

**Testimony of James W. Hendon**  
**Commissioner of the New York City**  
**Department of Veterans' Services (DVS)**  
**New York City Council Committee on Veterans**  
**Topic: Implementing Recommendations from the City Council's Report Card Initiative**  
**April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025, 1:00 pm**

Good afternoon, Chair Holden, members of the Veterans Committee, other City Council Members, and all who are present here today – including Veteran community members.

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

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

I want to start by saying thank you for taking the time to put this analysis together. A great deal of consideration, diligence, and care went into drafting this document. We appreciate the report card and, to its creators, we appreciate you. So much of inclusion is about having a seat at the table. It is about being seen. Us having this discussion today and having points added to the public record; this is *you* seeing *us* – the Veteran community. That Veterans are the first organization (and, by extension, group) to be viewed in this manner is historic and it is an honor. Thank you so much for increasing Veteran and Military family visibility.

For a roadmap of my comments, first I will provide a few initial flags (precursor items), then we will speak to the overall tenor of the report in the context of four major themes. Those themes are: resource allocation, managing expectations, penetration, and smart growth. In the smart growth section, we will offer recommendations about what DVS in the coming years could look like. We will address the recommendations that appear at the end of the report. Lastly, we will offer recommendations to the City Council on what it can do as a body to help advance New York City's Veteran community.

**Flags**

Now, to the flags.

The Speaker released a 76-page written report – a document that was roughly one year in the making. We are responding to that report through delivering testimony during a City Council Hearing (with two weeks of time to process the analysis). There is asymmetry between what was written and how we are responding to it. For that reason, we will not be able to address every

single item written in a report that is nearly 20,000 words long. We will honor the spirit of the report while addressing its feedback through four key themes.

In the grand scheme of things, this a broader discussion about the past, present, and future of New York City's Veteran community as anchored in the context of an exchange about DVS. In service of these larger dynamics – and the people impacted by them – we are going to try as best we can to speak in a way that honors a community hundreds of thousands of members strong (when including family members) and offer comments that still stand tall ten, twenty, and thirty years from now.

In that same vein: I urge the Council and all who are interested to review our most recent City council testimony. This was delivered during the preliminary budget hearing held on Tuesday, March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2025. That testimony – which can be viewed at [legistar.council.nyc.gov](https://legistar.council.nyc.gov) – speaks in detail about our department's history, how DVS is arrayed, our primary service areas, what we do to fulfill our charter mandate, it reviews our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and it relays current priorities. In the interest of time, I will try not to speak too deeply about things that were already mentioned there. I do want to distinguish: that testimony was rooted in the context of FY 26 preliminary budget discussions. This testimony speaks to an assessment of DVS' past nine years of performance in general.

Another flag: there are execution approaches made in the score card that claim to have been informed by municipal and higher level government work in Australia and Europe. Some of these norms, while purportedly common outside of the United States, have no precedent for being done at the City, State, or Federal levels inside of America. While DVS prides itself on innovation and we are open to taking calculated risks in pursuit of advancement and the betterment of our community, when we encounter an idea that is orders of magnitude outside of what is usually done and / or is too far removed from the norms of what is realistic and attainable in this nation (at any level of government), we put those ideas to the side. Hopefully, they can be accounted for in a separate conversation. This is also tied to us speaking to the spirit of the report and not getting in the weeds.

One final flag: I pray that we can have a healthy discussion. Everything that follows is not borne from a place of “let's blame this person for this, or that person for that.” It comes from a place of “let's speak openly about what's going on.” What has gone well? What needs work? And what does the path look like as we navigate towards a better tomorrow? It is clear from the report: those who contributed to the scorecard acted with benevolent intentions, kind hearts, and good faith. They acted in a way that removed ego and maintained focus on the Veteran community. We aim to embody that same mood.

### **Major themes**

#### **Theme #1: Resource Allocation**

It is important to note that we, the NYC Department of Veterans' Services, are a municipal government entity. We were created through a law passed by the City Council, then signed by the Mayor on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015 (Local Law 113 of 2015). Our date of establishment is April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016. As a public organization, DVS – the smallest department in New York City government – does all that we can to execute the laws that are written using the budget that we are provided.

We are not an advocacy organization. We are not elected officials. We are public sector employees.

Our task – per Chapter 75 of the New York City Charter – is to *assist* and *inform* members of the uniformed services community (including allies and stakeholders) in the areas of healthcare, housing, benefits, culture, education, and employment.

When recommendations are written which circle back to the comment (paraphrasing): “DVS does not have enough resources,” note that we—along with all agencies—must operate within the budget that we do have in an environment where citywide financial resources are finite, and we are able to achieve great work with the staff and resources that are available to the department. “We can always do more with more” is a statement we have uttered several times during past City Council hearings through the years. When resource changes can be made, we embrace them.

For instance, we thank the Mayor's Office of Management and Budget and City Hall for enabling us to onboard three new hires in the weeks since our last hearing. Another new team member will begin with our agency in May. For an organization with 39 authorized positions, every bit counts.

Needless to say, when we do not have the resources ... when the City is going through tough times (like the COVID-19 pandemic and the migrant crisis), we do not stop and feel sorry for ourselves. We do not retreat and complain. Our Veterans (all of them ... including their families) sacrificed so much for this country, doing more with less. We can function too. Our challenges – relative to those overcome by our community – are small. That said, in the face of adversity and extreme scarcity, DVS innovates and executes.

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

Being that this is the norm for DVS – being tasked to do a lot with a little – we focus very much on how to leverage the resources and partners around us to attain certain capabilities. For each of our charter mandated areas (healthcare, housing, benefits, culture, education, and employment), questions that we ask are:

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

The Speaker's report, to me, suggests – not explicitly, but through its tone – that the Department of Veterans' Services should directly solve all of the community's needs. I take a different approach. In my opinion, especially in light of us only having 39 authorized staff members (more than a quarter of whom are administrative personnel), we focus on *facilitating an environment* where the community's needs can be solved. DVS is not the end all, be all; we are a catalyst for further change.

From a military standpoint: we aim to ensure that certain capabilities are present in the landscape. We enact that approach by offering *direct services* (where needed), providing *referrals*, and executing what we call *synergies*. Synergies are situations where we collaboratively work with partners to ensure that – for the value delivered to Veterans and their loved ones – the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Our prior testimony (from March 25<sup>th</sup>) elaborates on what we have done in this space. We catalogue the various efforts that touch each of our charter-mandated areas. We collaborate with several partners – city, state, and federal ... public, private, and nonprofit. We do our best to foster a dynamic where we punch above our weight class such that (inclusive of partners)  $1 + 1 = 3$ .

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

### Theme #2: Expectation Management

This brings me to the theme of managing expectations.

In general, I take responsibility for the feedback that we, the NYC Department of Veterans' Services, have not managed expectations in the best way that we can with the Veteran community.

There are several things to say here in clearing the air.

First off: we are not the US Department of Veterans Affairs. Often times, Veterans and their loved ones have grievances that they wish to air with the federal government about VA services

and they do not know where to go. They come to us. We try to advance their issues when we are able, but much of the work centers on our charter mandated tasks to *assist* and *inform*. We assist and inform the client on how to engage the VA on a subject. At times when they believe that no movement has occurred, we provide them with the VA's Office of Inspector General contact information (for the record, the VA's Office of Inspector General website is [va.gov/oig](http://va.gov/oig). The OIG hotline is 1-800-488-8244).

Another nuance in confusing us with the VA: for Veterans who face housing insecurity, the VA (specifically, the Veterans Health Administration, or VHA) will assist Veterans who are eligible for VA healthcare. The VA will provide social work / case management services and connect eligible Veterans to HUD-VASH vouchers (Housing and Urban Development – Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing vouchers). HUD-VASH Vouchers are Section 8 Vouchers that are specifically for Veterans. The thing is: if you are not eligible for VA healthcare, then the VA will *not* provide assistance should you become housing insecure. That responsibility falls on us.

Historically, approximately 40% of New York City's homeless Veterans are not VHA-eligible. For those Veterans, we assist them with the housing search. We engage landlords. We obtain a special voucher called a HUD-VASH Collaborative Case Management Voucher. This allows us to distribute a HUD-VASH Section 8 Voucher while filling the VA's void in providing the Veteran with case management and social work services after they have been housed. DVS has housed 1,447 Veterans since our inception, 249 of whom used Collaborative Case Management Vouchers while 479 used traditional HUD-VASH. Beyond that, for those who do not wish to use VASH at all, we have housed 719 Veterans since our inception who used non-VASH vouchers including, but not limited to: traditional Section 8, the City Fighting Homelessness and Eviction Prevention Supplement, (City FHEPS), and the Special Exit and Prevention Supplement (SEPS).

This is our contribution to the City's reduction in the homeless Veteran population from 4,677 in 2011 to 624 in 2024 – a more than 85% decline.

Each of our housing coordinators performs 12-15 moveouts (from shelter) per quarter. When advocates say "I do not see DVS in the shelters," our response:

- Our team is busy taking the Veterans we assist to viewings, coordinating moveouts, facilitating payments tied the move, obtaining voucher certifications (and, when needed, re-certifications), and other tasks. When we are at the shelters (which is at least three days per week), we are interviewing clients in service of those things; and
- There are approximately 650 sites that house homeless persons in New York City. While the largest consolidation of homeless Veterans are located at Borden Avenue Veterans Residence in Long Island City, Queens (which has 225 beds), with a Point in Time count of 624 Veterans, it is implied that DVS personnel also spend time at other places. We help clients who are housed at other shelter sites, too.

While we do what we can to achieve certain capabilities (partnership and collaboration are our cornerstones), it is important to make sure all who observe us know that we are a small agency who efficiently uses the resources we have to accomplish an incredible amount.

I feel as though, in the report, our agency's size relative to what we have done as such a small organization was not factored into the scoring.

DVS maximizes the resources that we deliver through direct services, referrals, and synergies. That said, it is not an apples-to-apples comparison to put us side-by-side with other departments.

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

- Employment ([nyc.gov/vetjobs](http://nyc.gov/vetjobs)). DVS has built a strong, direct rapport with City agencies as well as approximately 35 Veteran-friendly corporations and counting – in addition to the New York City Employment & Training Coalition and the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities' NYC At Work Program – to facilitate employment opportunities at a rate of roughly 125 per month. A key differentiator between us and our colleagues at the Department of Small Business Services – whom we work in lock step with (via their Priority 1 program): SBS helps clients obtain jobs where the median pay is \$19 per hour. DVS helps clients obtain jobs that traditionally pay more than \$40,000 per year.
- VA Claims ([nyc.gov/vetclaims](http://nyc.gov/vetclaims)). During FY 25, the City Council, in its wisdom – we thank Veterans Committee Chair Robert Holden, Finance Committee Chair Justin Brannan, and Speaker Adrienne Adams for this – funded a Veterans Resource Center Initiative which effectively increases the number of accredited Veteran Service Officers who help New York City Veterans file VA Claims from the six whom we have at DVS to – once the initiative reaches full strength – another six who are tied to the New York Department of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. The VFW members will help Veterans file their VA claims – meeting with Veterans in Council Members' district offices. Beyond that, one of our VetConnect Service Providers, Northwell Health, has hired two full time Veteran Service Officers who are also able to help Veterans file VA Claims. Speaking to capabilities: these actions increase our community's overall ability to respond to Veterans' claims-related needs. Per the ACS 2023 1-year estimate, the percentage of Veterans who have a service-connected disability rating nationwide is 31.2%. That proportion drops to 21.6% in New York State, then to 20.1% in New York City. In pursuit of parity between the proportion of Veterans served at the national and city levels, we are doing everything that we can to close the gap.
- Veteran Feeding Program ([nyc.gov/vetfood](http://nyc.gov/vetfood)). Since June of 2020, DVS—in partnership with Hello Fresh, the New York State Department of Veterans' Services, the New York State Food and Anti-Hunger Policy Coordinator, The Campaign Against Hunger, Black Veterans for Social Justice, Amazon, numerous community and civic entities, and

philanthropic partners such as the New York Health Foundation and Bob Woodruff Foundation—has facilitated the preparation and delivery of two thousand meal kits per week (each meal kit contains four meals) picked up by approximately twenty community entities and delivered to food-insecure New York City Veterans. The value of the food – which is prepared and delivered on 50 out of 52 Wednesdays each year – is \$12.50 per meal kit. This amounts to \$25,000 of food distributed each week, or \$1.25 million worth of food each year. More than two million meals have been delivered since the start of this program.

- Mission: VetCheck ([nyc.gov/vetcheck](https://nyc.gov/vetcheck)). Started in 2020, Mission: VetCheck is a buddy check wellness calling program run in partnership with New York Cares and courtesy of generous support from various funders, including the New York City Council (once again: thank you, Chair Holden, Chair Brannan, Speaker Adams, and the entire Council for your support). Through Mission: VetCheck, New York Cares holds calling sessions with groups of volunteers at least thirty times per year. Volunteers participate from the comfort of their homes; calling sessions occur remotely. Mission: VetCheck volunteers call Veterans in the DVS database. They do so in a way where the integrity of Veterans' personally identifiable information is maintained. During the call, volunteers check in on Veterans. Volunteers ask whether the Veteran needs help. Most importantly, volunteers convey (paraphrasing): "We see you. We appreciate you. Thank you for your service. We love you." Over the past few years, more than 16,000 Mission: VetCheck calls were made each year, resulting in approximately 2,000 referrals for services (per year). Mission: VetCheck is a key way for us to reach out to Veterans who are in the shadows.

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

To level set: Vetconnect NYC is our agency's digital referral initiative. Internally, it serves as DVS' contact manager—that is, our client relationship management platform. You can learn more by visiting [nyc.gov/vetconnect](https://nyc.gov/vetconnect).

The Private First Class Joseph P. Dwyer Program is a state-funded effort administered by each New York county (and, in our case, the City of New York) which seeks to normalize help-seeking behavior among Veteran and military families. Details can be found at [nyc.gov/vetdwyer](https://nyc.gov/vetdwyer).

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

- In each of these cases – the VetConnect technology provider change and the way that we execute Dwyer – DVS stepped away from maintaining the status quo.
  - A. The technology change in VetConnect was rooted in feedback from our community about our digital referral system. Pro-tips including, but not limited to: track more data tied to each of our clients, monitor response times, ensure service provider and Veteran follow-up post-referrals, and aggressively obtain client reviews and feedback ... these are among the things that we will see with the new technology partner we have for VetConnect NYC. As of this hearing, we anticipate the contract being registered in May. June will be a time for our staff and service providers to train on the platform. We plan to launch the new-look VetConnect NYC portal on the first day of fiscal year 2026, on July 1<sup>st</sup>.
  - B. For Dwyer, all other municipal recipients of Dwyer funding – except for the City of New York – do one of three things with their funding. They either: 1) invest funds solely in their Veteran Services Agency, hiring staff and running programs out of the agency (ie: Tioga County), 2) they disburse the funds to one nonprofit to run all Dwyer-related activities (ie: Ulster County), or 3) the County's Department of Health directs the funds as it deems fit independent of the County's Veteran Service Agency (ie: Nassau County). DVS is taking Dwyer funding and, through a grant-like process – which conforms to New York City's Procurement Protocol Board rules – distributing resources to local Veteran organizations (and allied entities) in order to have a hyper-local impact for Dwyer resources. Money has – and is – in the process of being disbursed in support of 31 NYC Dwyer projects at this time. These projects will be performed during FY 25 and FY 26. During calendar year 2026, we will open the opportunity for applicants to apply for Dwyer funding to be remitted during fiscal years 27 and 28. This two-year funding cycle will continue for Dwyer as the program ensues.
- We are on a good foot with Dwyer and VetConnect now. Nevertheless, I take full responsibility for not realizing how much of a delay would occur in processing these contracts. Some additional things:
  - A. Along with the contracting component, Dwyer also took time as we internally worked to ensure that funds connected to the program are fluidly sent to DVS. The flow of Dwyer resources until recently was: the funding comes from the Office of Mental Health in New York State to the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene to DVS. Starting in fiscal year 26, our City's Office of Management and Budget will recognize Dwyer resources as coming directly to DVS. As soon as the money is transferred from the state to New York City, it will appear in DVS' account.



- B. The intersection between us needing PASSPort to perform all Dwyer-related procurement and the platform's existing challenges made executing Dwyer particularly hard. To reiterate: Dwyer is a grant style process; however, funded entities formally engaged DVS and were evaluated via PASSPort. That said, we are powering through all issues.
- C. Another factor that effected the VetConnect rollout: We needed to incorporate new technology in VetConnect – technology not used before in New York City government – in order to fully comply with Local Law 37. Local Law 37 of 2024 – which we appreciate and thank the Council for passing – requires that a Veteran identifier question be placed on City of New York client-facing forms. The Local Law requests a yearly report from DVS which conveys the number of respondents subdivided by the agency that they responded to (when answering the question), the service they were seeking, and their City Council district the person resides in. Until now, no technology exists where you can bulk upload a list of New York City addresses and immediately learn the City Council districts associated with those addresses. Currently, users must input addresses on an individual basis using the Council's Map Widget / Find My District webpage. We have built this bulk address lookup capacity into the new platform that will undergird VetConnect.
  - Beyond VetConnect, this innovation is key to DVS sharing contact information with each Council Member about the Veterans whom we are aware of in your districts during the ramp-up to Memorial Day and Fleet Week. Once again, we thank the Council and the Speaker for executing the agreement which will enable us to perform this data transfer.

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

1. DVS estimates New York City's Veteran community to be more than 200,000 strong. That number excludes family members. It is much more when you include them. Knowing that – if media reports are correct – only 21 people were contacted to provide *all* qualitative and quantitative feedback for the score card (in other words, the survey percentages mentioned and the comments provided only came from 21 individuals ... otherwise known as one one-hundredth of one percent of our population, at most [0.01%]), it is hard for me to digest that feelings towards DVS – from New York City's *entire* Veteran community – are so negative and strong. I do not believe that enough people were engaged for these thoughts to be fully representative.
2. It must be said: much of our work aims to bring Veterans into the light. A majority of US Military Veterans do not self-identify. Per the federal government's FY 23 Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures report: 34.3% of Veterans self-identify

nationwide, 29.8% self-identify in New York State, and 24.1% self-identify in New York City. When you add the fact that the FY 25 budgets for the VA, the New York State Department of Veterans' Services, and DVS are \$378.6 billion, \$30 million, and \$7 million respectively, despite the combined resources that we have, this problem with self-identification persists. It impacts us all.

- a. When taking in feedback from the Veteran community, we must face the duality of: I am receiving and accepting wisdom from those in our tribe *who do* self-identify. At the same time, it is incumbent upon us to find and attract the Veterans *who do not*.
  - b. With our limited resources, we often spend time in places where those who do not self-identify are; that is, entities and organizations that could capture them. I am speaking of community boards, community benefits organizations, employers, faith centers, hospitals, schools, etcetera. To those who *have* self-identified, because we are heavily focused on the non-identifying Veterans, they could view us and think, "I do not see you aggressively coming to me." To be clear: we *do* curate and visit forums to engage our self-identifying Veterans (ie: Community Engagement Sessions, Veterans Advisory Board meetings, DVS newsletter, cultural events, two of our Veteran Resource Centers are located within the Bronx VA and the Brooklyn VA, etcetera).
  - c. The charge – "we do not see you" – is still the charge. Our state and federal counterparts have received similar feedback as well. I accept that. It is something that all of us are working on.
3. From reflecting on the report, I think another reason for the disconnect between how the community sees DVS and how we see ourselves is: we have spent ample time these past several years building capabilities. I mentioned during the last testimony: when I first joined the agency in November of 2019, with the exception of our team that helped homeless Veterans (which worked in a silo), DVS was a referral agency. We did not deliver or facilitate the delivery of direct services. When the agency was created in 2016, there was no plan for what it would do and how it would grow. We had a very expansive charter – covering the gambit of healthcare, housing, benefits, culture, education, and employment. We were tasked to assist and inform all New Yorkers who are (or were) military connected. We lacked resources and direction. In light of those challenges, we opted to focus on the charter mandated areas (remember: execute the laws written using the budget that we are prescribed). For each area, we focused on building out a suite of capabilities. Our logic – informed by various community interactions, our Veteran & Military Family survey, City Council hearings, and the like: you cannot get something with nothing. One must offer attractive programs and benefits in order to inspire and motivate our brothers and sisters to self-identify as US Military Veterans; to come into the light. We have been overjoyed to notch wins that provide more offerings to the

Veteran community. We are preparing the battlefield, so to speak. Members of the community may think: “that all sounds great, but I do not know about those things. I need to see you *deliver* those things.” That is something we are pivoting to currently.

To us, the one-two-three combination of using Mission: VetCheck to make cold calls (one ... that is an enduring effort), sharing Veteran contact information with Council Members in the lead up to Memorial Day (two), and the launch of the new-look VetConnect NYC platform on July 1<sup>st</sup> (three) are major milestones which will define the pivot point.

I would like to mention ... some of the major capabilities that we are happy to see come to fruition – by charter area – are:

- Housing ([nyc.gov/vethousing](http://nyc.gov/vethousing))
  - A. An expansion to DVS helping, not just Veterans who have emergency and supportive housing needs, but also needs that involve affordable housing and home ownership ([nyc.gov/vetladder](http://nyc.gov/vetladder)).
  - B. Increased offerings specific to New York City Veterans in the affordable housing and home ownership arenas.
- Healthcare ([nyc.gov/vethealth](http://nyc.gov/vethealth))
  - A. Connecting Veteran families to healthcare for all members – recognizing that some members may use VA healthcare, while others may not ([nyc.gov/coverednycvet](http://nyc.gov/coverednycvet)).
  - B. Assisting Veteran families who face food insecurity ([nyc.gov/vetfood](http://nyc.gov/vetfood)).
  - C. Cultivating a strong network of providers capable of helping Veterans who require mental health first aid ([nyc.gov/vetmentalhealth](http://nyc.gov/vetmentalhealth)).
- Benefits
  - A. Curating a deep bench of accredited Veteran Service Officers capable of helping New York City Veterans and their loved ones file VA claims ([nyc.gov/vetclaims](http://nyc.gov/vetclaims)).
  - B. Helping more New York City Veterans take advantage of and remit VA burial benefits ([nyc.gov/vetburials](http://nyc.gov/vetburials)).
  - C. Increasing the Veteran community’s awareness and usage of New York State-specific Veteran programs and benefits ([veterans.ny.gov](http://veterans.ny.gov)).
- Culture
  - A. Raising the community’s awareness of Veteran heritage and cultural activities (OurVeterans.NYC).

- B. Facilitating an expansion of Veteran peer-to-peer engagements through the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Program ([nyc.gov/vetdwyer](http://nyc.gov/vetdwyer)).
  - C. Erecting a Memorial dedicated to New York City's Post 9/11 War Veterans ([nyc.gov/vetmemorial](http://nyc.gov/vetmemorial)).
- Education
  - A. Advancing academic opportunities for Veterans ([nyc.gov/vetstudents](http://nyc.gov/vetstudents)) and their loved ones ([nyc.gov/vetparents](http://nyc.gov/vetparents)).
  - B. Identifying and supporting military-connected students in NYC Public Schools ([nyc.gov/vetmfa](http://nyc.gov/vetmfa)).
- Employment
  - A. Helping Veteran community members help themselves in their pursuits as job seekers ([nyc.gov/vetjobs](http://nyc.gov/vetjobs)) and entrepreneurs ([nyc.gov/vetbusiness](http://nyc.gov/vetbusiness)).
  - B. Receiving Transitioning Service Members and empowering them to become economically enfranchised in New York City ([nyc.gov/vettap](http://nyc.gov/vettap)).

### Theme #3: Penetration

The best way for us to break through in reaching our Veterans – including those who do not self-identify – is to work with our partners and allies.

Now that we have offerings in each of our charter-mandated areas (and, starting on July 1<sup>st</sup>, a platform that can appropriately receive those who come to us in the form of a new-look VetConnect NYC), over the coming weeks, DVS will engage with all whom we can to help spread the word.

We will start with our City Council Members, Community Boards, Borough Presidents, State Assembly Members, and State Senators. Thanks to the change in VetConnect, we can divide our Veterans' contact information along all of those lines (the City Council evolution paved the way for us to disaggregate data through other districts geographically ... thank you for that). Data sharing agreements have been signed over the past two years leading up to this point. Next, we will focus on engaging New York City's major Community Benefits Organizations – not just those that are Veteran specific. This will help us identify Veterans who are untethered – those who have not self-identified. We will not share Veteran information with these organizations, as they are not government entities. The ask of Community Benefits Organizations will be to share the collateral that we provide and ask the Local Law 37 questions. They are (paraphrasing):

- *Have you or any member of your household ever served in the US Armed Forces?*

- *Do you consent to being contacted by DVS?*

It is important to note that we have data sharing agreements in place with the New York State Department of Veterans' Services and the US Department of Veterans' Affairs. We already work closely with them. The objective for us is to inspire and motivate Veterans who have not self-identified to do so and to take advantage of what we and our partners have to offer.

This ties back to our overall strategy: *connect* (we learn who our Veterans are), *mobilize* (Veterans learn who we are and they discover our offerings), and *empower* (we serve them).

Our approach hinges on the concept of touches. Those who are in sales, marketing, and politics have heard this framework countless times. You need at least seven touches – or occasions when a person interacts with your product or offering – in order for it to translate into a possible conversion. For them to choose to embrace you. We, the Department of Veterans' Services, do not have the resources to perform all seven touches alone. Even if we could, that would not be the best way. It is best for it to come from different sources; through different angles. If all of us are touching – DVS, the Council Members, Community Boards, Borough Presidents, State Assembly Members, State Senators, the New York State Department of Veterans' Services, and the VA – that's eight entities by themselves each doing more than one touch (through contemporary and legacy means). The fact that we are backing them up with connection to a broader ecosystem of support means that we will see traction. You will reach out and have somewhere to send those Veterans. You will have a resource to offer them.

Prior to the new VetConnect, prior to having so many capabilities available, and prior to this "touches" approach, DVS saw our number of Veterans and families served increase over the past three years (FY 22, 23, and 24) from 1,068 to 3,338 to 10,701. With limited resources and a tough economic backdrop, we have labored since 2019 to get to this point. I truly believe that this expansion plan will work.

We owe the Council and the broader Veteran community a more detailed short and long term plan. We accept that feedback. We are happy to put that together. Once again, this – what I am saying right now – is not necessarily a strategic plan; this is testimony. Today, I want to assure people: there is a lot of work, a lot of intentionality, and a lot of thought behind what is occurring. We appreciate the support and patience from everyone as this all comes together.

#### Theme #4: Smart Growth

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

I will provide what I think is a good framework for the next five years (I do not want to say ten because things change so much ... things beyond our control).

Some caveats:

- It takes time to grow an organization. I understand that this is not a situation where one would snap their fingers and the agency reach this size overnight. To grow the right way, it takes patience, a gradual approach, and trial & error. Doing things hastily in the short term can create long term problems where the costs outweigh the benefits.
- It goes without saying that personnel additions would be accompanied by non-personnel expenditure increases. Case and point: we need to pay for a laptop and cell phone for the new employee, etcetera.
- During DVS' first nine years of operation, a relatively disproportionate amount of our new manpower went towards administrative functions. Such can be expected. These are the things you need in order to establish an agency (ie: information technology, human resources & timekeeping, fiscal operations, equal employment opportunity, legal & compliance, etcetera). In DVS 2.0 – over the next five years – more of our new human capital can go towards client-facing functions. Client-facing functions are activities that directly speak to meeting our charter mandate.
- First and foremost: there is a spiritual return on investment to these suggestions; we should always do right by our US Military Service Members and their loved ones. That said, monetary return on investment arguments can be made on the net effect of these additions. I am speaking to the net effect on a local level, a state level, and nationally.
  - A. Nationally, we can speak to the federal dollars that Veterans bring to the New York City community.
  - B. Statewide, we can highlight the extent to which Veterans who use VA healthcare in lieu of Medicaid help avert state Medicaid-related costs. This, too, impacts the City.
  - C. Locally, we can talk about the ways in which serving Veterans – connecting them to housing, education, employment, burials and VA Claims-related services – reduces the utilization of City assistance programs and other subsidies.
- One last caveat: the current breakdown of DVS (organizationally and otherwise) is outlined in our Preliminary Budget Hearing Testimony, dated March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2025. What follows is what I believe DVS could look like as DVS 2.0.

Regarding smart growth, a key thing I will say (with an eye towards posterity ... speaking to tomorrow's policymakers): do not manufacture a crisis. When you are in an environment like

this where resources are scarce, there are leaders who will engineer a situation where they inspire Veterans and their loved ones to come to their organizations for help knowing that they are unable to triage the need. The point is to tell benefactors and prospective financiers: “look at all of these Veterans who need me. I do not have resources to support them. Please fund my work.” While that may be a practice for some nonprofit and for-profit organizations, for DVS as a government Veteran Services agency, we cannot operate that way. We must calibrate what we (and our partners) are able to offer to the intensity with which we promote those offerings Citywide. DVS must stand ready to receive and triage a growing number of clients who approach us. To do otherwise is to do harm.

Everything that we are doing is predicated on having the right composition, disposition, and strength to engage New York City’s entire Veteran community (working with partners) and to deliver the resources that US Military Service Members, past and present, and their families need – also working with allied organizations and stakeholders.

### **Responses to Scorecard Recommendations**

#### **Leadership, Strategy, and Direction**

We are happy to publish a short- and long-term plan. It is critical that we make sure that the plan dovetails with existing reporting and oversight mechanisms. This is all in support of working smartly and efficiently.

#### **Service Delivery Recommendations**

When it comes to our Veteran Resource Centers (or VRCs), the key issue is not “where is each VRC located?” or “can a DVS employee be available during non-traditional hours to receive clients (including all logistical implications involved)?”

An aside: I want to flag that – according to the 2023 ACS 5-year Estimate – 70.7% of all New York City Veterans are age 55 or older, 53.3% are 65 or older, and 31.8% are 75 or older. Being available during the day works well for our older, largely retired community.

The issue is: do Veterans know DVS so that they know they can reach out to us and ask us for help? We meet and serve Veterans during non-traditional times always. If a Veteran is not able to meet in person at a Veteran Resource Center during the VRC’s stated hours, then we flex to meet them remotely and / or in person on a case-by-case basis. We take a dynamic approach as opposed to a static one (with both this and our presence in the shelter system). When you couple us being flexible in these ways with the added support that the Veteran community now receives through the City Council’s VRC initiative (the VRC initiative is the most universal, hyper-local Veterans effort that has ever been executed by the City Council ... thank you again for that), the pain point is making sure that Veterans are aware of DVS. This goes back to the plan that was

discussed during the “Penetration” section. It outlines how we intend to have more constituents learn who we are as we facilitate increased touches and go viral.

Earlier in this testimony, we addressed the score card’s comments on the disconnect between how DVS views its operations versus the feedback from the 21 respondents to the report.

For the sake of efficiency – and recognizing that internal audit and oversight mechanisms exist between those established by the Office of Management and Budget, the Mayor’s Office of Operations, the Comptroller’s Office, the Department of Investigation, and the New York City Council – DVS will not perform internal audits of its operations. We trust the overlapping audit, oversight, and investigative systems that exist within City government. Also, recognizing that we must be smart with our resources, it is vital to have more people doing things worth measuring at DVS than to have staff members internally measuring those things. To be clear: we already track our operational and administrative performance. Metrics tied to that performance feed data that is already publicly reported. For that reason – and the “duplicate work” problem ... organizations are already tasked to do this – DVS does not need an internal audit role.

#### *Relationships and Collaboration*

The agency has several existing touches with Veteran community members. These include, but are not limited to:

- Veteran and Military Family Community Summits. We hold these at a rate of 1-2 times per year. Summits historically have 150 to 350 attendees (that number excludes supporting staff and event coordinators).
- Community Engagement Sessions. Held quarterly with Veteran community leaders. More than one hundred leaders are invited to our online community engagement sessions.
- Employment workshops. Held 2-4 times per year with 30+ attendees per workshop.
- Entrepreneurship sessions. Held 2-4 times per year with 30+ attendees per session.
- Women Veterans Luncheon. Held one time per year with 75+ attendees.
- Veterans Mental Health Coalition. Meets 4-6 times per year with 15+ attendees.
- Community survey. Conducted once every four years with 1,500+ respondents.
- Veterans Advisory Board meetings. DVS attends and addresses these meetings five times per year. There are approximately 20+ attendees.



- Veteran feeding program. Each Wednesday on 50 out of 52 weeks of the year, DVS coordinates with 15-20 volunteers who prepare 8,000 Hello Fresh meals (or 2,000 meal kits). We also coordinate with approximately 20 Veteran service organizations that pick up those meals and deliver them to food insecure Veterans.
- Various Veteran community gatherings and events. The agency attends more than 250 Veteran community events each year.
- Mission: VetCheck. Approximately 16,000+ buddy check wellness calls to Veterans each year.
- Digital engagement. Approximately 10,000 Veterans subscribe to our weekly newsletter (nyc.gov/vetnewsletter), we grew from having 245 to 362 to 474 thousand social media impressions over the last three years (FY 22, 23, and 24), and our website was visited 28, then 125, then 161 thousand times over the same interval. There are multiple ways that people can contact DVS both physically and remotely.

Those numbers are separate from the direct services work we have done in housing, VA claims, burials, and employment – among other things.

To reiterate: the number of Veteran and Military families we have served (from the Mayor's Management Report) has increased from 1,068 to 3,338 to 10,701 over the past three years (fiscal years 22, 23 24).

I push back on the notion – conveyed by 21 individuals – that we are not present and that we do not listen to the needs of the community.

There is a broader issue (which bedevils all municipalities and states – including the federal government) about how to tackle the challenge of Veteran self-identification. The question: how can we best attract our brothers and sisters to our services (and those of our partners) in order to bring them into the light? As I have briefed, we are engaging this issue directly. The plan that we are currently executing will help us address these things.

### Workforce Development

We have spoken to the DVS 2.0 size – ideally on a five-year horizon – earlier in this testimony.

When it comes to hiring, twelve out of the 39 authorized billets at DVS are filled by US Military Service Members – past and present. Apart from those twelve, two billets are filled by military spouses – one of whom is a Gold Star Spouse. Excluding spouses, 31% of all of our agency's authorized billets (12 out of 39 positions) are filled by Military Veterans. This is the highest proportion in New York City government. For perspective, the proportion of NYPD members – uniformed and non-uniformed – who are Veterans (out of all billets) is 5.2%. The proportion of

FDNY members is 8.6%. This same metric for the Department of Corrections is 5.4%. Military-connected persons comprise a large part of DVS' staff.

Beyond this, we host an average of six Transitioning Service Members (military interns) tied to the Department of Defense's Skillbridge Program each year. During a given academic semester, DVS hosts twenty to thirty VA Work Study Students who support our agency, assisting in areas ranging from communications to housing to information technology.

It is common practice for us to post job openings – full time and ancillary – in our agency's newsletter.

DVS significantly incorporates Veteran community members into our workforce – between direct and ancillary staff.

To be compliant with fair hiring practices, we – and all of New York City government – cannot discriminate against a job applicant on the basis of their status as a uniformed services member (past or present). Also, we cannot discriminate against a job applicant on the basis of them *not* having been a member of the uniformed services.

#### *Financial and Resources Management*

My response to the suggestion that DVS audit and perform an impact analysis of every penny that the agency spends is line with my response to the previous recommendation about auditing. Several entities exist which are funded and tasked to independently oversee us, investigate us (when necessary), and audit our work. Recognizing that we internally monitor our operations, it is not a good use of taxpayer resources to assign an auditing task to DVS as well.

#### *Digital Government*

Many of the digital government recommendations will be accomplished through the rollout of our new VetConnect NYC platform at the beginning of FY 26 (starting on July 1<sup>st</sup>).

#### *Measurement, Analytics, and Knowledge Management*

Like digital government, many of the measurement, analytics, and knowledge management recommendations will be accomplished through our new VetConnect NYC platform, which kicks off publicly on July 1<sup>st</sup>.

We are happy to publish policies for data sharing on the DVS website in the future as well.

#### *Recommendations to the City Council*

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

1. Please include the Local Law 37 Veteran identifier questions on the constituent intake forms in your district offices. Those questions (paraphrasing), are:
  - a. *Have you or any member of your household ever served in the US Armed Forces?*
  - b. *Do you consent to being contacted by the NYC Department of Veterans' Services?*
2. Please require all nonprofits funded by the Council to deliver Veteran programming to interact with DVS. Engaging us allows DVS to amplify the nonprofit's Veteran-specific events, services, and offerings.
  - a. An aside: separate from what the Council does, all leaders are encouraged to upload their Veteran-serving activities onto the Greater New York City area's Veteran community calendar, OurVeterans.NYC.
3. The spotlight brought by this report and this hearing to Veterans' issues is always welcome. Many pieces of legislation have been introduced by council members to address Veterans' issues. I would like to briefly turn today's spotlight onto two such pieces of legislation.
  - a. Int. No. 685 would, among other things, legally create a Veteran Leadership Advisory Program to educate Veteran owned business enterprises about City procurement opportunities and support such business enterprises during the procurement process. DVS does this now through our Veteran Business Leadership Association. Much like Local Law 40 of 2024, which codified our agency's digital services platform—VetConnect—Intro 685 would codify the Veteran Business Leadership Association into law.
  - b. Int. No. 686 would amend the membership of the Street Vendor Advisory Board to include the Commissioner of Veterans' Services or their designee, and it would increase the number of Speaker-appointed members to 7, to include a representative of the Veteran community.

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

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, thank you again for taking the time to have this discussion. We are happy to answer all questions that the Council has. Nothing but good things will come from this experience. As I have mentioned before, you have afforded our community another opportunity to have a seat at the table.

As for upcoming events:

- Please know that the next Veterans Advisory Board / Community Veterans Engagement Board meeting will be held on Wednesday, April 30<sup>th</sup> at 6 pm at the Queens Vet Center, which is located at 5005 Metropolitan Avenue, Ridgewood, NY 11385. It is a hybrid meeting; therefore, community members may attend remotely or in person. Details can be found at [nyc.gov/vetboard](http://nyc.gov/vetboard).
- The 2025 Military & Veteran Family Summit will be held at Citi Field on Saturday, May 3<sup>rd</sup> from 10 am to 2 pm. The address for Citi Field is 41 Seaver Way, Flushing, NY 11368. Details are available at [nyc.gov/vetsummit](http://nyc.gov/vetsummit).
- A City of New York celebration of the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of V-E Day will be held in Times Square on Thursday, May 8<sup>th</sup> at 11:30 am to 2:30 pm. Details are posted on [OurVeterans.NYC](http://OurVeterans.NYC).

Lastly, the New York City Department of Veterans' Services can be reached via telephone at 212-416-5250, email at [connect@veterans.nyc.gov](mailto:connect@veterans.nyc.gov), online at [nyc.gov/vets](http://nyc.gov/vets), and through the social media handle [@nycveterans](https://twitter.com/nycveterans).

God bless you, God bless the City of New York, and God Bless America.

Thank you!

--END--

**TESTIMONY OF JOSEPH BELLO  
NY METROVETS**

**BEFORE**

**THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL  
VETERANS COMMITTEE**

**OVERSIGHT: IMPLEMENTING RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE CITY COUNCIL'S  
REPORT CARD INITIATIVE**

**April 28, 2025**

Chairman Holden and members of the Veterans Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's critical hearing.

Last week, the City Council released its inaugural *Agency Report Card* initiative aimed at strengthening accountability and service delivery across city agencies. Beginning with the Department of Veterans' Services (DVS), this initiative seeks to develop deeper oversight, focusing on three critical areas: advocate engagement, agency engagement, and independent research.

The report correctly notes that DVS is one of the city's smallest agencies, operating with less than 1% of the city's budget and employing one of the smallest city staffs. As I pointed out in my budget testimony last month, the administration's failure to increase DVS's funding over the past several years has been a major barrier to improving its operations.

I commend the Council for providing this much-needed report. Its findings reveal significant gaps between DVS's reported practices and the real experiences of veterans and their families.

While the report marks an important first step toward greater accountability, it ultimately confirms what veterans, families, and advocates have long been saying: DVS is failing to meet the needs of those it serves. Although the Council assigned the agency an overall grade of "C," I believe a "D" would more accurately reflect its current state.

### **Strategic Planning and Staff Instability**

Looking back at DVS's Start-Up Report from late 2019, it's clear the agency has expanded programs and initiatives under the current Commissioner. However, as the Council's report notes, while initiatives are listed on DVS's website, there are no publicly available short or long-term strategic plans. This lack of transparency makes it difficult to understand the agency's goals or how initiatives fit into a broader strategy.

As a result, DVS front-line staff are under tremendous stress, contributing to chronic turnover – often without notice to veterans, partners or stakeholders. For example, the agency's organizational chart still lists the Assistant Commissioner for Outreach, despite her resignation months ago and the Senior Advisor for Intergovernmental Affairs has also departed.

This instability, combined with a reported 970% increase in service requests between FY23 and FY24, has overwhelmed the agency's staff, resulting in delays, dropped cases, and poor follow-up.

### **VetConnect and Compliance**

The report highlights that DVS delivers services either directly or through referrals made via its online platform, VetConnect, as well as by phone, email, walk-ins, and through Veterans Resource Centers (VRCs) across the boroughs.

As I testified last month, DVS awarded a \$450K contract to Combined Arms, a Texas-based nonprofit, to build a new VetConnect platform. Yet nearly a year after terminating its prior provider (UniteUs), the new platform remains incomplete. In the interim, DVS relies on Microsoft Forms, undermining the effectiveness and transparency of its data collection. Consequently, most veterans and providers view VetConnect as largely ineffective.

Additionally, beyond the issues the report noted regarding the VRC's, DVS has failed to comply with Local Law 37 (Intro. 1237-2023), missing its December 15, 2024, deadline to compile survey data from city agencies and report to the Speaker on the number of veterans identifying their status, broken down by agency, service type, and council district. The agency has also failed to submit Local Law 215 reports on Veterans Resource Centers (VRCs) for July 2024 and January 2025, leaving stakeholders without critical data. Finally, Local Law 216 (Veterans Resource Guide) has remained outdated since 2021. These compliance failures leave stakeholders without critical data and deepen mistrust.

### **Mission: VetCheck**

While Mission: VetCheck is listed as a DVS initiative, the agency does not manage the program. Additionally, given DVS's limited staffing, including the scale of outreach recently reported by the administration, it's unlikely DVS conducts any calls. Therefore, key performance indicators (KPIs) need to reflect the number of referrals received from New York Cares, what the referrals were for (legal, food, etc.) and their outcomes. It's also important to note that if the Council does not renew the \$540K funding for VRCs in FY26, from which Mission: VetCheck is funded, DVS will need to identify alternative funding or discontinuing the program.

### **External Partnerships**

The report praises DVS's for leveraging resources and nonprofit partnerships ("synergies") but simultaneously calls for better, more sustained and meaningful communication to lessen "negative opinions" about the agency. This contradiction highlights DVS's deeper problem: DVS's reliance on nonprofits, many of whom face their own funding and capacity challenges, without maintaining strong and ongoing collaboration. Once services are handed off, DVS has little control over outcomes. This however leads to accountability gaps and widespread frustration among veterans, especially given the agency's word of mouth "first touch" and then failure to address inquiries or follow-up effectively.

### **Insufficient Community Engagement**

While the report acknowledges DVS's recognition of the importance of engagement, the agency has not consistently held regular roundtables with the community. The report mentions community surveys in 2021 and 2024 but doesn't note that the 2021 survey was open for six months and still only drew 3,001 veterans' responses. Additionally, the 2020 Veterans Convening in Brooklyn, held by DVS prior to the pandemic, is not mentioned in the report.

Despite these surveys, outcomes or follow-up actions from the agency remain unclear, reflecting a continued lack of transparency and strategic planning. I'm unaware of any focus groups tied to

the 2024 survey, and while DVS claims to hold quarterly meetings with Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs), neither I nor many others have seen or heard of these efforts.

Most concerning is that 58% of veterans are unaware of DVS services. This suggests either outreach is not reaching deeply enough, particularly among older or underserved veterans; or that veterans, frustrated with the agency and its VetConnect platform, have reverted to the buddy system and are turning directly to non-profits for services. DVS's heavy reliance on digital outreach is also further excluding many older, less tech-savvy veterans.

The report also mentions DVS's annual Veterans Summit as non-digital outreach, yet its focus and purpose remain unclear. Many question whether these summits are meant for recently separated service members, active-duty personnel, and their families or if it's simply a resource fair. Without clear communication, it often seems that the agency is more focused on attendance numbers than the quality or relevance of the summit.

Additionally, the report shares that 460 "veterans community members" attended the 2024 Veterans and Military Family Summit at Yankee Stadium. However, from speaking with multiple representatives who attended this event, it's clear the 460 number included non-veterans and non-profit staff, not just veterans seeking services, creating a misleading picture of impact.

The report also mentions that DVS *"sometimes runs print ads in local newspapers, depending on the type of information they need to communicate with the public."* However, these efforts, including ads on platforms like "My Heart Radio," remain invisible to the community. Many, including myself, were unaware of the "My Heart Radio" ads until it was brought up at a Council hearing a few years ago during a PEG discussion.

Finally, Local Law 38 (Intro. 1239-2023), passed over a year ago, remains unimplemented. It required DVS, in collaboration with the Office of Community Mental Health and other agencies, to conduct outreach on veteran mental health resources across various platforms, including social media, radio, print, and digital.

A more transparent, consistent, and widespread approach to engagement is urgently needed to rebuild trust and ensure veterans' voices shape agency practices.

## **Housing Outcomes**

The report notes that DVS offers several housing supports, including rapid re-housing, rental assistance for permanent or supportive housing and obtaining housing for elderly veterans. While DVS exceeded its FY24 target by housing 126 homeless veterans (against a goal of 87), broader concerns persist, and overall performance remains mixed.

There has been a 63% decline in the number of veterans housed since FY21. Homelessness prevention efforts grew by only 10 cases over the past year despite a rising need both veteran and citywide. Critically, DVS does not track long-term outcomes, making it impossible to know whether veterans remain stably housed after one, three, or five years.



This mirrors longstanding transparency problems. For example, during my tenure working on veterans' issues in the Council, then Mayor de Blasio announced (in 2021) that DVS had housed its 1,000th homeless veteran. However, when the agency was asked for further details such as timeframes, recidivism rates, and the number of women veterans housed, they did not provide that information. It also remains unclear how many individuals were housed from Borden Avenue, although it's known that DVS recently hired two former staff members from ICL who worked at that facility.

As veterans continue to report difficulty reaching housing staff, poor follow-through and communication, it's important to state that meeting numerical targets alone is insufficient if underlying issues persist.

## **DVS 2.0**

In my opinion, incremental improvements won't be enough. Rebuilding DVS into an agency worthy of our veterans will require serious course corrections, including:

- An administration willing to prioritize and fund veteran services,
- Council review and enforcement of existing laws,
- Stronger internal planning, transparency, and measurable outcomes from the agency,
- Robust and sustained stakeholder engagement.

## **Conclusion**

While DVS has added programs and initiatives under the current Commissioner, the gap between reported progress and the actual experiences of veterans remains wide. This report confirms what many in the community have long known: DVS's lack of transparency, communication, service quality, and measurable outcomes across its programs must drastically improve.

This requires an administration that cares.

As I said before, this letter grade should not be dismissed as political theater during an election year. It is a clear and urgent call for reform. The administration (and the agency) must respond to this moment with urgency, clarity, and action. That requires more than optics or words, it demands greater transparency, accountability, stronger oversight, and above all, meaningful engagement with the community.

Veterans upheld their promise to serve us. Now, it's time for the city to do the same by restoring trust, honoring sacrifice, and building a city where veterans are genuinely seen, heard, and supported.

I thank the Speaker, the Council, particularly the Compliance Division and Committee staff for their work on this report, and Chairman Holden for convening today's hearing.

I'm happy to answer any questions you may have.

City Council Testimony April 28, 2024

### Implementation of the Speaker's Recommendations by the Department of Veteran Services

The challenge is in the title. Can the Department of Veterans Services Implement the Recommendations in the Speaker's Report Card? Judging by the Department's past performance... the answer is "No".

My Name is Armando Crescenzi, I am The Post Commander of My American Legion Post, I am a Life Member of the DAV, and of the Military Officer's Of America Association, I am a NY State Certified Alcohol and Drug Counselor and I received by JD in 1994 from Pace University School of Law.

In 2010 I founded a non-profit organization called Put Veterans First whose mission is to help NYC Veterans become self-sufficient by building their own small business as vendors and food cart operators. The injustice and abuse that NYC veterans face at the hands of the city is disgraceful and the City should be embarrassed of it's record with veterans who street vend.

If it's to make a few extra bucks, or to start a food service empire, thousands of veterans sign up every year with Department of Consumer And Worker Protection highly motivated and inspired to start a business. And year after year 1000's of veterans are driven out of the marketplace by the very same city that boasts of how friendly it is to veterans.

Many would think the problems we face could be easily solved with a well-place phone call to the Department of Veterans Services. Unfortunately, the Department of Veterans Services has completely abandoned us. They have left us outside of the perimeter and under fire.

Some of the challenges we face include:

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

Judges and OATH hearing officers are likewise ignorant of our rights,

Department of Transportation is privatizing every bit of sidewalk space for rent to the highest bidder,

The Health Department is silent on all Veteran vending matters following the passage of the unlawful Street Vendor Modernization Act, (we need their testimony, they could help us but won't)

The Department of Consumer and Worker Protection has turned over all vending responsibilities to the Street Vendor Project. How is this even possible?! The SVP is a private non-profit who want to open all streets to everybody all the time and remove all licensing requirements for vending. Saturating the street like that would wipe out veteran vending.

Beside robbing veterans of our placement priority, the Street Vendor project is not part of the City Government and their control at DCWP is unlawful. Can't you help us with any of these things?

Veterans who vend are literally begging for help from DVS. We are actually the perfect target population which DVS can easily engage with and very easily get tangible results. We are only asking that DVS give us a voice and help us access our rights. These are rights already codified in law and litigated in the courts in our favor. In fact, I challenge DVS today to make a commitment to veterans who vend.

So as I asked earlier, " Can DVS Implement Recommendations in the Report Card?"

Every month year in and year out we have brought our concerns to DVS and every month DVS turns a deaf ear and prattles with on innocuous data - hogging up precious time from the veterans. So pleased they are with their statistical accomplishment that they don't see the damage caused by alienating the veterans who showed up to be heard.

For NYC veterans who vend and vets who are paying attention, it has becomes obvious that this a charade, smoke and mirrors and razzle dazzle. Without the glossy website and newsletter and the digital data razzle...the DVS really deserves a "D.

Thank you,

Armando Crescenzi, JD

American Legion, DAV, MOAA

Dear Chairman Holden, Chief of Staff Daniel, Commissioner Hendon, and Members of the Committee,

I hope this letter finds you well. My name is Rabah Belkebir, a U.S. Army service-connected disabled veteran and a street vendor here in New York City. I write to you on behalf of a group of approximately 1,600 veteran street vendors across the city, including 300 who are service-connected disabled veterans. While only around 200 of us are actively vending, our community remains united and determined to address the daily challenges we face.

For more than 30 years, we have attended hearings at the New York City Council to advocate for our rights as veterans. These are rights that were granted to us by the state legislature, yet we feel that the City of New York has continually denied these rights. It is disheartening that while the city has allocated a budget of \$6 billion for illegal migrants, only \$6 million has been allocated to the Department of Veterans Services (DVS) to assist over 100,000 veterans.

For the first time last year, the City Council Veterans Committee, led by Chairman Holden and Chief of Staff Daniel Kurzyna, took a significant step in recognizing the plight of veteran street vendors. I am grateful for their support and for helping to bring attention to our issues. I also proposed the idea of appointing a liaison within the DVS to facilitate communication between our community and city agencies, and I am thankful that this initiative is now in legislation. We look forward to seeing the city agencies take action and respond accordingly.

However, despite this progress, the city agencies must stop ignoring our rights. As disabled veterans who served our country, we should be honored for our sacrifices, not discriminated against or subjected to unfair treatment. It is time for this to stop.

For instance, in the Times Square area, there are only two legal food vendors—myself and Armando. Yet, we are consistently issued illegal summons, often based on false claims, and when these summonses are brought to the OATH (Office of Administrative Trials and Hearings) department, we are frequently found guilty. Meanwhile, illegal vendors in the same area face little to no consequences, with many of their cases being dismissed by OATH.

With the recent departure of our liaison Jason, , we ask Commissioner Hendon to appoint someone to fulfill this role as soon as possible. It is crucial that meetings between veteran street vendors and city agencies be set up to address our concerns. Last month, I spoke with two OATH deputy commissioners, Mr. Castelli and Mr. Weach, to discuss our issues, but they informed me that the matter must be handled by the DVS.

We appreciate your continued support and ask that you keep pushing for solutions that honor the sacrifices of service-connected disabled veterans like us.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Respectfully Rabah belkebir

NYC Disabled Veterans Street Vendors  
(Specialized Licenses)  
NYS GBL 32/35a





NEW YORK HEALTH FOUNDATION: Improving the state of New York's health

**Testimony of Derek Coy, Senior Program Officer, New York Health Foundation**

**Submitted to the New York City Council Committee on Veterans**

**Oversight - Implementing Recommendations from the City Council's Report Card Initiative**

**April 28, 2025**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the New York Health Foundation (NYHealth) regarding the implementation of recommendations from the City Council's Report Card Initiative. NYHealth is a private, independent, statewide foundation dedicated to improving the health of all New Yorkers—including more than 133,000 veterans who call New York City home. My name is Derek Coy; I'm a Senior Program Officer at NYHealth. I am also a proud veteran, having served as a Sergeant in the United States Marine Corps.

For more than 15 years, NYHealth has worked to understand and support the health needs of New York's veterans. We do this through grantmaking, policy analysis, advocacy, research, and convenings. Our work has identified gaps in services and helped develop innovative, community-based programs that meet veterans where they are. Over the years, we have had the opportunity to partner closely with City agencies and partners to ensure New York's veterans receive high-quality, culturally competent care and support.

We appreciate the City's focus on accountability and data transparency through the City Council Report Card Initiative and the Mayor's Management Report. A high-performing City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) is essential to ensuring New York City's veterans have access to the services and supports they need and deserve. To complement the City's initiatives, we offer independent research and findings from recent NYHealth-supported analyses to inform the Council's ongoing efforts.

Veterans in New York City face unique barriers to care and wellbeing. Our recent *Veterans' Health Needs Assessment*<sup>i</sup>—conducted by the RAND Corporation and released in October 2024—identified several areas where the City can continue to make progress.

The report found that 26% of recently separated veterans in New York State have a probable PTSD diagnosis—a 60% increase since 2010. While some of that increase may

reflect improved screening, reduced stigma, and greater access to care, the number remains striking. Nearly two-thirds of these veterans report having a disability, and one in five rate their health as “fair” or “poor”—clear signs that their health needs exceed those of their civilian peers. Alarming, more than 20% reported an unmet need for mental health care. Among veterans experiencing suicidal thoughts in the past year, nearly half (43.4%) did not receive the mental health help they needed.

Other data reveals another sobering finding: veterans in New York City die by suicide at nearly twice the rate of their civilian peers. Mental health challenges—including PTSD, suicidal ideation, and substance use—contribute to poor outcomes for veterans. According to NYHealth’s own data analysis<sup>ii</sup>, veterans had a 2.5 times higher rate of “deaths of despair”—including deaths related to suicide and alcohol- and drugs— than civilians in New York City from 2012–2021. Younger veterans ages 18–34 had the highest suicide rate of all age groups, and veterans ages 55–64 had the highest rate of deaths of despair, with particularly high rates for Black and Hispanic veterans in the Bronx. These figures represent real people, families, and communities struggling to access the support they have earned.

We know that suicide prevention requires a comprehensive strategy—one that addresses not only mental health care but also economic stability, social connection, and access to community-based support systems.

NYHealth has invested in several programs that directly support these upstream factors, particularly around access to care, peer support, and connection to benefits. In many cases, we have collaborated with New York City agencies and partners to successfully scale and grow these programs. We believe more investment and attention is needed to meet the evolving needs of veterans in New York City and offer the following recommendations:

- *Continue to support proactive outreach and wellness programs, including Mission: VetCheck.* With NYHealth support, New York Cares—in partnership with DVS—operates Mission: VetCheck, a peer-based outreach program providing wellness check-ins, suicide screenings, and referrals to critical resources. This program has reached thousands of veterans and built a robust referral network for behavioral health, benefits counseling, and housing support.
- *Strengthen collaboration between City agencies, community-based organizations, and health care providers to ensure no veteran falls through the cracks.* NYHealth has supported initiatives that make it easier for veterans to access benefits and services, including recent veterans’ benefit expansions resulting from the largest

expansion in federal Veterans Administration benefits through the PACT Act.

NYHealth and City support for New York Cares and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America built on existing outreach programs to assist veterans with legal services, health care navigation, and community connection. More collaborations like these can help ensure that veterans are seamlessly enrolled in the services they need.

- *Expand peer support initiatives citywide, building on existing successful models.* Peer support offers invaluable guidance for families, who benefit from shared experiences. NYHealth has invested in expanding peer-to-peer programs like the Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program (Dwyer program), which has shown success in reducing isolation and connecting veterans to services across New York State. The City's focus on peer programming and its recent Request for Proposal process for the Dwyer Program are well-positioned as an opportunity to expand essential emotional support and practical resources for veterans, families, and caregivers.
- *Ensure robust and specific data collection.* The City's Bureau of Vital Statistics can make available and leverage relevant local data to aid government and nonprofit organizations in their service delivery and evaluation efforts at relatively little cost. New, more precise data will be a beneficial resource to program planning and policy development at the City level. Future research efforts should also disaggregate data by race, ethnicity, age and borough to better inform tailored programs and address disparities in veteran outcomes.

NYHealth remains committed to supporting veterans' health in New York City. We believe the City Council's focus on data transparency, accountability, and program investment is crucial to ensure that all veterans—and their families—have access to the care and resources they need. We look forward to being a partner in this work.

THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

9

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: RABAH BELKERIR

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Disabled Veteran Street Vendor

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 4/28/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Amy Hazer-Weber

Address: 1 Liberty Plaza, FD-23, NY, NY 10006 (VAP)

I represent: Veteran Advocacy Project

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Jane Adams

Address: 34 East 38th Street, #2A, NY, NY 10016

I represent: METROPOLITAN EQUESTRIAN

Address: Same as Above

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



**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☒ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: GEORGE SINGLETON

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: DISABLED VETERAN OF N.Y.

Address: VETERAN CLUB

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Timothy Pena

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 4/08/2023

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Sharon Brown

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Rose of Sharon Enterprises

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

**Appearance Card**

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name: JOE BELLO

Address: 215 METROVETS

I represent: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

**Appearance Card**

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☒ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**(PLEASE PRINT)**

Name: Armando Crescenzi

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Post Veterans First

Address: Same

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

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

*Appearance Card*

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Michael Matos

Address: [REDACTED] Brooklyn, NY

I represent: Myself (Veteran Advocate) 11209

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

*Appearance Card*

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Christopher Lee Thomas

Address: [REDACTED]

I represent: Self

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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