

6 years, NY Health has supported numerous

7 organizations, including city agencies, to understand

8 and address the health needs of New York's veteran

9 population, with a particular focus on women

10 veterans. Women have served this nation honorably in

11 every war since our founding— our nation's founding,

12 often in unacknowledged roles, yet full gender

13 equality in military service remained out of reach

14 for generations. Since the cap on female

15 participation was lifted in 1973, the number of women

16 serving has grown steadily. Today, women are the

17 fastest-growing segment of the veteran population and

18 are younger and more racially diverse when compared

19 to their male counterparts. Despite this growth,

20 significant gaps remain in our understanding of women

21 veterans' health and well-being, particularly on

highly consequential issues such as suicide and

justice involvement. At NY Health, we've invested in

research to help close these gaps, such as the first

comprehensive review of veterans' health and social

2 service needs in 14 years, as well as a study of
3 minority veterans in New York State, both of which
4 centered women's voices in the process. We offer
5 several findings as a resource to inform the
6 committee's work in our written testimony, but since
7 my time here is limited, I would like to harp on a
8 few that I believe are paramount. Research indicates
9 that women veterans face distinct barriers to
10 accessing care and other support. A 2020 Syracuse
11 University study of women in the military found that
12 more than half did not feel prepared to navigate
13 resources in their community after their time in
14 service, compared to just 37 percent of their male
15 counterparts. This likely contributes to one of the
16 most pressing issues veterans face, that of suicide.
17 Tragically, veteran suicide remains a chronic
18 problem, and mortality data underscores this
19 disproportionate risk women veterans face. In 2022,
20 the national suicide rate for women veterans was 92
21 percent higher than for non-veteran women. We know
veterans involved in the justice system are twice as
likely to die by suicide compared to veterans with no
history of criminal justice involvement. At the same
time, women have become the fastest-growing

2 incarcerated population in the U.S. However, there is
3 limited data on women veterans' involvement with the
4 justice system. Beyond these sobering facts, it is
5 hard to fully grasp the complex and intersecting
6 dynamics of suicide, justice involvement, and gender
7 since they are often underrepresented in data and
8 surveys due to privacy concerns and small population
9 sizes. Without timely, reliable, disaggregated data,
10 women veterans remain statistically invisible even as
11 disparities persist. To better serve women veterans,
12 we urge the City Council to consider closing these
13 critical data gaps, equipping the broader health
14 system and community providers to better meet the
15 unique needs of women veterans, and strengthening
16 outreach and engagement to women veterans
17 specifically. We appreciate and share the council's
18 focus on women veterans. With better data, stronger
19 coordination, and targeted outreach, New York City
20 can lead in ensuring that women veterans are not only
21 recognized, but fully supported. I hope that you will
look to myself and the foundation as a partner and
resource for this work, and thank you for your time
on this critically important topic.

2 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you for your
3 testimony, Mr. Coy, and for your service. And I know
4 you didn't get to the entirety of your testimony,
5 especially about the very important aspects of
6 strengthening outreach and engagement. We will all
7 read that thoroughly, and that will absolutely be a
8 part of the committee's record. Thank you for putting
9 in so much work, and all three of you for such
10 well-prepared testimony today. Appreciate it.

11 DEREK COY: Thank you.

12 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you. All
13 right, at that point, we'll call our next panel:
14 Michael Matos, Coco Culhane, and Dr. Remolia Simpson.
15 Apologies if I mispronounce anyone's name. Please
16 correct me when you get a chance. Go ahead when
17 you're ready.

18 MICHAEL MATOS: Good afternoon, Chair
19 Murano, Chair Farías, committee members. My name is
20 Michael Matos, and I serve as the President of Five
21 Borough Veterans. Our sole purpose is to strengthen
the position of New York City's military-connected
community through advocacy, civic engagement and
legislative action, ensuring that we are not just
heard by decision makers in this city, but that we

2 help shape its future. I grew up in NYCHA housing.
3 That's not a detail I mentioned for sympathy, but
4 because I know what public housing actually means to
5 a family that has nothing else. It served as the
6 difference between a stable foundation and critical
7 instability, and is a resource that too many veterans
8 in this city struggle to access right now. I served
9 in the United States Coast Guard. When I left, I had
10 the benefit of having people around me who helped me
11 stabilize. Not every veteran does. NYCHA houses one
12 in 17 New Yorkers and has the legal authority under
13 both state law and federal regulation to give
14 veterans a preference in admissions. It has simply
15 chosen not to. There is an unchecked box in NYCHA's
16 admissions preference form. Domestic violence
17 survivors have this preference, as well as
18 intimidated witnesses. We're asking that those who
19 serve this country be extended the same
20 consideration. Next week, on March 10th, Five Borough
21 Veterans will be on the ground for the city's annual
Hope Count, going street by street to find our
homeless veterans, make sure they're counted, and
connect them to resources. Veterans living on the
street are often more willing to talk to someone who

2 shares their bond of service, so we'll be there. What
3 we need is something to offer them. NYCHA should be
4 one of those options. This hearing also takes up the
5 question of how this city serves women veterans, and
6 that matter deserves equal attention. Five Borough
7 Veterans looks forward to hearing from our women
8 veteran advocates on what they need so we can focus
9 on taking the legislative action required to support
10 them effectively. On both fronts, the path forward is
11 the same: identify the gap and close it. NYCHA has
12 been asked four times since 2004 to include a
13 veteran's preference in their agency plan. We are
14 here to make sure it happens, and we intend to stay
15 at the table until it is done. The process exists.
16 The authority exists. What's needed now is the will.
17 Thank you.

18 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Mr.
19 Matos. One quick question, for me, and I'm looking
20 forward very much to working with you over the next
21 couple of years to help a lot of veterans. In the
most recent count that you've done of unsheltered
homeless veterans. Can you estimate approximately
what the unsheltered homeless veteran population is
in New York City?

2 MICHAEL MATOS: So that's the concern,
3 Chair Morano. So we spoke with the NYC Department of
4 Social Services on the last count. Now we're a brand
5 new agency, so we haven't done an account ourselves,
6 but the reason why we're doing this, the Hope Count
7 next week is because we specifically asked DSS what
8 metric they use to measure how many veterans are out
9 in the street, and there is none. So the reason why
10 we're going out there is we created our own metric,
11 and we're gonna go find them ourselves, hand them
12 over to DVS for proper connection, and ensure that
13 working for- moving forward with DSS, they establish
14 their own metrics so we don't have to go do it
15 ourselves.

16 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: I hope you'll keep
17 the committee posted.

18 MICHAEL MATOS: Absolutely.

19 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you very much.

20 MICHAEL MATOS: Of course.

21 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Please.

COCO CULHANE: Hi. I'm Coco Culhane, the
Executive Director of Veteran Advocacy Project. We
provide free legal services to veterans and their
families, and we focus on working with those

2 individuals who have post-traumatic stress, brain
3 injury, substance use issues, other mental health
4 conditions. So we really work with a small
5 subpopulation of veterans who are extremely
6 vulnerable. And so instead of going through— I have a
7 lot of stats and policy sort of stuff in my
8 testimony. I just wanted to make a few points and
9 share a client's story. You know, I think the need
10 for accurate data, as you were just talking about
11 with homeless vets, you know, I mean, every year at
12 the hearing DHS talks about how they know their names
13 and they know where all six of them are, and it
14 drives me mad because we have at least that many
15 people in our database already. So I think the need
16 for accurate data is really important. But more than
17 that, the voices of women veterans need to be heard.
18 What are the practical realities behind those
19 numbers? What are they actually experiencing? I'm a
20 civilian. I don't pretend to speak for anyone, but I
21 think that is really important. So often, you know,
how these laws and these different policies play out
are not exactly what's intended. So getting the facts
on the ground for people who are impacted by them, I
think is so important. And the other thing I wanted

2 to touch on is the impact of systemic racism. It's
3 what we see in addition to focusing on mental health.
4 That is probably the largest trauma that we see among
5 our clients. And if you look at statistics about
6 service members, it impacts discipline and discharge
7 rates, and a person's discharge status determines
8 what access to benefits and healthcare that they
9 have. So, just to give you a quick statistic.

10 Something like, I think 60 percent of women veterans
11 are white, 53 percent of our clients are women who
12 are Black, 83 percent are women of color. So you see
13 there an incredible imbalance. And so I just- if I
14 may share-

15 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: [interposing] Please.

16 COCO CULHANE: the story, a client story.

17 I think it exemplifies some of the challenges. And
18 again, this is among the most vulnerable individuals,
19 but we had a woman who served in the Navy's- in the
20 Navy in the early 1980s. She was doing quite well,
21 and she was then raped in her barracks. She turned to
alcohol and then marijuana. She was discharged other
than honorably, and she spent the next 35 years being
unsheltered, struggling with addiction, and she had a
stroke, she had lung cancer. She finally found

2 supportive housing and then was facing eviction
3 because she was, you know, trying to get by on
4 Supplemental Security Income. She had never told
5 anyone she was a veteran ever in those decades. She
6 was referred to VAP for services, and we represented
7 her in housing court, in public benefits. But we also
8 represented her with her VA claim and the Department
9 of Defense to get a discharge upgrade. And what she
10 experienced was that despite the fact that there were
11 medical records showing she'd gotten pregnant,
12 despite, you know, all of the different providers
13 that she had gone to for her PTSD, the Board of
14 Correction of Naval Records denied her upgrade
15 because one record said that she was 29 when she was
16 raped, and they pointed out she would have been out
17 of the Navy for 2 years at that point. So one number
18 that may have been a typo among thousands of pages
19 are what has held her back. On the VA side, she was
20 granted service connection for her PTSD. They
21 believed her, but a procedural error has kept her
case— kept her from getting the monetary benefits
that go with that. And so we appealed it. She has
been waiting more than three years just on that
appeal. Her claim started six years ago. Last month I

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2 received an email from the VA saying that she is
3 9,306th in line for a hearing. So that's some of the
4 realities, you know, that people are struggling with,
5 and not all women veterans, obviously, but those are
6 the ones I think we have a responsibility to make
7 sure that we're creating programs and reaching out
8 to. So thank you for your time today.

9 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Ms.

10 Culhane. And, you may say that you're not here to
11 speak for anyone, but something tells me there are a
12 whole lot of veterans that are glad you're speaking
13 for them. And on March 10th, we're going to be doing
14 a roundtable, myself, Councilmember Salaam, and
15 Councilmember Banks on issues specifically facing
16 Black veterans. It's going to be right here, and I
17 hope you'll come to that as well. Okay, Dr. Simpson?

18 REMOLIA SIMPSON: Hi, my name is Dr.

19 Simpson. Remolia Simpson is my name.

20 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you.

21 REMOLIA SIMPSON: And I'm here on behalf—
well, first of all, I'm a U.S. Army veteran. I've
served six active duty years and 10 inactive duty
years. Okay. We work as— when I say we, I mean just
us volunteers because we hear what the problem is. So

2 we just do work as a volunteer, like veterans
3 volunteer, and in the trenches, basically. So, and we
4 proudly support DVS in this ongoing effort and safe
5 support- I'm sorry, and secure, safe, and stable
6 housing for the veterans and families in need. In the
7 past year alone, we have proudly served- and
8 Executive Director Donée Smalls doesn't even know
9 this- we've proudly served 102 veterans, just us on
10 the ground. So thank you, Commissioner. Thank you,
11 DVS, again for that. Helped providing them
12 connections to essential services, resources. We
13 specialize in assisting veterans impacted by military
14 sexual trauma. Drawing from lives- drawing from lived
15 experience to provide compassionate, informed, and
16 peer-centered support. Their leadership and
17 partnership strengthened our ability to deliver
18 meaningful volunteer services that directly assist
19 local nonprofit organizations such as NAAM House,
20 N-A-A-M House, and My Brother's House, through
21 collaboration, shared resources, and coordinated- and
coordination to housing solutions while reinforcing
the community support system that empowers those who
have served.

2 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you very much.
3 Thank you. At this point, I'll invite our final
4 in-person witness, Mr. Joe Bello of New York Metro
5 Vets to come on up, and then we'll get to Zoom
6 testimony. Thank you. When you're ready, Mr. Bello.

7 JOE BELLO: Okay, before I begin, real
8 quick, I just want to make a note that I do support
9 the resolutions that were today. So I'd like to see
10 them both pass.

11 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you.

12 JOE BELLO: Anything around data and
13 education are real important, so. Chair Morano, Chair
14 Farías, and members of the Veterans and Women Gender
15 Equity Committees, thank you for holding this long
16 overdue hearing. All veterans are entitled to the
17 benefits they have earned, yet men and women often
18 experience military service differently and return to
19 civilian life with distinct needs. I appreciate this
20 hearing as the last City Council hearing focused
21 specifically on women veterans was held 2008, and
that's when DVS was still the Mayor's Office of
Veterans Affairs. So, since then, the landscape has
changed. Our veteran population has aged. The number
of women veterans have steadily grown. However, the

2 city's capacity to identify, measure, and proactively
3 respond to their needs has not kept pace. I would
4 like to make three central points on this. Nearly
5 15,000 Women veterans call New York City home,
6 representing more than 10 percent of our veterans
7 population and one of the fastest segments. Yet our
8 policies, our reporting, and outreach systems have
9 not kept pace with their growth or their distinct
10 needs. First, we cannot serve what we do not measure.
11 The city does not consistently publish gender
12 and race desegregated data on how many veterans
13 interact with housing, health, and economic support
14 systems. We lack borough-level outreach metrics
15 aligned with where women veterans live, and we do not
16 see outcome measures demonstrating whether services
17 improve stability or security. A recent audit also
18 found data insecurities and missing legally required
19 reports from DVS. Without these reliable, transparent
20 data, oversight weakens and resources may not reach
21 those who need them most. Second, women veterans face
elevated risks. Women who serve are significantly
more likely to experience military sexual trauma,
which have long-term impacts on health, employment,
and housing stability. While the City has reduced the

2 overall number of homeless veterans dramatically, we
3 do not publish homeless data by gender. That means we
4 cannot determine whether women veterans face distinct
5 barriers or disparities in housing access. Third,
6 outreach from DVS remains largely reactive. Delays in
7 responding to VetConnect items can delay assistance
8 such as housing requests, which can mean eviction or
9 even having to go into shelter. I agree with the
10 Commissioner that Local Law 37 has the potential to
11 improve identification across city agencies. But it
12 was passed in 2024, and implementation and public
13 reporting are not complete. I also— there we go. I
14 would also urge, besides the implementation of Local
15 Law 37, quarterly disaggregated reporting, and having
16 DVS consider publication of a women veterans
17 strategic plan with measurable goals, outcomes, and
18 timelines. Women veterans have served with
19 distinction. They deserve city systems that see them,
20 measure their needs accurately, and respond
21 effectively. Thank you.

18 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you very much
19 for your testimony. All right, thank you to all of
20 you who came here to share your thoughts and
21 experiences today. If there's anyone in the room who

2 wishes to speak but has not yet had the opportunity
3 to do so, please raise your hand and fill out an
4 appearance card with the Sergeant-at-Arms at the back
5 of the room. But barring that, that concludes the
6 in-person portion of our public testimony. So we'll
7 now move to remote testimony. If you're testifying
8 remotely, please listen for your name to be called.
9 Once your name's called, a member of our staff will
10 unmute you. You may then start your testimony once
11 the Sergeant-at-Arms sets the clock and cues you to
12 begin. We will begin with someone who I'm not sure if
13 I've ever heard testify at one of these hearings
14 before, Christopher Leon Johnson.

15 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

16 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Yeah, hello,
17 my name is Christopher Leon Johnson. I support all
18 the resolutions on this ticket, but I want to make
19 this clear that I pray that this new Commissioner,
20 Ysidia Mata, succeeds in her position as DVS
21 Commissioner. But I want to make this clear that I
think that next time when we have the pre-budget
hearings, they should start questioning her about,
like, what was that situation with her with ICE, her
getting at the ICE agent to tell him, get the f-out.

2 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: I'm going to stop you
3 there, and if you do not remain on topic, we will
4 mute your microphone. So if you'd like to remain on
5 topic and give testimony towards serving women
6 veterans in New York City, you can't continue.

7 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: I am. Man,
8 this- you got to calm down, okay?

9 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: Please do not tell me
10 to calm down. What I need you to do is continue your
11 testimony.

12 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Okay, okay.

13 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: On topic.

14 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Going forward,
15 when it comes to women's veterans, if she's a woman
16 veteran- I just want- when it comes to women's
17 veterans, yeah when it comes- they need to prioritize
18 women's veterans from getting NYCHA units over the
19 people that- we could tell like they just sleep
20 around all day and they just get- they get
21 everything. It's just like, it shouldn't be like
that. People that serve this country first should get
prioritized, that then the legal immigrants and
people that just come fresh out of prison, like, who
just completely like a criminal. That should be the

2 thing. Going with this resolution. Decline. Yeah,
3 so- yeah, hello? Yeah, so basically in a nutshell, I
4 support resolutions on the bill. Going forward, the
5 veterans should be prioritized more than everybody
6 else that like who just no good in the city.

7 [inaudible] city where we prioritize the migrants and
8 people that like commit all these crimes in the city,
9 and they get put on a pedestal. They get parades and
10 stuff like that, more than veterans.

11 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Thank you, your time
12 expired.

13 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: Thank you, Mr.
14 Johnson.

15 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Thank you.

16 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: All right, if
17 there's anyone else currently on Zoom who wishes to
18 speak, but has not yet had the opportunity to do so,
19 please use the raise hand function and our staff will
20 unmute you. If there's anyone else present in the
21 room who's not had the opportunity to testify but
wishes to do so, please raise your hand. And what
I'll just add as a point of personal privilege for
everybody. Obviously this is a group of people in the
room that's very well connected in the veterans

2 community. This is one of the most important topics,
3 women- serving women veterans in New York City that I
4 could possibly think of for the City Council to
5 address. And I'm grateful to the seven folks that
6 testified in-person and even the one gentleman that
7 testified via Zoom. But I can't help but think that
8 there are dozens, maybe hundreds of other folks that
9 we could have heard from today and either didn't know
10 about the opportunity to testify at this hearing, or
11 they weren't able to make themselves available to
12 testify. To the extent that you're able- we're gonna
13 be covering a lot of important subjects with this
14 committee, and I know Chair Fariás covers a lot of
15 important subjects with her committee. I'd really
16 appreciate it if you could spread the word throughout
17 your circles, your social groups, your professional
18 circles, your volunteer circles, that we're really
19 eager for the testimony of veterans, particularly
20 female veterans, and we're taking their feedback into
21 into account as we formulate the next oversight steps
and as we formulate legislation. I think there's a
lot of folks that have a lot to add that we didn't
necessarily hear from today. With that, I will invite
Chair Fariás to give her closing remarks.

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2 CHAIRPERSON FARIÁS: You've said it all.

3 This hearing is now adjourned. Gavel us out.

4 CHAIRPERSON MORANO: [gavel] Thank you,
5 everyone.
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C E R T I F I C A T E

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



Date April 20, 2026