

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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HELD AT: COMMITTEE ROOM, CITY HALL

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

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Charlotte Martin
Intrepid Museum

Frank Bourke
The Research and Recognition Project

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The Military Family Center
New York University Langone Health

2 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good morning and welcome to
3 today's New York City Council hearing for the
4 Committee on Veterans. At this time, please silence
5 all electronic devices. No one may approach the dais
6 at any time during today's hearing. Chair, you may
7 begin.

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Sergeant. Good
9 morning. I am Councilmember Robert Holden, Chair of
10 the Committee on Veterans. Welcome to our oversight
11 hearing on increasing veterans' civic engagement in
12 New York City.

13 In a landmark book of civic responsibility,
14 edited by leading scholar Thomas Ehrich, civic
15 engagement is defined as "working to make a
16 difference in civic life of our communities." The
17 book also notes that a morally and civically
18 responsible individual is willing to take action when
19 appropriate. Well, you know, our veterans have
20 already worked and, in some cases, sacrificed a great
21 deal to make a difference in the civic life of our
22 nation through their service.

23 Veterans are the walking definition of the
24 morally and civically responsible individuals who
25 have taken action to make a difference.

2 As a result of their service, veterans have a
3 unique perspective on the civic life that they fought
4 to defend, and we should all want to hear their
5 voices, not only when it comes to national issues,
6 but also when it comes to local and state issues,
7 especially those that affect veterans and their
8 families.

9 Right now, veterans here in New York City are
10 working to improve the quality of life in their
11 communities by voting, volunteering with civic
12 community organizations, joining and serving in
13 leadership positions, and veteran service
14 organizations, and even running for elected office,
15 even though we need more running for elective office.
16 But it's a start.

17 How can our veterans be better supported in their
18 civic work they do now in their communities, and what
19 encouragement might they need to become even more
20 engaged? That is our question today, for our
21 witnesses from the DVS, Department of Veterans
22 Services, and from our witnesses who are veterans or
23 represent our veteran community and our veteran
24 service organizations. We look forward to having a
25 discussion with DVS about its current support for

2 veterans engagement in community volunteer work,
3 including any work that has been done on the Vet the
4 Vote, a nationwide campaign launched to get veterans
5 and military families to serve as poll workers. Vet
6 the Vote enjoys partnerships with the NBA and with
7 NASCAR in its recruitment campaign.

8 As President Obama tweeted, poll workers power
9 our democracy, helping voters cast their ballots and
10 making sure that elections run smoothly. So far,
11 over 136,000 veterans and family members have been
12 signed up to work for the polls in November. We also
13 look forward to a discussion about the work of our
14 own New York City Veterans Advisory Board, an
15 important civic engagement opportunity for our
16 veterans.

17 Finally, with the deadline for voter registration
18 coming up on October 26, we are very interested in
19 whether any voter registration outreach is being
20 conducted to make sure that the veterans are
21 registered to vote and in the important upcoming
22 elections. And, as always, we want to know how the
23 City Council can support all of this work.

24

25

2 At this time, I would like to acknowledge my
3 colleagues who are here today, Councilmember Christy
4 Marmarato.

5 Also, I would like to thank committee staff for
6 work to prepare this hearing, John LaRosa our
7 Legislative Counsel, Regina Paul our Policy Analyst,
8 and Ross Goldstein our Financial Analyst. And
9 finally, thanks to my Chief of Staff, Daniel Kurzyna,
10 who's standing out somewhere in the hallway, I think.
11 I would also like to-- I would like to turn it over
12 to our Legislative Counsel to administer the oath to
13 our witnesses from the administration.

14 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you, so we have
15 Commissioner Hendon and Assistant Commissioner Nicole
16 Jordan-Jones. Please raise your right hand.

17 Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth,
18 and nothing but the truth in your testimony before
19 this committee and to respond honestly to
20 Councilmembers' questions?

21 BOTH: I do.

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

2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Good morning, Chair Holden,
3 committee members, and advocates. My name is James
4 Hendon. I serve as Commissioner of the New York City
5 Department of Veteran Services. I'm excited to
6 discuss our department's initiatives and efforts to
7 increase civic engagement among veteran and military
8 families.

9 I'm joined by DVS's Assistant Commissioner for
10 Community Engagement, Nicole Jordan-Jones. And to
11 get right into it, the bedrock of our democracy is
12 civic engagement. Further, the presence of veterans
13 and their loved ones in our neighborhoods enriches
14 our communities and improves our lives.

15 To this point, according to the National
16 Conference on Citizenship's 2021 Veteran Civic Health
17 Index, 75% of veterans voted in the 2020 presidential
18 election compared to 67% of non-veterans. Veterans
19 averaged 95 hours of volunteering per year compared
20 to 74 hours for civilians. 36.5% of veterans belong
21 to a group compared to 26.5% of non-veterans.
22 Veterans are more than twice as likely to appear in
23 Congress as in the civilian population. Veterans are
24 five times more likely than their non-veteran peers
25 to work for the federal government. Veterans are 10%

2 more likely than non-veterans to spend time with
3 neighbors, and nearly 60% of veterans give money to
4 charity, while 52% of non-veterans make charitable
5 contributions.

6 For these and many other reasons, it's essential
7 that we involve veterans and their family members in
8 civic processes and in the day-to-day functions that
9 make community service possible. For many veterans,
10 their service to our nation does not end when they
11 take the uniform off. Rather, it continues daily
12 through their service to friends, family, and the
13 community.

14 It is crucial that our staff at DVS recognize
15 this and work towards supporting our veterans and
16 society at large. Through supporting three pillars
17 of engagement, we assist and inform veterans about a
18 myriad of programs that both directly and indirectly
19 promote civic participation. These three pillars
20 are: Volunteer, serve, and lead.

21 First, I'd like to begin with volunteer.
22 Volunteering involves DVS promoting volunteer
23 opportunities, which are either curated by our
24 department, run by a sister agency, or organized

2 wholly within the veteran community. Examples of
3 such programs are Mission Vet Check.

4 Mission Vet Check is a buddy check wellness call
5 program operated in partnership with New York Cares.
6 Volunteers meet weekly to call U.S. military service
7 members, past and present, in order to check in on
8 them, make them aware of our offerings, and thank
9 them for their service. Emotionally, volunteers
10 convey to New York City veterans that we as a city
11 appreciate them, we see them, and we love them.

12 Through the help of thoughtful volunteers,
13 Mission Vet Check amplifies our agency's ability to
14 go on the offensive in meeting our charter mandate to
15 assist and inform veterans in the areas of
16 healthcare, housing, benefits, culture, education,
17 and employment. More than 16,000 calls were made in
18 support of Mission Vet Check during fiscal year 2024,
19 and please visit nyc.gov/vetcheck to learn more.

20 Emergency food efforts: Every Wednesday from
21 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., approximately 15 to 25
22 volunteers, many of whom hail from Black Veterans of
23 Social Justice, pack 2,000 donated HelloFresh meal
24 kits, the equivalent of 8,000 meals, at the Campaign
25 Against Hunger's Brooklyn Community Food Distribution

2 Center located in East New York. Roughly 20 veteran
3 service organizations pick up the meals and deliver
4 them to food insecure veterans throughout New York
5 City. In the four-year history of this program, more
6 than one and a half million meals have been
7 delivered.

8 The lifeblood of the HelloFresh food work is its
9 volunteers, of which we can always use more. Further
10 information can be found at nyc.gov/vetfood.

11 Veteran Voices Project, or VVP. VVP is an oral
12 history initiative designed to preserve the stories
13 of New York City's veteran community. After being
14 trained and provided with suggested questions by
15 storytellers, volunteers collect the oral histories
16 of veteran and veteran family members. Those
17 histories are then archived by DVS and the Municipal
18 Archives. Recordings are publicly available on
19 SoundCloud and the NYC DVS Veteran Voices Project
20 series on Artifact. We're currently in the process
21 of providing more than 80 of our Veteran Voices
22 Project recordings to the Library of Congress.
23 Details about VVP can be found online at
24 nyc.gov/vetvoices.

2 ETS Sponsorship Program: The Expiration of
3 Terminal Service, or ETS Sponsorship Program,
4 recently rebranded Onward Ops, enables volunteers to
5 mentor transitioning service members as they
6 reintegrate into civilian life. A DVS non-profit
7 partner, Onward Ops connects new veterans with
8 trained sponsors from the communities to which they
9 will transition. The effort focuses on the 12 months
10 surrounding new veterans' departure from the Armed
11 Forces.

12 Like our other initiatives, Onward Ops depends on
13 the presence of volunteers. These volunteers serve
14 as the trained sponsors. More information is
15 available at nyc.gov/vetmentor.

16 Other City of New York programs: Beyond the
17 volunteer opportunities curated by DVS, we happily
18 cross-promote volunteer offerings provided by sister
19 agencies, including, but not limited to, the NYC
20 Civic Engagement Commission, the Mayor's Public
21 Engagement Unit, NYC Service, NYC Aging, the NYC
22 Department of Parks and Recreation, and the NYC
23 Department of Youth and Community Development.

24 Non-City of New York programs: ourveterans.nyc
25 is an online community calendar of greater New York

2 City area veteran offerings, programs, and events,
3 and volunteer opportunities. Run by the Bob Butcher
4 Foundation at the behest of DVS, ourveterans.nyc is a
5 one-stop shop for learning who's doing what, when,
6 and where in our local community, in addition to how
7 to help.

8 Along with posting our own events on the
9 ourveterans.nyc website, we constantly encourage
10 organizations that ask us to amplify their work to
11 post their events and volunteer opportunities on the
12 ourveterans.nyc website as well. Details can be
13 found online at ourveterans.nyc. That was the first
14 pillar of volunteer.

15 The second pillar of our three is serve.

16 Serving involves ways that our veteran community
17 can become civically involved in existing boards,
18 commissions, and engagement platforms across New York
19 City government, community boards.

20 DVS perennially encourages veterans to serve on
21 their local community board, both in an official
22 appointed capacity and in a non-board member status.
23 Each year we update the five borough's community
24 board application guidelines and submission forms
25 once they're available. Applications to be appointed

2 to one's community board, if that board is located in
3 Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens, or Brooklyn are due
4 anywhere from mid-February through early March. The
5 deadline varies by borough. The appointment begins
6 on April 1st.

7 For Staten Island, there is a rolling application
8 and no deadline, and we relay this information online
9 at nyc.gov/vetcommunityboards.

10 Veterans Advisory Board: The 13-member New York
11 City Veterans Advisory Board exists according to the
12 city charter to assist-- to advise DVS, hold regular
13 public meetings tailored to the veteran community,
14 and submit an annual report to the mayor and city
15 council, which includes policy and legislative
16 recommendations for DVS and the council.

17 Our agency promotes Veterans Advisory Board
18 meetings at nyc.gov/vetboard. We also maintain
19 biographical information about the board, prior
20 meeting minutes, recordings, and yearly reports at
21 nyc.gov/vetboard. We encourage more of our veteran
22 community members to attend VAB meetings so they can
23 meet one another, raise issues, and be heard.

24 Boards and commissions We are happy to cross-
25 promote appointment opportunities to the more than

2 200 City of New York boards and commissions. We
3 recognize the value that veteran community members
4 bring to all aspects of city government. Details can
5 be found online at nyc.gov/appointments in the boards
6 and commissions tab.

7 Community engagement sessions: Community
8 engagement sessions are virtual quarterly meetings
9 that DVS holds with leaders in the veteran community.
10 Our definition of a leader is any person who helps
11 one or more veterans or their loved ones. During
12 community engagement sessions, we update leaders on
13 DVS developments, discuss in detail a veteran
14 services topic that ties back to one of our charter
15 mandated areas, and create a space for leaders to
16 provide us with thoughts and feedback on agency
17 activities. Details about community engagement
18 sessions can be found on the DVS homepage in the tile
19 that appears front and center. Visit nyc.gov/vets to
20 learn more.

21 So we talked about volunteer. We talked about
22 serve.

23 Our third and final pillar of engagement is lead.
24 Leading in this context involves ways that veteran
25 serving entities can leverage available local

2 government resources in order in order to fuel and
3 maximize the value that their organizations deliver
4 to our community. There are two efforts that I'd
5 like to highlight with regard to leading.

6 First is the Joseph P. Dwyer program. The
7 Private First Class Joseph P. Dwyer program is a New
8 York state funded effort which aims to increase
9 social engagement and connectivity for U.S. military
10 veterans and their families. After starting in 2012
11 with 12 New York communities, Dwyer initially
12 excluded New York City, the state legislature has
13 recently expanded the program to include 25
14 communities. New York City is now a Dwyer Program
15 funding recipient. Funding for the Dwyer Program
16 flows from the state to the NYC Department of Health
17 and Mental Hygiene to us at DVS. Through DVS, New
18 York City is the first community to receive Dwyer
19 money and then take measures to issue the funding to
20 multiple veteran serving organizations in a dispersed
21 hyper-local way.

22 Here in the five boroughs, Dwyer will empower
23 frontline organizations to normalize help-seeking
24 behavior amongst veteran and military families. Our
25 spirit is to treat this like it's a grant program for

2 our veteran serving institutions. That said, we are
3 conducting this in effort in the context of Mayor's
4 Office of Contract Services Guidelines and
5 Procurement Policy Board rules.

6 The deadline for veteran serving organizations to
7 apply for this inaugural post-pilot round of Dwyer
8 funding is Monday, September 30th, 2024 at 2 p.m.
9 Please visit nyc.gov/vetDwyer to learn more.

10 New York City Council funding: We perennially
11 encourage all veteran serving organizations to apply
12 for discretionary funding from the New York City
13 Council.

14 Council discretionary funding is the most
15 enduring, long-standing resource available to the
16 501c3s, 501c19s, and other non-profits that support
17 U.S. military service members past and present in the
18 City of New York. Given that the deadline to apply
19 for council funding is in mid to late February, we
20 update our website with information about the council
21 funding application process as soon as it is made
22 public. Details would speak to the most recent
23 council funding process, FY25, but are still relevant
24 to next year's process, FY26, can be found online at
25 nyc.gov/vetcouncilfunding.

2 It is important to note that for both these
3 efforts, the Dwyer Program and council funding, we
4 encourage veteran serving non-profits that help
5 navigating city procurement systems, that need help
6 navigating city procurement systems, to contact our
7 friends at the LaGuardia Community College Apex
8 Accelerator for technical assistance. Details about
9 how to schedule a meeting with the LaGuardia
10 Community College Apex Accelerator can be found at
11 nyc.gov/vetDwyer. We do not want anyone to say that
12 they were not afforded the tools to compete for these
13 resources.

14 Self-identification: Despite what we offer in
15 terms of volunteer, serve, and lead, all is for
16 naught if we cannot identify veterans and duly
17 inspire them to self-identify, to proactively come
18 out of the shadows, to level set. According to the
19 VA's most recent gross domestic expenditure report
20 for FY23, nationwide, 34.3 percent of U.S. military
21 veterans self-identifies, but the proportion drops to
22 29.8 percent in New York State, and 24.1 percent in
23 New York City. In other words, for every New York
24 City veteran that you see, like me and several in

2 this room, there are three you do not see. We put
3 volunteer, serve, and lead forward.

4 Those are civic engagement pillars. We advance
5 them proudly, but we cannot have a real discussion
6 about civic engagement until we identify more of our
7 people. A few of our strategies in this regard
8 follow.

9 Local Law 37 of 2024 passed by the City Council
10 late last year and taking effect in 2024. Local Law
11 37 mandates that City of New York agencies include
12 all client-facing city forms and quoting the local
13 law, the forms must include a question about whether
14 such person or any member of their household has
15 served in the Armed Forces, National Guard, or
16 Reserves of the United States. This is the first
17 year that this question has been mandated by law.

18 We are excited about what the future holds as we
19 prepare to report on the results from this question
20 provided by other agencies and including ourselves no
21 later than December 15th. We anticipate that this
22 law will go a long ways towards helping us identify
23 New York City veterans.

24 DoD data for transitioning service members. In
25 October 2022, after years of advocacy in partnership

2 with the National Association of State Directors
3 Veterans Affairs, DVS began receiving DD-214 data
4 from the U.S. Department of Defense for all veterans
5 whose mailing address after separation from October
6 2022 onward was within New York City. This autumn
7 through the same program, we will begin receiving
8 transition assistance program data for future
9 veterans who have not yet left military service but
10 who have indicated on their pre-separation counseling
11 check sheet checklist in the form, this is the form,
12 place them in TAP, that they will transition within
13 the next 12 months to the City of New York. We'll be
14 able to connect, contact these future veterans before
15 they leave the military.

16 Through these efforts as time goes by, we will
17 form and nurture relationships with more New York
18 City veterans starting from day one of their veteran
19 existence. They will be identified. An update, we
20 got the form, we got the information today, like this
21 morning before coming to this hearing we received the
22 information.

23 So now we know prior to someone's getting out
24 that they have said they want to come to New York so
25 we can reach out to them while they're going through

2 the TAP process. That literally happened at 9 18
3 a.m.

4 Data sharing with the New York State Department
5 of Veteran Services. DVS recently executed a data
6 sharing agreement with our state level counterparts
7 at New York State DVS. This two-way agreement allows
8 us to share contact information about the veterans
9 whom we assist. It allows us to amplify one
10 another's outreach, increasing our known universe of
11 veterans. Equally important, New York State DVS
12 receives contact information from the Department of
13 Motor Vehicles for all New Yorkers who place the word
14 veteran on their driver's license. Specific to New
15 York City, we will receive that information as well.

16 Beyond these ways of identifying veterans, we
17 recognize that performing our core work, delivering
18 veteran services in a professional, efficient,
19 empathetic way will generate goodwill and encourage
20 more of our brothers and sisters and their families
21 to come out of the shadows. Delivering marquee
22 services, promoting those services, and undergirding
23 our work with strong alliances and partnerships are
24 keys to inspiring more of our veterans to come

2 online. That in turn fosters a dynamic where more
3 veterans will discover and embrace civic engagement.

4 In conclusion, we are grateful for this
5 opportunity to testify on the topic of improving
6 veteran civic engagement. As always, we're happy to
7 answer any questions that the committee may have.

8 More information about DVS's community programs
9 can be found online at nyc.gov/vets. Volunteer
10 opportunities are explicitly highlighted at
11 nyc.gov/vetvolunteer.

12 Lastly, speaking of engagement, if you are
13 attending an institution of higher learning or
14 enrolled in a training program and your institution
15 is partly or fully subsidized by the VA, in other
16 words, like someone participating in vocational rehab
17 or veteran or dependent using the post-911 GI Bill,
18 please know that the VA Work-Study Program is an
19 opportunity for you to be compensated by the VA to
20 work part-time at a VA-approved site while you
21 matriculate.

22 If you are interested in applying for a DVS-
23 specific work-study position and meet eligibility
24 requirements, please submit a resume and cover letter
25 to VA Work-Study at veterans.nyc.gov. Thank you.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Commissioner.

3 And speaking of the work-study, I taught 40 years at
4 CUNY and we had-- our work-study students were mostly
5 veterans at that time, which was great.

6 And I got to know-- some were actually-- when I
7 started teaching, some were older than I was at that
8 time. And they, you know, it was kind of
9 interesting. But they gave me a perspective that I
10 carry to this day about, you know, volunteering and
11 all the work they did and what they went through.

12 But let me just get some questions and I'm going
13 to go off script a little bit. Do we know how many
14 veterans sit on community boards?

15 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We don't know the exact
16 number. I'll pass it to Nicole to add anything to
17 that, our AC for Community Engagement.

18 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER JORDAN-JONES: No, sir, we
19 don't know the exact numbers-- We don't have the
20 exact number, but I do know currently there are seven
21 boards that have veteran service-- that have
22 committees that service veterans.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: By the way, we're joined by
24 Council Member Nurse.

2 I served on the community board for 30 years and
3 I just want to, you know, a couple of days ago, I
4 went online to see if I can get a community board
5 application to see if veterans were, you know, a
6 little box was-- was put on there and I couldn't find
7 that many applications. Only one community board, in
8 fact. I didn't search for hours, but I did search
9 many community boards.

10 There's no application available even, because
11 they open up a period. I think it should be open all
12 year round, community board applications for everyone
13 and you apply.

14 So we'll talk to, you know, certainly if we have
15 to have a local law to do that, you know, we'll do
16 that. But the form that I did get, it didn't say
17 anything, no mention of veterans, no-- if you're a
18 veteran and so forth.

19 So the fact that, you know, we can easily get
20 that information about how many veterans serve on the
21 community board by just somebody actually, you know,
22 spending a few days and calling or writing or
23 emailing. But I know that's a-- you know, I had
24 asked that we have-- and it could take a law, but I
25 had asked that we have a veterans committee on every

2 community board. But then we got some pushback
3 saying, well, not that many veterans are sitting on
4 community board, and I couldn't give them an answer
5 on how many.

6 So if we can get that and make sure that-- since
7 the veterans have a lot to offer, we know that in
8 your testimony and certainly what I read, they're
9 probably the biggest population that could offer,
10 probably life experience and a lot more than-- just
11 in their own community, they could offer a worldview.

12 So, if we can get that on the form, if we can
13 encourage-- if your office can encourage community
14 boards to all include that on their forms, I'd
15 appreciate that.

16 COMMISSIONER HENDON: In a soft way we can bring
17 it up, Mr. Chair, because we're constantly touching
18 these community boards.

19 So under Nicole's leadership, we're always making
20 sure we have lots of communication with the CBs. So
21 we can ask them gently, you know, suggest and also
22 try to ask how many veterans are you aware of who are
23 on--

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right, right. So I think
25 it's important because we have to tap into a

2 population that served us, and the-- and try to get
3 them their perspective on it. And I'd like to have
4 at least a few veterans on every community board if
5 that's possible. That's our goal.

6 So what has DVS done to support the national--
7 nationwide Vet the Vote campaign to recruit election
8 day poll workers from our veteran community?

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So we haven't tied in with
10 Vet the Vote, Mr. Chair.

11 Also, we don't tie in with these types of
12 organizations in general as far as us proactively
13 reaching out to them. We know that our friends at
14 Civic Engagement Commission do have the Democracy NYC
15 campaign, that \$2 million campaign to do voter
16 education to get folks signed up to be able to vote
17 ahead of the June primary. But we as an agency do
18 not directly proactively reach out to those entities.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, and what about
20 your efforts to-- what's DVS doing to encourage
21 veterans to register to vote? I mean that's-- that I
22 think is very important. And what-- Your testimony
23 is veterans register more than the general
24 population, which is good. I'm glad to hear that.

2 But what are we doing to actually get more veterans
3 to register?

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: What's tough about that,
5 Mr. Chair, is that for us, there are different ways
6 to respond to this.

7 One is that it's not within our charter, as far
8 as this area. For us, it's assisted and informed in
9 the areas of education, employment, healthcare,
10 housing, benefits, culture. That's one piece.

11 Another piece of this is, you know, we worry
12 about in any way being perceived as being political.
13 It's so touchy to get into things that involve
14 political education to get out the vote, and there
15 are other organizations that already do this. And so
16 we, you know, kind of see that landscape. But then
17 we are wary about-- you know, we don't want to in any
18 way be perceived as being partisan or leaning any
19 direction.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, you're just saying to
21 vote. You're not saying who to vote for. You just
22 vote. And, you know, it's important to get the
23 voices from our veterans to vote.

24 So, you know, it's a-- Listen, the general
25 population, everybody should vote. It should be you

2 know, it should be on everyone's list of things to do
3 on Election Day or even prior to that.

4 But again, it's transitioning from military life
5 to civilian life. You know, so to focus on what they
6 could do for their communities is important. You
7 know, so when you said you get the list of people who
8 are looking to New York to settle after their
9 military life, there should be some kind of message
10 to them to volunteer. And you mentioned a bunch, but
11 just in their local communities, how to volunteer.
12 And again, that could come from the VA or DVS, but
13 even an email, something to that effect could help.

14 What role does the Veterans Advisory Board play
15 in advising DVS? Because I know you go on those
16 meetings, you know, and I appreciate that, that you
17 and your staff do that.

18 COMMISSIONER HENDON: It's important for people
19 to feel like they can be heard at forums like this
20 and at the VAB and that they can, you know, interact
21 with their government. And so for us, you know, the
22 VAB by function holds its five meetings, you know,
23 once in each borough per year.

24 And they do produce a report that is sent to the
25 mayor and the speaker with recommendations, policy

2 and legislative, as far as veteran services and how
3 the city renders them.

4 For us, we try to take that feedback and see what
5 can we move the needle on? How can we be of value in
6 certain ways to advance things that they're
7 recommending? You know, just a few examples include
8 the transition to us-- to starting to, you know,
9 manage some of these small-dollar contracts coming to
10 our veteran organizations, as far as discretionary
11 contracts, as an example.

12 Another one for us is just the expansion of the
13 board from having 11 members to 13 members.

14 So now two seats, one for the speaker, one for
15 the mayor, who are appointed as family members. And
16 just recognizing-- I've got to call out
17 Councilmember Nurse here, who herself is a military
18 family member. And so we think about our family
19 members as well.

20 Another example of something we've done, you
21 know, at the behest of the board has been, you know,
22 bringing together our veteran street vendors, many of
23 whom are here today. We had a convening just last
24 November with that group and different factors in
25 government between the different agencies that

2 interact with our street vendors, and even setting up
3 online nyc.gov/vetvendor, so that our vendors know,
4 here's a person from sanitation who works on veterans
5 issues that involve vending; here's a person from
6 consumer affairs who works on veteran vending; here's
7 a person from parks; here's a person from the health
8 department, from small business services, et cetera.
9 So, to try to get that throughput, that's something
10 that came from the board.

11 And there's several other things that we've done
12 that have been involved with, you know, taking the
13 board's input.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: How do you judge-- Okay,
15 I'll just turn to my colleague, Councilmember Nurse,
16 do you have a question?

17 COUNCILMEMBER NURSE: Thank you, Chair. I did
18 have a question. And thanks for letting me jump in
19 because I have a Landmarks Committee vote right now.

20 So I have three kind of things to touch on. I
21 know that the chair mentioned community boards. And
22 my understanding is, I believe the law is coming up
23 soon where there's term limits. And so I think it
24 would be really great to do some proactive outreach
25 and education and workshops on preparing veterans and

2 communities to enter community boards, considering
3 there is probably a very, very high turnover of
4 membership in community boards, given how long people
5 serve on them. So it's a great opportunity.

6 And the other question I had was if you all
7 collaborate with BOE at all, or if BOE has ever done
8 any proactive outreach with you all around kind of
9 veteran voter registration or any outreach campaigns.

10 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We have not, Councilmember
11 Nurse, as far as direct collaboration with BOE. We
12 may have a lot of communication with BOE, but we've
13 not done a coordinated event along those lines. We
14 reached out to BOE in the past about having them
15 speak at a Veterans Advisory Board meeting. That was
16 something that we tried to arrange. This was back in
17 2021. But that's the greatest touch we've had with
18 them.

19 COUNCILMEMBER NURSE: Yeah. Maybe we should bug
20 BOE to really take the initiative and reach out to
21 the veterans.

22 And I think it's important to mention that a lot
23 of service members, if they go in very early, if they
24 go in really young, they lose out on the experience
25 of that local democracy at home. And so they might

2 not even be familiar with local government structures
3 such as community boards, city council, things like
4 that. I mean, when I was growing up in the military,
5 we didn't have those things. We would vote by
6 absentee ballot if there's any awareness and
7 education.

8 So, it takes time to relearn or actually learn
9 for the first time, depending on how long you served
10 and when you joined, what is civic participation for
11 you, because you're coming from a top-down structure
12 so much that you're not even thinking about that.

13 So, I really think the education piece is super
14 important for folks that you're now getting the data
15 from who are transitioning in. I think that's really
16 great that that data has come in today. But that was
17 all I had to ask.

18 COMMISSIONER HENDON: May I just add something to
19 what you just said?

20 COUNCILMEMBER NURSE: Sure.

21 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Another thing to point out
22 is that half of veterans settle down in a place
23 they're not originally from. So you have folks--
24 It's educating them about what it means to be
25 involved in local government, but also introducing

2 them to New York City as far as different
3 organizations and just the networks here.

4 Because about 200,000 folks leave the military
5 each year, 10,000 come to the state of New York,
6 5,000 come to the city of New York approximately.
7 And we're assuming roughly half of these people have
8 never lived here before. So this is a learning curve
9 that we need to address.

10 COUNCILMEMBER NURSE: Yeah, absolutely. Thank
11 you.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Councilmember.
13 We've been joined by Councilmember Paladino.

14 COUNCILMEMBER PALADINO: Good morning.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Good morning.

16 Just back to the VAB: How does DVS judge the
17 effectiveness of the VAB and its members? Do you
18 actually look at the participation of its members in
19 the VAB?

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Well, it's not within our
21 mission set. That's not one of our areas of
22 presence.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But you could make
24 recommendations to the mayor.

2 For us, I think the way that we measure it is,
3 really, how dynamic is our relationship, how well do
4 we work together, and looking at what successes do we
5 have as far as, you know, the VAAB making a
6 recommendation and us sticking the landings and we
7 were able to bring this to fruition.

8 I think that's the way we look at it, or at least
9 the way I look at it, as far as the synergy with it.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But your contact with VAB,
11 is it a monthly check-in, or is it bi-monthly? How
12 does that work on getting the right people on the
13 Veterans Advisory Board? And some of their
14 recommendations in the past: You highlighted one or
15 two, I think. What are some of the major
16 recommendations that they made that you feel really
17 helped DVS, helped you in your role as commissioner?
18 I think one that we haven't seen the fruit come yet,
19 but it's in the oven, so to speak, is VetConnect NYC
20 and how we're operating it.

21 There was a lot of feedback that the VAB had
22 about how that platform, this is the digital services
23 platform through which we connect veterans to service
24 providers. Right now, we ended the contract with one
25 vendor we've been working with and now we're working

2 with another. So we had Unite Us. It was a vendor
3 we've used for several years and we're transitioning
4 to Combined Arms. A lot of what we're doing with
5 Combined Arms, it is really fueled by input from the
6 Veterans Advisory Board. We're in the data migration
7 period right now where they're setting things up so
8 that that will be what undergirds the portal.

9 But that's a very important thing as far as just
10 feedback from the VAB, that I think that we've really
11 taken to heart and that directly reflects in our
12 execution.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So the veteran service
14 organizations, which we both are involved with, do
15 you talk to them about getting their members engaged
16 not only in community boards but joining the
17 community groups, civic associations, and so forth?
18 Because I do that on my level, trying to get them to
19 connect with at least the community boards and civic
20 associations. So, some are doing that already, but
21 do you have any formal program? A couple of things.

22 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Each quarter we have a
23 community engagement session where we invite all
24 leaders in the veteran community. It's a virtual
25 session. We just want to have a place, a forum,

2 where if you are a leader in the community, you can
3 be able to speak to us and vice versa. If you have
4 needs, you can air them.

5 You can always reach out to us offline. We try
6 to have these organic bullets as one mechanism to be
7 able to touch folks.

8 I'd say the closest we come to what you're
9 saying, Mr. Chair, is if someone is looking to apply
10 for council funding, we will do the best we can to
11 try to help them put together their packet for that.
12 We can't do it for them, but we can give them all the
13 appropriate guidance on it and how that may tie into
14 having to coordinate or liaise with your elected
15 official, with this committee and other bodies.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, that is a major
17 challenge. Most not-for-profits--

18 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Please jump in. Please
19 jump in.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah.

21 ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER JORDAN-JONES: Chair,
22 community boards are also invited and they
23 participate in the CEM meetings.

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Good. Great. All right.

2 So again, speaking on what the city council can
3 do, what additional resources or support does DVS
4 need from the City Council to enhance civic
5 engagement among veterans in New York City?

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I've got some-- Before I
7 say-- I want to go back to a comment on VAB. I got
8 to give VAB some regular credit for this. They ask
9 us, "Please put the hearing notifications in the
10 newsletter. Please make sure that stuff is available
11 on social media." And I feel like from the point
12 when they asked that, we started to see, for those
13 who attend these meetings, we started to see some
14 sort of increase in attendance.

15 And so I've got to give VAB credit for that as
16 far as something in real time we can see as far as
17 them making a suggestion, us taking it, and seeing
18 some sort of action on it. I just want to
19 acknowledge that.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Great.

21 COMMISSIONER HENDON: But to the other question,
22 I think that something that can move the needle the
23 most, Mr. Chair, we've got 50 to 60 veteran
24 organizations that receive discretionary funding each
25 year, roughly. There's nothing that asks that those

2 organizations tie in with DVS so that we can cross-
3 promote and be aware of what they're doing and get
4 the word out. And so if there was some way that we
5 could arrange things where if you receive council
6 funding, you've got to come on the net with DVS and
7 let us know about whatever that event is so that we
8 can amplify it.

9 I don't know how that would sound as far as the
10 legal language, but I think that's something that can
11 definitely amplify our ability to touch folks and to
12 just take what you're investing in through the
13 council and ensure that it has the maximum effect.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, we do have internship
15 programs too within the City Council offices. So we
16 could actually do a program.

17 And I think if that comes from your office, it
18 can come from this committee. But I think if we got
19 support from DVS on, let's say, hire a vet or allow
20 veteran opportunities within the council offices, I
21 think that's the way to get the word out to
22 constituents. Because we see dozens of constituents
23 a day, and then we also have regular town meetings in
24 my office and around my office.

2 So, getting the word out that way, and having a
3 veteran speak to the public is also very, very
4 important.

5 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think something to add to
6 this, because you're speaking of the existing
7 internship opportunities and us getting the word out
8 about that. Something that we're very much open to,
9 and this is, I'm saying this, we're both city
10 government at the end of the day. We're both State
11 of New York, just we work in different places in the
12 city.

13 We're an approved Skillbridge partner.
14 Skillbridge is a partner defense program where
15 someone who is within their last six months of
16 service can, so long as their senior supervisor
17 approves, work for a non-military government-related
18 organization, be it working for the city of New York
19 or working in the private sector, working with a non-
20 profit. And it's work that can be done full-time as
21 far as either hybrid, remote, or in person. And so
22 we have a Skillbridge intern ourselves with us, a
23 young man who's a Marine transitioning out. His name
24 is William. He's just leaving the Marine Corps,
25 looking at what he's doing, but he's been with us.

2 And that's a program where I think that this is
3 something we could also work on, where if someone is
4 looking to be Skillbridge, we can be the
5 administrative lead for it, but have that person in
6 your office, Councilmember Marmarato, Councilmember
7 Paladino, Councilmember Holden. So that's something
8 we can look at doing with the council.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So here's another question
10 that you're probably not going to be able to answer.
11 There's only a few, but this is-- how many
12 Councilmembers are veterans, do you know of?

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: To our knowledge, none.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: None.

15 COMMISSIONER HENDON: At this time.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: None. All right. And I'm
17 included in that. So-- However, we have to change
18 that. Do you have any ideas? Because I'm trying to
19 figure it out.

20 What I'm trying to get more people to run for
21 office, when I find someone that actually-- they're
22 not really entrenched in a political party, that they
23 are really, they care about their neighborhoods, and
24 they care about their community, and they care about
25 the city. But when I meet people, it's important to

2 see their motives for running for office, not that
3 they're part of a clubhouse or anything like that.
4 They're part of engaging in their community's
5 leadership.

6 And veterans are a group that I could say are
7 mostly leaders in one way or another. So how do we
8 do it? And I'd like to just, again, off the cuff, no
9 notes, just like, how do we get people, veterans, to
10 run for office more? How do we engage them to get
11 involved?

12 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I feel like, and this is me
13 with the DVS hat on, it's really about, it really
14 comes down to outreach and identifying more people.
15 This is an M&Ms game to me, meaning that each
16 Councilmember on average represents 171,000 people
17 for our 51 Councilmembers.

18 So you're looking for that green M&M that'll be
19 that one that could potentially be that if we're
20 talking about the council. We need more M&Ms in the
21 jar in the first place to get the green one. And so
22 to me, a lot of the work for us on DVS's side is,
23 what are we doing to continue to identify folks and
24 engage them and just bring them into the community so

2 that they are already, you know, tied in so they can
3 take advantage of opportunities.

4 It's not on us to be that group that does the
5 political education, but if we animate more people to
6 become civically involved, those things will
7 inevitably take place or other groups and
8 organizations that do the political education and
9 grooming. But for us, it's just getting more folks
10 to come on the net.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. But, you know,
12 again, when you come, you know, you talk to a veteran
13 and you can hear in their voice that they're, you
14 know, obviously they have that capability or they
15 have that wherewithal. Put that in the back of your
16 mind just to try to get them to run, encourage them
17 to run. And if they-- If you don't want to do it,
18 I'll do it.

19 It's important that we try to get more leaders
20 who are veterans in this city, just based on the City
21 Council that we're seeing today with no members. I
22 don't think I could remember a time when that was
23 like that, where we had no veterans.

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: What's tough for me is the
25 top thing for me is identifying the veterans.

2 And I feel like if we got into this space as DVS,
3 then it would make it harder for us to identify the
4 veterans. That's my worry.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I know. But you talk to
6 veterans all, you know, every day of your life.

7 So just, again, just keep that in the back of
8 your mind. Any questions from my colleagues?

9 COUNCILMEMBER PALADINO: Just a statement to go
10 back to what Bob just brought up. I have a Navy vet,
11 young girl, 36 years old, who's been renting the
12 apartment upstairs from my house.

13 And sadly, she's going back to Idaho to run for
14 office. She's off the charts bright. And she stayed
15 here about five or six years, to what you're saying.

16 And I said, Andrea, why don't you run for office?
17 You would be outstanding. And she says, no, not
18 here. I'm going to go back home to Idaho. And
19 that's what she's doing.

20 But to your point, Commissioner, we always end up
21 at the back at this very same space, which is they
22 need to self-identify for us to know that they're
23 vets, and that we could take it that one step further
24 with them once we know we're talking to a vet. And
25 then we could explore and have, through conversation,

2 try to figure out where their niche is. A lot of
3 them are working already and never claimed that they
4 were veterans. And again, we come back to the same
5 thing, that they're entitled to just so many
6 benefits, and I implore them to get involved and to
7 find out what's there.

8 And these younger people in their 40s and 50s,
9 and some are in their late 20s, doesn't seem like
10 anybody wants to self-identify, which I think is a
11 shame. So, you know, we're working with a small
12 number that we know of, but we know the number is far
13 greater than that.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Councilmember Marmorato?

15 COUNCILMEMBER MARMORATO: Thank you, Chair. Hi.
16 I just want to touch on what you mentioned earlier
17 about the \$2 million for a campaign to outreach to
18 voters for the veterans. Does that \$2 million come
19 out of your \$5 million budget or is that separate?

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: That's separate.

21 COUNCILMEMBER MARMORATO: Right. I was going to
22 say--

23 COMMISSIONER HENDON: That's the Civic Engagement
24 Commission. It's the Democracy NYC initiative. And
25 so that's a separate agency that runs that.

2 COUNCILMEMBER MARMORATO: Okay. All right. I
3 was going to say that would be kind of tough.

4 I just want to know, what are you doing to
5 outreach to younger veterans? Because I feel like as
6 I go to these organizations and the Legions and the
7 veterans organizations, I feel like the medium age is
8 kind of a little bit higher up there. And I was just
9 wondering, what are we going to do to get the younger
10 veterans involved?

11 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Well, I think one piece of
12 it is that one year when someone leaves the military,
13 if they're not tethered, that's something that is
14 called a deadly gap as far as the incidence of
15 suicide in our community are significantly higher in
16 that one year post leaving the military, if no one
17 grabs them as they transition from military to
18 civilian life. And so we're trying to grab more of
19 those folks.

20 And so that's why it's so important as far as
21 those who are just transitioning that literally as of
22 this morning now, when someone indicates, and it's a
23 DD-648 form, it's a pre-separation checklist. When
24 they indicate, I'm getting out of the Army, the Navy,
25 Air Force, Marines, et cetera, and I'm going to New

2 York, we get that information so we can start to
3 communicate with them right away. So, this is a way
4 for someone to not fall into the shadows. So that's
5 one thing that we're doing.

6 Another thing is, we do have the DD-214s I
7 mentioned. So once the separation paperwork is
8 actually processed, as soon as it's processed, each
9 week, we get that information. So, we're able to try
10 to put hands on folks who are just coming to us.

11 Another area of penetration for us is trying to
12 reach out to more veterans through social media. And
13 so I just want to call out the efforts of our comms
14 team, our press secretary, our digital communications
15 manager, Chuck Rivera, Curtis Duval, who, looking at
16 just the most recent MMR report, the Mayor's
17 Management Report that's gone out, that the
18 impressions across various platforms have surged by
19 54 percent from FY23 to FY24, more than 474,000.

20 And just things that they've done to just expand
21 outreach and marketing efforts digitally and through
22 other means, which we've seen move the needle. Even
23 online site visits to the DBS website, there's a 21
24 percent increase from the previous year. And it's
25 really about diversified strategies.

2 So, when we say diversified, we are talking about
3 direct mail, traditional outreach, informationals,
4 text messages, social media, printed newspaper. But
5 when it comes to online piece, we pray that that's a
6 way for us to bring more of our younger veterans into
7 the frame.

8 COUNCILMEMBER MARMORATO: Okay. If there's any
9 material that you would like to pass along to my
10 office, as far as like posting on Instagram,
11 Facebook, and Twitter, I'd be more than happy to do
12 that, just to help with the outreach.

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We'll follow up.

14 COUNCILMEMBER MARMORATO: Thank you.

15 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Not just with you, we'll
16 follow up with the Councilmembers too, all the
17 members.

18 COUNCILMEMBER MARMORATO: Great. Thank you so
19 much.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You know, as you were asking
21 that question: What could we do to actually expand
22 civic engagement within our veteran community? I
23 come from advertising, so I always think social media
24 campaign, advertising. Social media costs nothing to
25 put out. And designing posters or just an ad

2 campaign could be done within our CUNY schools, our
3 colleges, that have design departments.

4 And I come from that, by the way. So, you know,
5 we always worked with City Hall when I was a
6 professor at City Tech. And we did public service
7 campaigns, which is, that's a win-win.

8 It's a win for the students designing a real
9 campaign. And certainly it's a win to the not-for-
10 profits. And certainly, if we do a veteran campaign,
11 even on self-identification, be proud of your
12 service.

13 I mean, something, a campaign like that, just to
14 back that veteran into civilian life, and then
15 telling them how to actually work with your
16 community, to be part of the community, to feel that
17 they have something to offer. So I'm going to work
18 with some colleges, and maybe you can visit with me
19 one time in a couple of days, and just engage with
20 some of our students in college to come up with a
21 campaign to try to get veterans, not only self-
22 identified, but also civic engagement, which is the
23 topic of this. And again, it's done very easily.
24 It's not that difficult.

2 So, any other-- before I let you go, any other
3 questions or plans that you have to expand civic
4 engagement for our veterans, other than what we
5 mentioned today? Any other ideas that you might
6 have?

7 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think beyond what we've
8 mentioned, as far as just continuing to identify
9 veterans and focus on these pillars of volunteer,
10 serve, lead, nothing more I can mention at this time,
11 Mr. Chair.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Great. All right. Thank
13 you. Thank you so much, Commissioner. Thank you for
14 the great work. Appreciate your-- Anybody else?
15 Okay, we're good. Thank you. Thanks so much for
16 your testimony.

17 Okay. I'm now going to open the hearing for
18 public testimony. I remind members of the public
19 that this is a formal government proceeding, and that
20 decorum shall be observed at all times.

21 As such, members of the public shall remain
22 silent at all times. The witness table is reserved
23 for people who wish to testify. No video recording
24 or photography is allowed from the witness table.

2 Further, members of the public may not present
3 audio or video recordings as testimony, but may
4 submit transcripts of such recordings to the Sergeant
5 at Arms for inclusion in the hearing.

6 If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please
7 fill out an appearance card. It kind of looks like
8 this, or it is this, with the Sergeant at Arms and
9 wait to be recognized.

10 When recognized, you will have-- I guess I'm
11 going to expand it to three minutes, okay? You'll
12 have three minutes to speak on today's topic.
13 Increase-- The topic is increasing veteran civic
14 engagement in New York City.

15 So, Sergeant, we're going to do three minutes
16 rather than the two.

17 If you have written, written statement or
18 additional written testimony you wish to submit for
19 the record, please provide a copy of that testimony
20 to the Sergeant at Arms. Please note that witnesses
21 who are here will testify before those on Zoom. I
22 will now call the first panel.

23 Professor Allen M. McFarlane, you can-- you can
24 come up. Bryan Elliott-Cook, and Ashton Stewart.

25 Professor, you want to start? Okay.

2 MR. MCFARLANE: Well, good morning, Allen
3 McFarlane. Freedom is not free. These are the
4 immortal words of the retired United States Air Force
5 Colonel Walter Hitchcock of the New Mexico Military
6 Institute.

7 I refer to and share this quote often as it is
8 foundational to the mission we hold dear at New York
9 University in service to student veterans and
10 military connected students. Good morning again.
11 I'm Allen McFarlane.

12 I'm a three-time graduate of New York University,
13 currently employed as the Associate Dean for Outreach
14 and Engagement in the NYU Office of the Dean of
15 Students. I have been employed by NYU for over 40
16 years, and I serve as the Director of the NYU
17 Military Alliance. I proudly served the United
18 States Air Force and was stationed at Langley Air
19 Force Base in Virginia, now Joint Base Langley.

20 Thank you, Councilmember Holden and the committee
21 for the invitation to testify today.

22 I'm grateful and humbled to provide you with this
23 helpful information or any helpful information about
24 the NYU Military Alliance and respond to your

1 questions. It so happens that the Alliance is
2 celebrating its 15th year at New York University.
3

4 In 2009, the Alliance was established by a
5 consortium of university units and notable alumni
6 such as the celebrated journalist and author Mr. Pete
7 Hamill, U.S. Navy veteran, may he rest in peace, and
8 Major Christopher Tripp Zenetis, pilot U.S. Air Force
9 Air National Guard and FDNY Fire Marshal.

10 While at NYU, Tripp was a member of the NYU
11 Student Senate and Class President. Major Zenetis
12 perished in Iraq along with six other airmen in a
13 helicopter crash in 2018. His leadership remains an
14 inspiration and is an exemplar in how colleges can be
15 a pipeline to public service and civic engagement.

16 About the Military Alliance: First, we are
17 committed partners with the Student Club, the NYU
18 Student Veteran Association, and the Office of
19 Student Success. I would also like to give a shout
20 out to my colleague, Assistant Director of Student
21 Veteran Transition and Success, Army Veteran, Stephen
22 Westby, and our other division units within
23 University Life and our work across schools with the
24 Military Connected Student Standing Committee.
25

2 We host a number of programs from open houses to
3 the Military Ball at NYU. Our base, if you will, is
4 the Military Alliance Community Center Lounge. The
5 MAC, as it is known, is a destination for student
6 veterans and military connected students to meet
7 foster community, learn about services at NYU, the
8 VA, and beyond.

9 The Honorable Veterans Administration Secretary,
10 Dennis McDonough, visited our lounge in April 2024
11 and he was a featured speaker at NYU that invited
12 veterans from across the city and other local
13 universities and some folks are here.

14 Finally, our theme this year is Adapt, Adjust,
15 and Connect. As student veterans and military
16 connected students endeavor to meet their educational
17 belonging and career goals, this theme specifically
18 addresses what we learned from the Military Connected
19 Student Survey in 2024 that was administered by my
20 office and the Office of Student Success.

21 It was a sobering reminder that veterans have so
22 much to contribute, but with so-- with so much
23 sacrifice there remains this persistent challenges
24 for adjusting to civilian life. So conversely, here
25 is a golden opportunity to harness their lived

2 experiences in establishing outcomes for their
3 success and engagement with society at large.

4 As we partner with our veteran and military
5 connected students and university departments, I
6 would like to thank our NYU Government Relations
7 Office, the Student Veterans Association Club,
8 Partnership, the vast VA resources, and other notable
9 organizations that are steadfast in their commitment
10 to veterans.

11 Even when it comes to new emerging technologies
12 such as AI, and other growing sectors of our economy,
13 I cannot think of a better community to tap into for
14 their love of country and service for a career in
15 many professions and especially public service.

16 Thank you again for your commitment and support
17 for veterans. I look forward to our dialogue this
18 morning.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Professor. Thank
20 you. Bryan?

21 MR. ELLICOTT-COOK: Good morning, Chair Holden
22 and distinguished members of the Committee of
23 Veterans. My name is Bryan Ellicott-Cook. My
24 pronouns are they and he and I serve as the Director
25 of Government Relations of SAGE Serves, a division of

2 SAGE, the nation's largest and oldest organization
3 dedicated to improving the lives of LGBTQ plus older
4 adults.

5 Today, I'm here to highlight the importance of
6 civic engagement for veterans, particularly LGBTQ+
7 veterans, and explore how New York City Department of
8 Veterans Services can better serve this community.
9 SAGE Serves has served veterans of the LGBTQ
10 community who are over age 50 since the creation of
11 our SAGE Vets program, and I was the program manager
12 of that program until three months ago.

13 The importance of civic engagement for LGBT
14 veterans is crucial. Civic engagement is the
15 cornerstone of healthy democracy. For veterans,
16 particularly LGBTQ veterans, participation in civic
17 life is not only a continuing service of their
18 country, but an essential pathway to ensuring that
19 their unique voices and needs are heard. LGBTQ+
20 veterans face unique challenges ranging from
21 discrimination within and outside military to health
22 disparities that persist throughout their service.

23 Civic engagement empowers LGBT veterans to shape
24 their society that is more inclusive and responsive
25 of their needs, particularly in the areas like

2 healthcare, housing, and mental health services.
3 However, it's important to recognize the complex
4 nature of engaging veterans in civic life. Veterans
5 are not a monolithic group. Their experiences, their
6 needs, their priorities vary based on factors of the
7 area in which they served, their branch of service,
8 their personal experiences in and out of uniform.

9 For LGBT veterans, this complexity is further
10 amplified by the history of discrimination, both
11 within the military and in civilian life. Many LGBT
12 veterans who served under discriminatory policies
13 like Don't Ask, Don't Tell, or who were discharged
14 due to their sexual orientation, gender identity,
15 often have deep scars. These experiences can lead to
16 distrust of institutions, including government
17 agencies, which can hinder their willingness to
18 engage in civilian life and engagement.

19 I do have five ways that we can do this better:
20 Targeted outreach and education, cultural competence
21 services, support for mental health and social
22 isolation, advocacy for policy change, like you said,
23 Councilmember Holden, their ability to self-identify
24 both as a veteran and as a member of the LGBTQ
25 community could go a long way. That would help

2 strengthen civic engagement is just being able to
3 identify all the boxes, not just one or two.

4 I want to thank you for allowing me to testify
5 and also partnering with SAGE. We do a lot of civic
6 engagement around getting out to vote. I have a
7 great relationship with the Commissioner, and we can
8 do a lot more together.

9 Thank you.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. Thank you so
11 much for that.

12 MR. STEWART: Good morning. My name is Ashton
13 Stewart. I'm Chair Holden, members of the Council
14 Committee on Veterans.

15 Thank you for holding this hearing today. I'm a
16 Navy veteran who served in the first Gulf War and I'm
17 also the veteran liaison at MGHS working in hospice
18 and palliative care.

19 Yesterday was National Voter Registration Day and
20 10 years ago I was the Executive Director at the
21 League of Women Voters of the City of New York and I
22 produced a very large and National Voter Registration
23 Day event right here at City Hall Park partnering
24 with CUNY, the New York City Board of Elections, and
25 Voto Latino.

2 We held a mock election using the new voting
3 machines. We had Lady Pink who I commissioned to
4 create a spray paint mural depicting the word vote to
5 show the power and struggle behind the word. As you
6 know, the suffrage movement was very powerful in
7 earning the women the right to vote.

8 It's now housed at the New York Historical
9 Society's Museum. It was 10 foot by 12 foot. It was
10 awesome. It was a great day.

11 Getting back to MJHS, it's a not-for-profit
12 health system that was founded in 1907 and has grown
13 into one of the largest health systems in the region
14 and volunteerism is a key part of our hospice
15 programs. MJHS understands unique needs and
16 challenges that face veterans of all cultural
17 backgrounds as they approach the end of life
18 including the very real and often not yet need for
19 the unmatched peer-to-peer support from other
20 veterans.

21 MJHS is proud to be a part of the We Honor
22 Veterans National Initiative which is a partnership
23 between the VA and the National Hospice and
24 Palliative Care Organization. Last year we earned
25 the 2023 We Honor Veterans Outstanding Program Award.

2 And we also connect-- they connected us to several
3 civilian volunteers and I just don't want this to get
4 lost. Civilians who work with the volunteer
5 population are so important because they are the
6 bridge to get the trust from the veterans to self-
7 identify. I've seen this in examples with one
8 veteran in particular. He was speaking with a social
9 worker. He trusted her. He shared that he was a
10 veteran. He shared that he got kicked out in boot
11 camp out of this terrible thing that happened to him
12 and then she reached out to me to help advocate for
13 him. We got him housing help. We got him inducted
14 into New York State Veterans Hall of Fame. We got
15 him comfortable identifying as a veteran, and it was
16 huge and it was all because of that one social
17 worker.

18 At MJHS we've had one volunteer who finished our
19 onboarding process and he's helped us put together
20 our packets for veterans and their families
21 proclamations signed by Governor Hochul, and We Honor
22 Veterans Certificate and he is getting more involved
23 in the program.

24

25

2 He represented us at the United Veterans of War
3 Council event for Vietnam Veterans Recognition Day.
4 He's getting more involved in the work we're doing.

5 We had another volunteer who spoke fluent
6 Mandarin who helped us connect with a family of a
7 Chinese veteran who didn't really-- it was great
8 because we--

9 [BELL RINGS]

10 May I just finish this one little anecdotal
11 piece?

12 She spoke his language and I think the cultural
13 connection that they shared after we got his
14 permission to connect them we were able to-- to share
15 resources with him that he was unaware of and that
16 was incredibly helpful.

17 So when we work with veterans in the veteran
18 space it's just crucial and I want to work with the
19 council in any way I can to try to get more veterans
20 involved in this work and more advocates that want to
21 support veterans and certainly more veterans who want
22 to run for office. Thank you.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's what we really need.

24 MR. STEWART: Yeah.

25

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's what I took from
3 today, but I think all of you can help on the front
4 lines and I thank you for all your great work. I
5 mean all three groups are amazing but thank you all
6 for your testimony. I appreciate it.

7 MR. STEWART: Thank you so much.

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Next panel Erin Verrier,
9 Dondi McKellar, Joshua Sooklal.

10 Erin you want to start?

11 MS. VERRIER: Sure yes. Hi everyone. Thank you
12 for the opportunity to testify. My name is Erin
13 Verrier, and I am the manager of policy and external
14 affairs at Community Health Care Network, otherwise
15 known as CHN.

16 We are a federally qualified health center with
17 14 sites citywide that provide critical primary care
18 and social services for patients and underserved
19 communities. While our services are many I'm here
20 today to speak about the work that we do for veterans
21 supporting their health and mental well-being.

22 Our military family wellness program connects
23 active and former service members to health and
24 social services. Each participant is screened and
25 assessed for mental health needs by a licensed

2 clinical social worker and can receive referrals for
3 services like individual and family counseling,
4 psychiatry, medication management, as well as medical
5 care, dental services, and other social services
6 including legal support services provided by our
7 program partner Veterans Advocacy Project. With the
8 Veterans Advocacy Project our program participants
9 can receive assistance for public benefits, VA
10 claims, discharge upgrade applications, housing
11 support, and other civil legal issues. The Veterans
12 Advocacy Project works closely with CHN staff to
13 ensure continuity of care and also provide CHN staff
14 training on cultural competency when working with
15 veterans and understanding their legal needs.

16 To speak to our program's impact, in one example
17 a 44-year-old army veteran was referred to our
18 program given his mental health concerns and housing
19 instability. A CHN social worker provided a mental
20 health assessment, identified the need for a higher
21 level of care, and helped him schedule an initial
22 intake appointment at the VA for treatment. The
23 social worker also referred the patient to Veterans
24 Advocacy Project for assistance with rental arrears.
25 The patient is now attending regular talk therapy and

2 psychiatric appointments at the VA while receiving
3 legal representation for his housing concerns.

4 In another example a 33 year old U.S. Navy
5 veteran and single mother of two was referred to our
6 program given her child care and employment concerns.
7 With CHN she learned how to apply for a child care
8 voucher, how to contact the veteran center for
9 employment assistance. The patient is now approved
10 for child care vouchers and is working closely with
11 the veteran center to attend career events and build
12 relations with future employers. All of this to
13 support their current civic engagement.

14 So, we're proud and honored overall to work with
15 our veteran population and we greatly appreciate city
16 council support for our program. We're committed to
17 this program's continuation and look forward to
18 sharing our progress in the year ahead. Thank you.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you so much for that.

20 MS. VERRIER: Thank you.

21 MR. SOOKLAL: Good morning committee. Good
22 morning Chair Holden. My name is Joshua Sooklal. I
23 am a student at John Jay. I work for a non-profit
24 Hope for the Warriors and I'm on the Veterans
25 Advisory Board.

2 I'm here to address increasing civic engagement.
3 Like you said earlier Chair Holden, there is not a
4 veteran on the City Council, but there is one veteran
5 running that I know of and he's a good friend of
6 mine.

7 In the end I think in order to increase civic
8 engagement, well, we need the support and as you can
9 see right here you we have the support. What we
10 don't have is the support of the city and that's
11 unfortunate.

12 I go through day in day out schools, homeless
13 shelters, you name it. I'm in it. When I'm speaking
14 to a veteran and they are telling me the atrocities
15 that are happening I just can't help but well call
16 the Commissioner, because he picks up his phone. But
17 for them being the least funded city agency I feel
18 like that's-- that's a downfall. If you can't
19 support veterans then who else can you support? We
20 mean something. They're my family. Thank you Chair.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you.

22 MR. MCKELLAR: Good morning Councilman Holden and
23 members of the Committee On Veterans. My name is
24 Dondi McKellar. I'm a 62-year-old United States Navy
25 veteran, a Bronx homeowner, a lung cancer survivor, a

2 member of the LGBTQIA+ community, and a New York City
3 street vendor. These identifications are not just
4 labels but they represent the journey and the
5 challenges I have faced.

6 Today I emphasize the importance of increasing
7 veteran civic engagement in New York City, and
8 encourage my fellow veterans to take advantage of the
9 opportunities the New York City Civic Engagement
10 Commission offers. I have been dedicated to
11 supporting veterans and ensuring their voices are
12 heard throughout my career. I served as the chairman
13 of the veterans committee for the street vendor
14 project from 2014 to 2018 and chaired the standalone
15 veterans committee for the Bronx Community Board from
16 2016 to 2019.

17 These roles helped me to understand veterans'
18 unique challenges and how crucial civic involvement
19 is to addressing them. In 2019, I joined the New
20 York Civic Engagement Commission Participatory
21 Budgeting Advisory Committee to advocate for
22 veterans' engagement.

23 Even after the committee ended in January 2024, I
24 remained committed.

2 As a coalition member for Kingsbridge Heights
3 Community Center, I helped secure 347 votes in May of
4 2024 for the People's Money Initiative, directing
5 \$3,405 to the James J. Peterson VA Medical Center
6 food pantry to address veteran food insecurities.
7 Please review the attachments.

8 The People's Money Initiative is a citywide
9 annual participatory budgeting process. All
10 residents ages 11 and up, regardless of immigration
11 status, can decide how to spend a portion of the city
12 budget. The four-phase process includes idea
13 generation, borough assembly, voting, and
14 implementation. Veterans participation is key in
15 amplifying our voices and making meaningful community
16 changes.

17 Your participation matters. I urge this
18 committee to recognize the New York City Civic
19 Engagement Commission as a viable resource for
20 veterans. We can empower veterans and drive positive
21 change across New York City by fostering greater
22 civic engagement.

23 Thank you for your time, consideration, and most
24 importantly your dedication and well-being to our
25

2 veterans. I sincerely appreciate your commitment to
3 this cause.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And I want to thank you for
5 your commitment. Certainly amazing work. All of
6 you, I thank you very much. And as the Veterans
7 Advisory Board, that's such an important group. And
8 anything that we could do on the City Council, I'd
9 love to hear from the VAB for your work. And
10 certainly, Don, you're amazing. You have a lot of
11 different experiences, which is very valuable.

12 So, all of you, please feel free to contact my
13 office with suggestions. Certainly you're on the
14 front lines. And Erin, thanks so much.

15 Thanks for your work. Thank you, panel. Very
16 good panel.

17 Next panel, Joe Bello, Melissa Del Valle Ortiz,
18 and Michael Matos. We're waiting for Joe, so go
19 ahead, Melissa.

20 Or who's ready? It doesn't matter. So you're
21 okay. All right.

22 MR. MATOS: Michael, go ahead. Morning, Chairman
23 Holden, members of the committee. My name is Michael
24 Matos, a born and raised New Yorker, a veteran of the

2 U.S. Coast Guard, and dedicated advocate for the
3 veteran community.

4 I'm here today to discuss both the importance of
5 civic engagement for veterans and the barriers we
6 face in fully participating here in NYC. Veterans
7 possess valuable skills and perspectives that can
8 enhance civic life, but many face challenges when
9 transitioning back to civilian life. While the
10 military prepares us for service, it often falls
11 short in helping us reintegrate into the communities
12 that we come homemaker to. This leaves many veterans
13 feeling disconnected.

14 Additionally, misconceptions about veterans being
15 aligned solely with conservative views can create
16 unnecessary distancing, particularly in a liberal
17 city like New York. Veterans represent a wide range
18 of political beliefs, and this diversity needs to be
19 acknowledged, not misrepresented.

20 Finally, the high cost of living in NYC,
21 particularly the lack of truly affordable housing,
22 focuses-- forces many veterans to focus on survival.
23 Programs like the NYC Housing Connect often have
24 income or qualifications starting in the six figures,
25 which puts affordable housing out of reach for many.

2 With these basic needs unmet, veterans have
3 little time or energy for civic involvement.

4 To address these challenges, we must begin
5 supporting service members before they transition,
6 offering them access to enhanced job placement and
7 community engagement programs. This early support
8 can ensure they're better prepared for civilian life.

9 Second, we need to break down political
10 stereotypes and create spaces where veterans of all
11 backgrounds feel welcomed and valued. Public
12 education campaigns could help highlight the true
13 diversity within the veteran community.

14 Lastly, NYC must expand access to affordable
15 housing programs for veterans with realistic income
16 qualifications. By providing stable housing, we give
17 veterans the foundation to fully engage in civic life
18 and contribute to the community.

19 Thank you for your time. I look forward to
20 working together to create a more inclusive,
21 supportive environment for veterans in NYC where they
22 can thrive and participate fully in civic life.

23 Thank you.

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Mike. Melissa?
25

2 MS. DEL VALLE ORTIZ: Is this on? Is it on now?

3 Okay. Cool. Thank you for receiving my testimony.

4 Good morning, everyone. It was really great to be in
5 the room today for a lot of different reasons. I'm
6 seeing a lot of people that I haven't seen in a
7 while.

8 So I'm submitting this testimony as a two-year
9 active duty member to the United States Army.

10 I'm submitting this testimony as it's 30 years
11 overdue. I received an honorable discharge in 1997
12 after seven years in the inactive reserve due to my
13 pregnancy discharge. Prior to that, I birthed my
14 children in 1990-91. I was later divorced by the age
15 of 24 in 1994. Then a single mother of two, I was
16 left with no qualifying veteran or active-duty
17 preference or benefits, including a homeownership
18 loan or higher education, affordable housing, et
19 cetera, because of a pending honorable discharge. I
20 was forced to get on public assistance and remain
21 homeless for two years.

22 I was, however, lucky enough to be housed by
23 various family members due to my own perseverance. I
24 secure project-based Section 8 housing in Sunset
25 Park, Brooklyn, where my children and I remain housed

2 today. I have worked and volunteered in my community
3 of Sunset Park for 30 years in every level of civic
4 participation from my community board, starting my
5 tenants' association, my community action board with
6 NESCA and Department of Youth and Community
7 Development.

8 Within the non-profit sector, I've worked for
9 various organizations. I've also volunteered,
10 including being the first woman of color to serve as
11 president to the League of Women Voters in the City
12 of New York in its then 95-year history.

13 Finally, I've secured employment with the office
14 of Congressmember Nydia Velazquez as a federal
15 housing specialist and community liaison, all due to
16 my years of community organizing and involvement,
17 which now includes Sunset Park's first veteran
18 military family appreciation parade, which is going
19 to happen on November the 9th, 2024.

20 I'm testifying today to request that if the City
21 of New York wants to proactively stimulate veteran
22 and military household turnover within NYCHA housing
23 stock as it enters into the project-based Section 8
24 model under the RABPAC agreement, it should take into
25 consideration some of the following recommendations.

2 Unlike NYCHA, project-based Section 8 housing
3 stock receives no federal, state, or city-related
4 supportive services. NYCHA tenants are, however,
5 given access to job training programs, Section 3
6 employment, qualified for earned income disallowance,
7 first-time home ownership programs, et cetera.

8 And yes, these are all federally qualifying HUD
9 guidelines, but the City has the capacity to engage
10 in HUD Region 2-- to engage HUD Region 2. Therefore,
11 I'm making the following recommendations. To engage
12 with HUD to lift the barriers from residents of
13 dedicated project-based Section 8 housing so that
14 residents can benefit from the same access to self-
15 sufficiency programs that RABPAC tenants have access
16 to, to include military families as a category on
17 every city government intake, including city council
18 offices and New York City shelters. This would give
19 them and inform family members of their eligibility
20 to federal services they may not realize they have--
21 they qualify for.

22 Create a prioritized category of military
23 families within the homeless shelter system as
24 underage dependents of active duty service members
25 should have access to housing subsidies.

2 To ensure that NYCHA housing counselors inform
3 tenants when a housing member joins the military that
4 they do not need to be removed from the household, so
5 that when the service member returns from service,
6 they have access to affordable housing.

7 Five, categorize military income as disallowed
8 income, so that household, so that the household is
9 not burdened with the rent increase while the service
10 member is deployed.

11 In regards to self-sufficiency, why is an active-
12 - why is an inactive service member any different
13 than a reserve member? If counted as an eligible
14 status, this will provide access to a college
15 education, certificate, vocational training program,
16 waivers to pay city exams, a preference status for
17 gainful employment, license as a New York City street
18 vendor.

19 If I had any of this while I waited seven years
20 for my honorable discharge, I could have been all
21 that I could be seven years sooner. I could have had
22 an apartment instead of sleeping on spare beds and
23 sofas with my children. I could have already owned a
24 home. I might have obtained a college degree and
25 would have awarded me a higher paying job much

2 sooner. I might have already had my own small
3 business and by now my own corporation. As we all
4 know, the military cultivates a go-getter mindset.

5 Because of this non-eligible status, I hadn't
6 embraced my veteran status until 2023 when I was
7 recognized by Senator Gournades as a New York State
8 Veteran Hall of Fame inductee for my decades of
9 community service.

10 For this reason, I implore you to help hundreds
11 if not thousands of military families and inactive
12 military members awaiting their honorable discharge
13 papers, direct and immediate access to benefits that
14 they so desperately need, and in some cases don't
15 even know that they qualify for.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. Thanks so much
17 for that testimony. And we'll-- you know, please
18 let's talk in the future because you have, you're a
19 wealth-- you have a wealth of knowledge certainly.
20 And, I'm sorry what happened there. That's-- But
21 again, that made you stronger. And the fact that
22 you're helping other people now is-- and you're a
23 very example of the meaning of this hearing actually.

24 So thank you for all your work. Joe Bello?

2 MR. BELLO: Okay. Chairman Holden, members of
3 the Veterans Committee, thank you for the opportunity
4 to testify at today's hearing on increasing veteran
5 civic engagement. Military veterans and their
6 families bring a unique perspective on how service
7 fosters a sense of common purpose and civic
8 engagement is one of the impactful ways veterans
9 continue to serve their communities after leaving the
10 uniform.

11 One reason veterans excel in civic life is
12 because of the diverse environment we experienced in
13 the military. We are brought together with
14 individuals from various backgrounds, races, and
15 perspectives, and we're expected to work as a team.
16 This experience forces a strong sense of purpose,
17 camaraderie, and belonging.

18 Veterans share a lot of the same concerns on
19 issues that many New York City residents do, but we
20 are keenly aware that change requires civic
21 engagement. As a result, research shows that
22 veterans are more likely to vote, volunteer, join
23 civic organizations, or donate to charity. We have
24 to acknowledge that here in New York City, we have an
25

2 aging veterans population with 72% of our roughly
3 138,000 veterans over the age of 55.

4 Therefore, it is likely that many of our aging
5 veterans have at some point either served or are
6 currently serving on community boards, health and
7 hospital community advisory boards, or CABS, or even
8 police precinct councils. Unfortunately, these
9 numbers will likely decrease as they age.

10 For younger veterans, civic engagement varies.
11 Some veterans are engaged in their schools, as we've
12 heard, or in internships, working with VSOs, or
13 participating in civic activities outside of
14 veterans-specific organizations, such as volunteering
15 or serving on their child's PTA.

16 Additionally, some young and older veterans find
17 themselves dealing with challenges that may hinder
18 them from participating in civic engagement. For
19 others, civic engagement may be as simple as what Mr.
20 McKellar testified, voting in New York City's
21 participatory budgeting initiative, or even their
22 local Councilmembers' PB, where community members
23 help decide how funds are spent.

24 With regards to the community boards, before his
25 untimely passing, Paul Vallone was meeting with the

2 borough boards to encourage community boards to get
3 more veterans to serve on them. Unfortunately, he
4 had noted to me that DVS did not maintain (and the
5 Commissioner acknowledged that) on how many veterans
6 actively joined community boards. They were simply
7 promoting the opportunity.

8 Therefore, any discussion on increasing civic
9 participation first requires having some data around
10 how many vets are currently engaged in civic activity
11 in New York City. According to its webpage, DVS
12 connects veterans to programs and resources that
13 promote social enrichment, including volunteer
14 opportunities. The site highlights the three main
15 areas of social engagement that the Commissioner
16 talked about: Mission VetCheck, the Veterans Voices,
17 and packing Hello Ready fresh meal kits.

18 Unfortunately, while there are various issues
19 regarding each of these programs, to access them, you
20 must complete the agency's VetConnect page request,
21 which has a response time of three to five business
22 days, according to its website. Aside from these
23 programs, DVS has fallen short in creating additional
24 civic engagement opportunities. For example, as the
25 Commissioner stated, two years ago, the agency was in

2 the process of taking over the Joseph P. Dwyer Mental
3 Health Peer-to-Peer Program from the Health
4 Department.

5 Commissioner Hendon stated at a Veterans Advisory
6 Board meeting that a committee, which included VAB
7 members, would be formed to review grant and RFP
8 submissions for this funding. Unfortunately, this
9 committee never materialized, while funding has been
10 provided. Additionally, with regards to the new
11 post-9-11 Veterans Memorial in Whitestone, DVS's
12 webpage states that the formation of a Memorial
13 Advisory Committee intended to represent diverse
14 facets of New York City's Veterans Committee.

15 It also includes a proposed timeline.
16 Unfortunately, DVS appointed members to this
17 committee without involving, informing, or
18 transparency to anyone, including the VAB or the
19 community. To date, there has still been no
20 information from Commissioner Hendon regarding the
21 committee's members, even though we know at least two
22 of them live outside of New York.

23 The lack of transparency and missed opportunities
24 on both these programs reflects poorly on the

2 agency's efforts to enhance civic engagement within
3 the local veterans' community.

4 Finally, with regards to the VAB, as someone who
5 not only helped draft several pieces of legislation
6 and worked on the annual report, and also served on
7 the board, I believe I have some insights into this
8 issue. I would ask that this committee hold a
9 separate oversight hearing for the Veterans Advisory
10 Board, as one has not been conducted since February
11 of 2017.

12 There are several concerns regarding the current
13 state of the Veterans Advisory Board, including the
14 process for appointing members, the way meeting
15 notices are put out to the community, and the lack of
16 documented minutes or videos.

17 While I deeply respect my former VAB colleagues
18 and the institutional knowledge they bring, I would
19 also like to propose to this body legislation to
20 limit the number of terms an individual can serve to
21 a maximum of two terms, which is six years. This
22 change would open opportunity for other veterans who
23 wish to become more civically engaged with the
24 community.

2 We are currently in a time when trust in veterans
3 is high, but negative perceptions also persist due to
4 issues like veteran suicide, homelessness, and the
5 media portrayal of veterans as either extremists or
6 damaged. Both these narratives cannot be true, but
7 they highlight the need for more data and a balanced
8 understanding of veterans and how and what we
9 contribute to society.

10 To everyone attending today's hearing, in person
11 or online, thank you for sharing your thoughts, your
12 insights, and concerns about what's happening with
13 our community.

14 Your participation here in civic engagement at
15 its best and helps shape the future of our community.
16 Thank you, Councilmembers, for your time.

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Joe. Just a
18 question on the serving on the VAB, six years. How
19 did you arrive at six years?

20 MR. BELLO: Well, I mean-- So, I served for
21 seven, and to be honest with you, the last year, I
22 had already been telling the former chair at that
23 time that I served one year too many. If we go by
24 the terms of three-year terms, then two terms is six
25 years.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: The only thing is, it's a
3 volunteer position. That's why I tend to shy away
4 from term limits for volunteers. It's actually
5 sometimes counterproductive, because you're telling
6 people, "Thank you for your service, goodbye."

7 MR. BELLO: I think if I may, though, there are,
8 you know, when I go around to the community, there
9 are a lot of people who are interested in the
10 Veterans Advisory Board and would like to serve on
11 the Veterans Advisory Board and have questions about
12 how the individuals get appointed to the advisory
13 board.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, again, I appreciate
15 that. That's why we should evaluate if people are
16 showing up on the VAB, if they're participating, if
17 they are-- so somebody has to evaluate it.

18 MR. BELLO: Well, the other thing I would
19 recommend then too is we're currently, the law
20 requires the VAB to meet once in all five boroughs.

21 I can tell you from my time, that's clearly not
22 working, and I think you've seen that as well when
23 you've come online. So this is why I'm asking for
24 perhaps, you know, to have an oversight hearing on
25 the VAB.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's a good suggestion.

3 MR. BELLO: To have that discussion about how we
4 can make the VAB better.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Very good. Thank you.
6 Thank you so much. Thank you, panel. Appreciate it.

7 My next panel is Michael Abramovich, Susan
8 Wallace, and Frederick Hart.

9 Michael, you want to start? Good morning,
10 everyone.

11 MR. ABRAMOVICH: Thank you, Councilmember. I
12 would just-- my name is Michael Abramovich. I was
13 raised here in New York City. I was a first-
14 generation immigrant from the former Soviet Union,
15 now Russia. I grew up in New York City my whole
16 life. My parents were homeowners. They bought a
17 house on Staten Island. They were very proud of the
18 day they managed it. I went to high school and when
19 9-11 happened, and being an ROTC cadet, I was more
20 than motivated to join.

21 Fast forward to 2012, I finished eight years of
22 service, having served in the Army National Guard and
23 Reserves for the State of New York, and having
24 deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

2 My-- I started working in New York City Civil
3 Service and working as a New York City civil servant.
4 So, I would like to discuss what-- why I feel
5 veterans are invisible when it comes to working in
6 civil service or being recruited to civil service
7 positions.

8 First off, I-- in my time as a student veteran,
9 as a veteran advocate, I have very-- I cannot recall
10 a time I've seen any New York City agencies actively
11 recruiting veterans for positions.

12 The second thing is, once veterans get into the
13 civil service system, whether applying for a job that
14 they get, or encouraged by friends and family to
15 apply for various positions and find themselves as
16 civil service employees, we are practically never
17 engaged as veterans. I can recall maybe one time in
18 11 years where I had a little bit of say of how
19 dealing with veteran suicide, and how to approach
20 veterans.

21 But what my experience is, while there's all this
22 awesome training to prevent sexual harassment, to
23 prevent discrimination and mistreatment of various
24 minorities, including the LGBTQ community, there's
25 really zero-to-little provided on addressing veterans

2 and how to properly show us respect or what to-- what
3 is okay to talk to us about and what is not okay.

4 A lot of times I've spoke to veteran-- veterans
5 who in their workplace, private and public, often are
6 disregarded. People will say insensitive things
7 without realizing how insensitive they are,
8 especially in the days of media showing, TVs, movies,
9 video games displaying brutal war scenes that clearly
10 has desensitized the general public.

11 A lot of times those conversations that we hear,
12 or these innocent questions are asked are often
13 offensive and because we are taught to shut up and
14 suck it up and drive on, we often never make our
15 complaints known, hence our silence.

16 Often we are isolated. We don't have other
17 veterans to connect to. We don't have veterans
18 mentoring-- other veterans mentoring us.

19 Also our direct line leadership. Some of us have
20 awesome supervisors. I have an amazing first line
21 supervisor. She's always helpful. She understands
22 my concerns with my health, with my advocacy, and
23 everything I'm involved with, and has always been
24 respectful of that.

2 Other veterans I know have gotten quite the
3 opposite, very much disrespected, alienated and they
4 felt that there was really not much they can do.

5 The other thing I want to bring up is that New
6 York City-- I feel the New York City Department of
7 Veterans Services has yet to engage the veterans who
8 are working as civil servants regardless of what
9 position. I feel that there needs to be a stronger
10 sense of community of those who are looking to work
11 in New York City government and those who already
12 are. In addition to better mentoring veterans who
13 are already in civil service so they can maximize
14 their skills and their abilities, and just aren't
15 stuck sitting in some entry level position for 20
16 years because they don't want to bitch and complain
17 and just doing the job best they can with just thumbs
18 up from their bosses.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Michael. Susan?

20 MS. WALLACE: The last four speakers, the prior
21 panel, and my brother here, have expressed many of
22 the things that I have been thinking and wanting to
23 say. I'm almost overwhelmed that I did not perceive
24 this alone or that I'm not misperceiving this.

2 I have not been treated well as a veteran in New
3 York City at all. I have tried to get involved with
4 civic organizations. I have an excellent resume and
5 background. It's kind of amazing actually. I
6 couldn't even get my bar license in New York. I have
7 an active license in another state. I have been a
8 member of the bar for 34 years. I'm an employment
9 civil rights lawyer. I work for the federal
10 government. I was a reservist for 25 years. I'm a
11 retired JAG officer. I was asked in the interview
12 for my bar license to get my license basically
13 transferred here.

14 What I did with my children when I was at drill
15 at that time, how did I dare to put my children
16 through that. How did I put my children through
17 having to worry that mom was going to die?
18 Unbelievable inappropriate questions. No one has
19 ever addressed it. I can't find anybody to address
20 it.

21 I volunteered for my local democratic club. I
22 asked to start a military chapter, a military
23 committee. I was grilled and put through-- They
24 just wouldn't do it. They just wouldn't do it. They
25 had to have me, you know-- I had to justify it.

2 They wanted to know why this would be important. I'm
3 in Bay Ridge. I live walking distance from Fort
4 Hamilton. I said, "I think that there are a number
5 of veterans around here. There are lots of service
6 members living here. This should be, there are
7 families live here." They absolutely shut me down
8 and wouldn't do it. I've tried volunteering in a
9 couple of different organizations. I'm too old. I'm
10 female.

11 Talk about invisible veterans, okay. I'm an
12 invisible veteran and there are many other women like
13 me that I know. All the women I serve with are
14 isolated, alone, and feel completely rejected like we
15 wasted our lives. It is heartbreaking more than I
16 can possibly express to you in a public forum.

17 As far as one of the things that I heard today
18 about getting veterans involved is we're still stuck
19 on dividing between reserve and active duty. This--
20 I heard earlier, you know, we're talking about doing
21 the catchment and trying to get people, you know, as
22 they're coming out. DD-214. Reservists don't have
23 DD-214s unless they served in active duty. I served
24 25 years. I don't have a DD-214. I never missed a
25 drill. I served in two different state guards half

2 the time and the other half was in the Federal
3 Reserve USAR. So I've been all around the reserve
4 component. Never missed a drill in 25 years, and I
5 don't have a DD-214 because I was never active duty.

6 My son, who is 100% disabled, almost died in
7 basic training, has a DD-214 because he went active
8 duty for basic training more than 30 days. If you
9 don't serve more than 30 days continuously, you don't
10 get a DD-214, you get another type of document.

11 Equally valid. You are still a veteran. I can't
12 get veteran on my license because I don't have a DD-
13 214. I've been trying-- I know I've done through
14 your office and I've done through, you know, through
15 a couple other representatives' offices trying to get
16 that corrected. The definitions of veteran in the
17 state law are incorrect. They don't even comport
18 with the federal.

19 This has evolved over years. The definition of
20 veteran in the Vietnam era was very different than it
21 is now, okay? We have-- the federal government has
22 opened this up and become more inclusive because our
23 reserve went from basically almost no reserve to 85%
24 roughly of the army in the last 20 years. These wars

2 were fought by reservists. Reservists died. Mostly
3 reservists.

4 So, you know, this this has got to be, this
5 should be fixed. New York should not be stuck on
6 this. I'm willing to help with this. I am a lawyer.
7 I can help you with the language. I-- you know, I'm
8 willing to help with this. I'm in contact with Gary
9 Port, who is the reserve ambassador, who is
10 interested in this as well. I served with him, and
11 I'm very good friends with him. So I-- I'm willing
12 to help with this.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, it's very, very
14 important. I didn't-- again, I didn't even, I wasn't
15 even aware of this, but thank you so much. We'll
16 talk some more after this and we'll try to come up
17 with some solutions, and I'll-- I'm sure we'll work
18 with the commissioner to try to address this. This
19 is not right. You're exactly right. So, thanks
20 again, Susan. I appreciate it so much. Fred? Yeah.

21 MR. HART: My name is Frederick Hart. I'm a
22 disabled veteran. I'm going to make it fast. This
23 is my first time at a meeting. I'm here because they
24 issued me a blue license like two years ago. I
25 haven't used it until like maybe three weeks ago. I

2 decided to go to where my license tell me I can go,
3 which is Midtown.

4 So, I'm in Midtown. I'm working on my first day
5 on the job. It was unbelievable. I mean, five cops
6 surrounded me, and I'm trying to figure out what's
7 the problem. They said, let me see your license. I
8 gave them a license. They all talked amongst each
9 other and within five minutes, they gave me a ticket
10 and I'm like, "It's my first day on the job.
11 Couldn't you give me a warning? Can't you at least
12 let me know when I'm doing wrong?" They just gave me
13 a ticket. So, after that, I'm trying to figure out,
14 "Am I going to get ticket every day? I haven't
15 worked in years. I just started three weeks ago for
16 the first time. What is the ticket about?" I'm
17 looking at all the things happening around me. It's
18 unbelievable with the crime that's in Times Square,
19 right? And I'm asking them, "You're going to come at
20 me, a disabled veteran, give me a ticket with all the
21 stuff happening around?" It hurt me so bad, right?
22 To the point where I don't even know how to get out
23 there, right? When I do see the cops, I hide my
24 license because I know if they see me, they're going
25 to come at me. Why? Why are you ticketing me?

2 You're making it hard for me to support myself, my
3 mother, my family. So, where I'm going to go? I see
4 people selling things everywhere illegally. Why
5 would you come at me and give me a ticket? I'm
6 heartbroken.

7 Now, I'm afraid to get out there because I'm
8 thinking they're going to come and ticket me. Our
9 job is not only to protect this country, but I feel
10 like I'm still there. If I see something injustice,
11 right? My first reaction is to protect, right?

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: This is the same thing we're
13 hearing. Yeah.

14 MR. HART: And the tourists come at me to ask me
15 questions. I'm just hiding in the corner because I
16 feel the cops are going to come at me.

17 COUNCILMEMBER PALADINO: Take that ticket and
18 throw it in the garbage. Tear it up into a million
19 pieces and throw it in the damn garbage. You know
20 what? Get it fixed. No way do you get a ticket,
21 ever.

22 MR. HART: I want to go back to work, right? I
23 talked to the veterans in the area, and they told me,
24 "Oh, it happens." But it never happened to me. I'm

2 a good guy. All I want to do is make a few dollars
3 and go home. Why? Why do the cops ticket me?

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah. I can't explain it.
5 Let's talk again some more on this. But this is
6 very, very puzzling. The last people that should be
7 ticketed are our veterans.

8 MR. HART: For what? What did I do?

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. Thank you.

10 MR. HART: I'm just so ashamed.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you so much.

12 COUNCILMEMBER PALADINO: Don't you be ashamed of
13 anything.

14 MR. ABRAMOVICH: Can I just raise one thing? You
15 guys want to see more veterans running for city
16 council? Well, the solution for that is final-five
17 voting where more independent veterans feel that they
18 have a fair chance to run without being sidelined by
19 the two major parties.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I agree.

21 COUNCILMEMBER PALADINO: 100%.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you so much. Thank
23 you, panel. Very good.

24 [APPLAUSE]

25 Keep it down. Keep it down, please.

2 Next panel, Luis Melendez, Tim Pena, Mount Lacy.

3 Luis, you want to start? Okay. All right. Tim?

4 MR. PENA: I'll start. Good afternoon, everyone.

5 My name is Tim Pena.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Pull the mic a little

7 closer, yeah.

8 MR. PEN: AI run an organization called Veterans
9 Justice Project and an organization here in New York
10 City called the Forgotten Veteran. I get it.

11 I spent five months in a shelter here in New York
12 City when I first came in under the VA grant per diem
13 transitional program, which is a congressional
14 program for VA eligible veterans to receive access to
15 resources, supportive housing, transitional services,
16 employment opportunities. One of those, of course,
17 is registering to vote, getting our documents and our
18 identifications.

19 One of the first things that I did when I got to
20 New York City was I registered to vote. And one of
21 the reasons why I came to New York City, one of the
22 things that had a part in that, was the voting laws.

23 Currently, there are over 600,000 veterans who
24 cannot vote in this country. Felonies. In my home
25 state of Arizona, if you have more than two lifetime

2 felonies, you have to go back to the sentencing court
3 and plead your case why they should allow you to vote
4 again.

5 For veterans, it's even more difficult because we
6 heard, and we hear, just because you're a veteran is
7 not an excuse for a free ride. It's not a free-- get
8 out jail card.

9 So not being able to vote, most likely ever again
10 in Arizona, and as a veteran, was one of the reasons
11 why I ended up here in New York City. And the first
12 thing I did was I registered and I've been voting
13 since.

14 But it's very important because as we are talking
15 about here today, as far as, like, veterans and civic
16 engagement: The main thing that we are here, and I
17 can speak as a homeless veteran, is getting ourselves
18 into the community as quickly as possible. And that
19 is being able to be afforded those resources and
20 supportive services from the shelters when we come
21 into them. Because once we leave that system, we
22 won't be-- it's very difficult to try to get access--
23 to try to get back. Once you leave the transitional
24 program, it's very difficult to get back into the
25 system.

2 [BELL RINGS]

3 If I might, just two things on what we've been
4 talking about.

5 One, one of the things that I realized or when I
6 noticed when I came in, was there are is a wonderful
7 park system and a wonderful recreational program here
8 in New York City. It's \$25 a year for veterans.
9 Fantastic.

10 I would propose that the City Council look into
11 waiving those fees for veterans who are coming into
12 the shelter system and letting them have quick,
13 immediate access from the shelters into the rec
14 centers. And also another thing, which has been
15 brought up today, currently MTA-- neither MTA nor
16 Fare's Fair acknowledge VA for disability. I'm a
17 disabled veteran. I'm 70%. We submitted the
18 paperwork to MTA for reduced fares and it's been
19 rejected because I was told I can't be collecting
20 SSDI and VA disability at the same time. So if I'm
21 collecting VA disability, I can't apply for SSDI and
22 that's all that they'll accept with the MTA.

23 Thank you very much.

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you so much, Tim.
25 Mount Lacy?

2 MR. LACY: My name is Mount Lacy and I identify
3 as a 70% service-connected disabled homeless veteran.
4 I'm here to explain why my civic engagement has been
5 hindered by the New York City Department of Homeless
6 Services through their grant and per diem program.
7 The grant per diem program is a congressional program
8 that is guaranteed to qualified veterans to provide a
9 secure, safe, and drug-free environment free of
10 retaliation, discrimination, and retribution.

11 As I've lived at Borden Avenue, I found that the
12 city has overrun all of the GPD program guidelines
13 with DHS policy. They treat us as any other homeless
14 person in New York City. They laugh at the grant per
15 diem guidelines, as if they don't have to follow
16 them. They mock us when we try and show them the
17 policy. They say it's just another shelter.

18 It's not. It's a residency program and that
19 title is on the building: Borden Avenue Veterans
20 Residency Program.

21 Now, some of my testimony is I was attacked in
22 the bathroom by what I believe was not two veterans.
23 There are non-veterans at Borden Avenue. I was hit
24 in the back of my head multiple times. I tried to
25 leave the situation and run out of the bathroom. The

2 door opens this way. I could not. I had to turn
3 around and defend myself. I got someone in a choke
4 hold and put them to sleep.

5 I let them go. They bumped their head and
6 started bleeding. Because they had two of them, I
7 got arrested. Borden Avenue refused to give the
8 security footage to the police, and the foundational
9 statement that got me arrested was that I followed
10 them into the bathroom. It was 3:30 in the morning.
11 I had no shirt on and only socks.

12 Those two men followed me into the bathroom and
13 proceeded to try to beat me to death. I got charged
14 with two serious felonies that I was facing over 10
15 years in Rikers Island for. The DA did not have any
16 evidence. The public defender would not do anything
17 that I asked them to do. In fact, he said I'm a
18 former DA. I know they're not going to do anything.

19 I said, "Sir, I'm not going off of your
20 experience and your hope that they won't do nothing.
21 I want to build a case on facts and evidence." He
22 recused himself from my case.

23 I got another one who did nothing. Every level
24 of government has failed me in New York City from the
25 police to the public defender, the DA, the judge.

2 They let me sit on the street for six months and only
3 gave me the choice of the street or the one of the
4 most dangerous shelters in the DHS system, where a
5 DHS police station has to be stationed, 6500 Jerome
6 Avenue. I chose the streets of Long Island City
7 because they're safer, even in the winter.

8 I am still not being allowed to go back to the
9 grant per diem program. The DHS commissioner won't
10 even give Commissioner Hendon a solid answer. Every
11 answer that I've received from Karen Fuller, who is
12 the oversight of the VA program, every reason has
13 been given, like multiple reasons have been given.
14 Every time I defeat that reason, they come up with a
15 new one. Now they're trying to get me to fill out
16 reasonable accommodations that Borden already
17 provides for. I don't need reasonable accommodations
18 to go back to Borden. That place is built for me and
19 I want to be with my people.

20 One of the first things you look at on the-- on
21 the signage is that you are able to practice your
22 civil rights. What they do to protect themselves
23 from their violations of us is they tell us we're not
24 allowed to record. Record being a citizen journalist
25 is a constitutionally protected activity, especially

2 within your residence. That policy is our HIPAA
3 rights. They're taking our HIPAA rights from us to
4 protect their misconduct.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, we got to wrap
6 up.

7 MR. LACY: I got those videos and they'll be
8 posted on the internet.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I'd like to get--

10 MR. LACY: So will the transcript that I'm going
11 to put on the website, and I encourage everybody to
12 go look at that.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: When were you last at
14 Borden? Because I want to find out if there's non-
15 vets.

16 MR. LACY: October 13th.

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Of last year.

18 MR. LACY: Yes, there's many non-vets and non-VA
19 qualified veterans.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, we're going to
21 look into that. Thank you so much for your
22 testimony. Luis?

23 MR. MELENDEZ: Hi, my name is Luis. Could you
24 hear me?

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, just get a little
3 closer.

4 MR. MELENDEZ: My name is Luis. Could you hear
5 me from here? And being in the homeless system--
6 Being in the homeless system, it's like even if I try
7 to speak or say anything, it's just like, no, you
8 can't speak. You have to hold your tongue. You have
9 to like not talk when there's like a law for like
10 freedom of speech.

11 MR. PENA: No, he's helping me. He's my-- I'm
12 working with doing outreach, as long as now as I've
13 done here in New York City. One of the issues,
14 because I'm, you know, I was homeless. I'm now-- one
15 of the social civic engagements is, you know, I'm on
16 the Veterans Task Force. I was with the persons with
17 living experience, continuum of care. I'm out on
18 street every day. I deal with veterans every day at
19 Borden Avenue and other shelters. I've been working
20 with Mr. Lacy here for a while. Luis here is one of
21 those-- you know, those people in the community that
22 look up to us.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Luis is not at Borden?

24 MR. PENA: He is very important. No, he's not at
25 Borden.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, he's not at Borden.

3 MR. PENA: Not at Borden, no.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. So what is...?

5 MR. PENA: Mr. Lacy is supposed to be in a
6 veterans program, but he's not.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I know, but I'm talking
8 about Luis.

9 MR. PENA: But he's not, and he could--

10 MR. LACY: Luis knows my whole story and is
11 helping me directly.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. So that's--

13 MR. PENA: So that's the community engagement.
14 Even in the shelters, there's still community
15 engagements. There are people that look up to us as
16 veterans. But when we come into city agencies and
17 city organizations, it's a different story.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But Tim, you nodded your
19 head when Mount said that there are non-veterans at
20 Borden. You said, yeah, you were kind of doing that.
21 Yeah.

22 Did you experience that?

23 MR. PENA: Yeah. We've been saying that for two
24 years.

25

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And you ran into non-
3 veterans at Borden?

4 MR. PENA: I was threatened and extorted by non-
5 veterans.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. Then we're going to
7 look into it. Thank you so much. Thank you, panel.
8 Thank you so much.

9 Next panel, Walter Wells and Armando Crescenzi.
10 I'm just doing it in order they gave me.

11 Walter, you want to start? All right, whatever.

12 MR. WELLS: My name is Walter Wells. I'm a
13 disabled Vietnam vet. I just wanted to address a
14 couple of people that's here, the Commissioner here.
15 And my community is Times Square, all right? Guys
16 know me that don't even be in Times Square. They
17 know me from Brooklyn, Queens, you know, you see, if
18 you ever need somebody looking to get on a board, you
19 can come see me.

20 And I'm just hoping that you would never pick
21 nobody that hasn't been through the trenches that
22 we've been through. We've been out there like we're
23 second class citizens, as disabled vets. I've been
24 out in Times Square a long time. I get along with
25 the people in the stores, the community. I'm

2 involved with a lot of stuff. And I love there
3 because I've been there a long time.

4 But as a disabled vet in Times Square, we are
5 pushed off the corners. Why? Because we have what
6 they call the Egyptian Mafia, you know, with all the
7 food trucks, all the rules and regulations that we
8 have to go through, they disregard them, like they
9 running in the city now. Yes, we get tickets.

10 The ladies say don't pay the ticket. Pay that
11 ticket, because they won't give you a license. You
12 know, no, no, we can't renew. They get-- depends.

13 Could be up to \$1,000. I had to pay a ticket for
14 \$250 because I had the American flag too high. Yes.

15 Yeah. I've been through it. I mean, we go
16 through a lot of stuff there in Times Square.

17 You know, they take, we're still getting tickets.
18 We're supposed to be within 10 feet of the crosswalk,
19 but the police would come over, especially the new
20 ones. Oh, you're 15 feet, you know, you can't be 15
21 feet.

22 Excuse me, wrong. The Commissioner, the borough
23 commander, at a meeting, he had a welcome meeting and
24 told all his subordinates, because he introduced me.
25 He said, you see this-- you know, this man here,

2 this man know more about the rules and regulations
3 than all you guys put together, you understand?
4 Because he's a very good guy. He's tried to help the
5 veterans out. But it's very bad for us right now.
6 We lost a lot of veterans in Times Square. They
7 either left because of the treatment that we're
8 getting, they left for-- and pushed out because we
9 can't work the corners no more. We can't even get a
10 food cart to work in the area because, like I said,
11 the commission that they got, you know. But I'm just
12 hoping that we can get somebody to help us. We need
13 some help.

14 We need a lot of help in Times Square. Thank you
15 for listening to me.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right, Armando?

17 MR. CRESCENZI: Good morning to all. Thank you,
18 Chairman, committee members, and all the veteran
19 advocates present here today. My name is Armando
20 Crescenzi. I'm a life member of Disabled American
21 Vets, a life member of the Military Officers of
22 America Association, and a life member of the
23 American Legion, where I'm the commander of my post.

24 I have a degree in political science. 30 years
25 ago, I got my doctorate in law, and today I'm

2 specializing in civil rights, with the focus on the
3 Fifth and Fourteenth Amendment.

4 In 2010, with my fellow veterans, I founded a
5 nonprofit organization called Put Veterans First.
6 Our mission is to help New York City veterans start
7 and build their own small business as vendors and
8 food cart operators, all by accessing their state-
9 granted rights. These are rights. It's not a
10 charity. It's not a privilege. These are rights
11 written into the law for service-disabled vets to
12 operate free from city placement restrictions in the
13 city of New York.

14 Over the years, I've seen hundreds of veterans
15 get driven out of street vending by the city and the
16 NYPD. We heard from Walter, and we also heard from
17 Fred Hart earlier, and sadly, there's a new cadre of
18 enforcement personnel out there that was just
19 completely unaware of the law.

20 Sadly, the mayor's office and the City Council
21 stood by and did nothing to help New York City
22 veterans pursue their American dream.

23 Recently, the city granted full immunity to
24 asylum seekers who commit quality-of-life crimes,
25 stating that criminal charges would reflect poorly on

2 their asylum application. No matter what your
3 opinion of the immigration fiasco, the fact is that
4 the city sidewalks are overrun with illegal,
5 unlicensed vendors.

6 Most service-disabled vets cannot compete in such
7 a lawless environment. It seems that the police have
8 been totally defunded, except when it comes to
9 service-disabled vets. Then there's plenty of
10 enforcement.

11 Because of rising crime and the city dysfunction,
12 vending is no longer an attractive option for
13 veterans.

14 So how can New York City meet its legal
15 obligation to accommodate disabled vets? Codified in
16 state and federal law, the city is mandated to
17 provide reasonable accommodations to its disabled
18 veterans who operate as street vendors. Years ago,
19 all the newsstands were run by veterans. Today, with
20 the proliferation of digital media, newsstands have
21 become obsolete and are shutting down everywhere.

22 The MTA has dozens of these so-called ghost
23 newsstands, and throughout the city, there are more
24 than 600 newsstands that are vacant. Coincidentally,
25 there are 600 disabled veterans licensed and

2 registered with the city as vendors of merchandise
3 and food.

4 I propose that the city grant each eligible
5 veteran a newsstand where they can run their own
6 business. In exchange, the veteran would make his
7 newsstand a hub of community affairs and social
8 services. I call this Veterans Take a Stand for
9 Civic Engagement. The initiative will ensure that
10 the city honors its obligation to disabled veterans
11 who would run the newsstands as their own retail
12 business.

13 The veteran would serve as a community liaison,
14 promoting civic awareness and participation. Each
15 newsstand will be a place where local residents can
16 connect with and plug into community activities and
17 events. Reliable internet, digital kiosks, and
18 tablets would be a must, available for anyone in need
19 of social services or a referral.

20 Security cameras, first aid kits, Narcan, and
21 defibrillators would also be present at these
22 locations.

23 Being embedded in communities throughout the
24 city, the newsstands are ideally suited to meet the
25 needs of the booming delivery business. They can be

2 drop-off and pickup points for packages, charging
3 stations for e-bikes, and relief stands for the
4 delivery drivers.

5 Maybe Amazon or FedEx would like to access this
6 network of 600 convenient locations, owned and
7 operated by a veteran who has civic engagement as
8 part of his business model. The opportunities are
9 limitless. In closing, I say, don't wait for
10 Veterans Day to thank a veteran. Help veterans take
11 a stand in your neighborhood, and you can thank a vet
12 every day all year long. Thank you.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Armando, for your
14 very good testimony. Thank you both. Appreciate it.
15 Thank you.

16 Next panel. This is our last in-person panel.
17 Rabah Belkebir and Abdell Jamila. Rabah, you go
18 first. Thank you. All right.

19 MR. BELKEBIR: Thank you. Hi. Hello there.

20 How are you? All right. My name is Rabah
21 Belkebir. I'm a service-connected disabled veteran,
22 and I'm blue license, too.

23 I just want to answer the blue license. In Times
24 Square, especially, the city and NYPD, they are
25 issuing summonses only for disabled veterans. I give

2 you an example, me. I'm the only one. Me and
3 Armando. Mr. Wells, he sells merchandise. But as
4 food vendors, we are the only legal vendors in Times
5 Square.

6 But we are the only one who gets tickets. A
7 couple of months ago, the city issued 18 tickets.
8 They gave me 16 because, you know, that's the
9 problem. They don't give them about disabled
10 veterans. We are the only ones. So that's the
11 problem.

12 I have here a New York state court order. They
13 ignore that, just like that. I told them. They come
14 to me. They say, you can't. How many legal vendors
15 there? This is not. You're the only one who must
16 go. I says, "Why? What's going on here? I'm a
17 disabled veteran. Everything legal, but okay."

18 But I have something to say about the new stands,
19 me, Armando, and everybody we did talk about it. So
20 I'm going to read your letter. I hope you will
21 understand with my accent.

22 "We are a group of disabled veterans
23 from New York City reaching out to you
24 regarding the current state of the largely
25 abandoned New York City new stands. Today,

2 the community of street vendors in New York
3 City include more than 1,600 veterans who
4 makes their living on the street, braving
5 all matters on weather condition, whatever
6 it's cold or hot, whatever, the summer or
7 the winter, in the freezing cold, during the
8 rain and everything. For many of us
9 disabled veterans, these businesses are
10 among the few that accommodate our need to
11 attend frequent VA hospital appointment.

12 Of course, we have to make all appointments.
13 You've got a regular job. We can't do it.

14 So it is difficult enough for most able-
15 bodied individuals to do. Of your body and
16 mine, we believe there is an opportunity
17 that will cost the city any financial
18 resources and would, in fact, add revenue to
19 its coffers through an increased tax.

20 As veterans who have made significant
21 sacrifice to our country, we ask that our
22 service needs to be acknowledged and
23 respected and rewarded by licensing to
24 implementing what we are about to propose.
25

2 Our preliminary research showed that
3 only about 300 new stands, so there is only
4 300 new stands. It used to be like 1,300,
5 but only 100. They closed them with the new
6 technologies.

7 New stands are still operating in the
8 city, most of which are in Manhattan, plus,
9 of course, Bronx and Brooklyn. In 1950, it
10 was like 1,325 new stands. But today, it's
11 only 300. So whatever.

12 If we can get those, of course, we're going to
13 pay and everything, and we are willing to work with
14 the DVS, and I think the disabled veterans, we
15 deserve this chance, because if we don't do it,
16 probably the city will give it to someone else. God
17 knows what they are going to sell inside. So I think
18 they already started selling cigarettes or whatever
19 they're selling. So if we can turn them into coffee
20 kiosks, so we will be the eyes of the city, plus it's
21 going to be a little help center for veterans.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right. Very good idea.

23 MR. BELKEBIR: Thank you very much.

24 MR. JAMILA: Good afternoon. My name is Abdel
25 Jamila, U.S. Army retired and a combat vet with a

2 distinguishing prize Valor. As a service-connected
3 disabled veteran who operates as a street vendor, I
4 have chosen to participate in today's meeting to
5 address issues that have long been overlooked or
6 neglected by city agencies and its lack of sufficient
7 vendor enforcement policies. Police and agents are
8 not knowledgeable in the law concerning Article 35.

9 Today presents a rare and unique opportunity for
10 us to voice our concern and assert our rights. Our
11 primary focus is on the well-being of veterans of the
12 city of New York, particularly mental health and
13 other challenges we face. We believe that
14 progressive measures can help prevent the alarming
15 rates of suicide among veterans and disabled veterans
16 in particular, and we are a group that has selflessly
17 served and sacrificed our bodies and mind for the
18 country that we all love.

19 Unfortunately, in New York State alone, a
20 disheartening one-third of the homeless population
21 consists of veterans. Many of these veterans could
22 make a living and become more productive citizens if
23 the city made it easier for these veterans to work
24 the streets without being in constant fear. Many of
25 us have PTSD and cannot tolerate confrontation and

2 intimidation by other types of vendors, police, and
3 other enforcement agencies.

4 Some of us cannot respond in socially acceptable
5 ways, so we avoid working in contested areas to avoid
6 troubles. As a war veteran street vendor, our work
7 on the streets of New York is driven by necessity
8 rather than choice. We find ourselves in this line
9 of work as it is often the only means to support our
10 families.

11 In previous hearings at City Hall, we as a group
12 of disabled veterans emphasized the difficulty of
13 securing traditional employment due to frequent
14 hospital visits to address injuries sustained during
15 our military service.

16 I just feel like the City of New York is-- I just
17 feel like we are under assault by the City of New
18 York and the City Council, some of the City
19 Councilmembers, by being discredited and discrediting
20 us as veterans. Thank you very much.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, thank you both.
22 And our final panel is going to be on Zoom. Brendan
23 Gibbons? Brendan? We don't see Brendan on there.
24 So Charlotte Martin?

25 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

2 MS. MARTIN: Hello. Sorry, just a second. Okay.
3 Hello, my name is Charlotte Martin. Thank you for
4 holding today's hearing on veteran civic engagement.
5 I'm the Director of Access Initiatives at the
6 Intrepid Museum, and in this capacity, I have the
7 privilege of overseeing the Museum's Veterans Access
8 Initiative that includes a range of programs and
9 resources for current and former service members and
10 their families.

11 I do want to take a moment to acknowledge the
12 generous support of the City Council. Our programs
13 would not be possible without this support, so thank
14 you to Chair Holden and the committee members and
15 staff for your efforts to connect veterans with one
16 another and cultural resources like the Intrepid
17 Museum. Cultural organizations like the Intrepid
18 Museum have a tremendous role to play in connecting
19 veterans with one another and other resources.

20 Because of the Intrepid Museum's non-traditional
21 ship-like meeting spaces, our organization may
22 present a more comfortable environment for veterans
23 who have not previously felt welcome at or drawn to
24 traditional veteran organizations.

2 Through supportive but not overly therapeutic
3 programming, we can create entry points for veterans
4 to try something new and engage in community.

5 Veterans come together through a shared interest and
6 end up exchanging resources and opportunities for
7 further engagement.

8 We have also observed this with veteran and
9 military families who may feel isolated from one
10 another or from the city. The Intrepid Museum's
11 programs are designed to be inclusive and engaging
12 for all veterans, including those with service-
13 related disabilities. Outreach and programming has
14 also increasingly focused on veterans historically
15 excluded from other veteran spaces, particularly
16 women, veterans of color, and LGBTQ veterans.

17 We acknowledge and address the challenges faced
18 by veterans and their loved ones while honoring their
19 strength and contributions. In order to foster this
20 positive experience, appropriate staff and volunteer
21 training and planning is crucial. Since starting our
22 veterans initiative almost 10 years ago, the Intrepid
23 Museum has welcomed veterans from all branches,
24 service eras, and backgrounds through both free
25 veteran-only and inclusive programs.

2 At our cornerstone veterans-only program,
3 Intrepid After Hours, veterans explore the museum,
4 get a behind-the-scenes experience or workshop, and
5 then connect over a catered dinner. Earlier this
6 year, we started coordinating with the Department of
7 Veteran Services to ensure that there's always a
8 veteran DVS representative at programs available to
9 answer questions and share resources. We have
10 received very positive feedback.

11 We've also heard from veterans how meaningful it
12 has been to learn about resources and opportunities
13 from other veterans. Several have even gone on to
14 become volunteers at the Intrepid Museum as part of
15 other organizations, reducing isolation and giving
16 back to their community. At the museum, we also make
17 a point to ensure that veterans are specifically
18 invited to public programs, whether focused on
19 veteran issues or more general, in an effort to
20 reduce isolation and bridge veteran and civilian
21 divides.

22 Collaborations have been crucial, such as our
23 ongoing partnership with Exit 12 Dance Company to
24 host therapeutic workshops for veterans and family
25 members, culminating in a public performance on the

2 flight deck, and our recent program with the Met
3 Opera focused on women in the military.

4 We recognize the power and value of the arts,
5 history, culture, and service to bring veterans
6 together and connect them with their communities.
7 Thank you.

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Charlotte, for
9 your great work. It's a wonderful museum. Keep up
10 the great work. Thanks so much for your testimony.

11 Next is Dr. Frank Bourke. Welcome back.

12 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

13 DR. BOURKE: Thank you for the invitation,
14 Commissioner Holden, and very much so for the \$35,000
15 award to the Research and Recognition Project to
16 train counselors in the New York City area. I'd like
17 to use this forum to ask the committee and
18 Commissioner Hendon, et cetera, all of the people
19 associated with the Veterans Committee who know of
20 clinical directors and leaders in mental health
21 across the city.

22 We would like to use the money that has been
23 awarded to scholarships for clinicians in the New
24 York City area in order to introduce them, first
25 person, to the effectiveness of the RTM protocol.

2 For those of you not up on this conversation, we
3 have a protocol that we've taken through the research
4 and validation process scientifically to approval as
5 evidentiary medicine. That's called a
6 reconsolidation of traumatic memories.

7 That allows or enables us to train therapists in
8 a three-day program with follow-up treatment to
9 administer the protocol successfully. The protocol
10 in its research is eliminating PTSD and all its
11 symptoms over 90 percent of the time. That's the
12 first five studies. It really works. And what we
13 want to do is get this known and in better
14 circulation in the New York City area, running this
15 initial training for New York City counselors as a
16 pilot and an introduction to the protocol to leaders
17 in the clinical services in New York City area.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Doctor.

19 Doctor, I have a question. How many counselors
20 are already trained in RTM?

21 DR. BOURKE: 325. They're accessible on our
22 website.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. That is a good
24 number. And we wanted to actually allocate more
25 money. But it's a first step. It's a baby step.

2 But we appreciate you and all your work on
3 pioneering-- the pioneering work for RTM. It does
4 work. I can attest to that. And I thank you for
5 your work and your continuing advocacy for RTM.

6 Thanks, Doctor.

7 DR. BOURKE: In simple terms, Commissioner, what
8 we're hoping is that when it's seen by experienced
9 clinical directors in programs in the city, its
10 efficacy will jump another notch up, and we can
11 train. We should be training 50 or 100 counselors in
12 a pilot to get this thing going, and know it really
13 works and it's really needed at a grassroots level.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you so much, Doctor.
15 Our final panelist is Dr. J. David Stiffler.

16 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

17 DR. STIFFLER: Good afternoon, Chair Holden and
18 members of the New York City Council Committee on
19 Veterans. I'm David Stiffler, the Medical Director
20 of the Military Family Center at NYU Langone Health.
21 Military Family Center at NYU Langone Health was
22 established in 2012 with the goal to fill in the gaps
23 in mental health services available to veterans and
24 their family members in the New York City area.

2 The center's mission is to address the mental
3 health challenges of this population by providing
4 accessible, high-quality, evidence-based treatment to
5 veterans and their family members.

6 Since inception, our Military Family Center has
7 provided mental health treatment to over 4,000
8 veterans and their family members.

9 To summarize our program, we provide
10 comprehensive evaluations and personalized evidence-
11 based treatment for a number of mental health
12 problems, including post-traumatic stress disorder,
13 depression, anxiety, ADHD, insomnia, and substance
14 use disorders.

15 For couples or families experiencing relationship
16 difficulties, we offer either couples or family
17 therapy. We are also able to offer individual
18 psychotherapy for children and adolescents. We
19 provide services completely free of charge and offer
20 our services to veterans regardless of their
21 discharge status, combat exposure, or era served.

22 Our services are available to family members of
23 veterans, even if the veteran is not involved in the
24 treatment.

2 To maximize engagement and access care, we offer
3 appointments during the evening outside of normal
4 business hours, both in person or by video through a
5 virtual health platform.

6 It is common for veterans who struggle with
7 depression to have difficulty with engagement in
8 civilian life after service. Young veterans often
9 face challenges with the transition from their
10 military service into the next steps in their lives
11 as civilian adults. After service, some veterans
12 struggle with finding meaning in their lives or
13 activities to engage in that leave them feeling
14 fulfilled or like they have made a valuable
15 contribution. It has been reported that civic
16 engagement contributes to growth and maturation as
17 young people transition into adulthood and that
18 volunteer engagement reduces depressed feelings in
19 service members.

20 More specifically for veterans in school,
21 research has shown that civic engagement may promote
22 higher utilization of mental health service on
23 campus. Research has shown that veteran civic
24 engagement is important to the transition to civilian
25 life. The Military Family Center at NYU is proud to

2 be a link for veterans to engage with their community
3 and we thank the council for holding this important
4 hearing.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, doctor. And on
6 the family centers, do you have a waiting list or are
7 you able to see everyone that requests it?

8 DR. STIFFLER: We see everyone. Ideally, we see
9 everyone within a week of their initial phone call.
10 Of course, during times when demand surges, we do our
11 best, but our goal is to have everybody seen within
12 five business days.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Again, doctor, thank you for
14 all the great work you do. I so appreciate it.

15 DR. STIFFLER: You're welcome. Thank you. Okay,
16 Brendan. Our next panelist is Brendan Gibbons.

17 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Brendan, are you there? I
19 think he might be having technical difficulties.
20 Last call for Charlie Cassiano and Maria Macaluso.

21 Brendan, are you back? Are you showing up again?

22 SERGEANT AT ARMS: You may begin.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, he might be having
24 might be the bandwidth. Brendan, are you still with
25 us? Last call.

2 Okay. Sorry, Brendan. He's showing up and then
3 he disappears on the list here. All right, I want to
4 thank everyone, all the panelists and commissioner.

5 Thanks for staying again. He's probably the only
6 commissioner that stays for an entire hearing and
7 that's we got to commend him for.

8 Charlie Cassiano, Maria Macaluso, and Brendan
9 Gibbons. All right, I know. Okay, but thank you
10 everyone for the testimony. It was magnificent. It
11 was a great hearing. And again, I want to thank--
12 We did learn a lot.

13 Okay, my colleague wants to say something.
14 Vickie Paladino.

15 COUNCILMEMBER PALADINO: I want to thank
16 everybody for coming here today. What we covered
17 here is not a problem that's going to be easily
18 solved. Every single one of you came here today
19 crying out for help. You're crying out for help to
20 be able to make a living, a legal living. And the
21 fact that you are being attacked, persecuted, because
22 you are a veteran, and we heard you all here today
23 proclaim that some people said, "What do you think
24 you're special because you are a veteran?" Well,
25 damn right, you are special because you are a

2 veteran. And the fact that we have this immigration
3 crisis in our city, and we have illegal vendors all
4 over-- I'm in district 19. They're everywhere.

5 We're a little sick and tired of it. You guys
6 deserve what you deserve. And you fight like hell
7 for that ticket that they had the nerve to give you.

8 And anybody in this room that gets a ticket, you
9 come and see me, because I'm going to tell you right
10 now, you should not be paying any tickets. You are a
11 legal licensed vendor trying to make a living in the
12 city of New York.

13 The fact that you are veterans, that's a cherry
14 on top of the cake, because we got people slicing and
15 dicing fruits and vegetables in our subways under
16 filthy conditions. You guys want to open up a
17 newsstand? You've offered several different other
18 ways you could use the newsstand. You are here
19 asking for help. And the City of New York is turning
20 their back on you. And the State is turning their
21 back on you. This should not be allowed.

22 And as part of the Veterans Committee, we will do
23 our very best, because I am sick and tired of paying
24 \$5 billion for illegals who exist in our society,
25 allowed to do whatever they want, and our veterans

2 who put their life on the line-- And a lot of you
3 disabled, mentally and physically, are being treated
4 like garbage. No. No. No.

5 Thank you very much.

6 [APPLAUSE]

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you for that. Well
8 said, Councilmember Paladino. And I want to adjourn
9 this hearing.

10 [GAVEL]

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C E R T I F I C A T E

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



Date September 25, 2024