

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON MENTAL HEALTH
AND ADDICTION

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January 27, 2026
Start: 1:10 p.m.
Recess: 1:40 p.m.

HELD AT: Committee Room - City Hall

B E F O R E: Tiffany L. Cabán,
Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:
Shirley Aldebol
Joann Ariola
Simcha Felder
Ty Hankerson
Linda Lee
Althea V. Stevens

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

Fiodhna O'Grady
Samaritans of New Yorks Suicide Prevention Center

Casey Starr

John Whitaker
Self

Kumarie Cruz
Samaritans of New York

Michael Matos
Five Borough Veterans

Gerard Placide
Army Veteran

James Edward Becton III
Five Borough Veterans

1 COMMITTEE ON MENTAL HEALTH AND ADDICTION 3

2 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Check, check, check one, two.

3 This is a prerecorded sound test for the Committee on
4 Mental Health and Addiction. Today's date is January
5 27th, being recorded by Michael Leonardo in the City
6 Hall Committee Room.

7 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good afternoon. Good
8 afternoon. Welcome to the New York City Council
9 hearing on the Committee on Mental Health,
10 Disabilities and Addiction. At this time, please
11 silence all electronics and do not approach the dais.
12 Thank you for your cooperation. Chair, you may
13 begin.

14 CHAIRPERSON CABÁN: [GAVEL] Good afternoon
15 everyone. My name is Council Member Tiffany Cabán,
16 Chair of the New York City Council's Committee on
17 Mental Health and Addiction.

18 Just a quick note at the next Stated Meeting, we
19 will be voting to change the name of this Committee
20 to the Committee on Mental Health and Substance Use.

21 Before we begin, I'd like to recognize that we
22 are joined by Council Members Aldebol and Council
23 Member Ariola on Zoom. Today, the Committee will
24 hear a Preconsidered Introduction sponsored by
25 Council Member Farah Louis, which would require the

2 Commissioner of Health and Mental Hygiene to report
3 annually on suicides that occur in the city. I want
4 to begin by grounding today's hearing in the reality
5 that suicide is not just a statistic. It is a
6 tragedy and a failure of our health and mental health
7 care systems. It's a public health issue, rooted in
8 grief and trauma and this bill aims to codify suicide
9 reporting to bring transparency and consistency while
10 honoring the dignity of those we have lost and the
11 families left behind.

12 Our responsibility is to ensure that data is
13 collected thoughtfully and used to prevent harm,
14 expand care, and save lives. The goal is not to
15 stigmatize or sensationalize, but center equity and
16 ensure that interventions address the wide
17 disparities in access to care, particularly for the
18 most vulnerable communities. Every policy we pass
19 should reflect our commitment to compassion, justice
20 and the idea that no one's pain should be invisible
21 or ignored.

22 I would like to thank the Administration for
23 providing testimony on this bill last session and I
24 would also like to thank the Committee Staff who work
25 to prepare this hearing, as well as my own staff.

2 Before we begin testimony, I'm going to read a
3 brief statement on behalf of the Bill Sponsor,
4 Council Member Louis.

5 "I want to begin by thanking Chair Tiffany Cabán
6 for her leadership and for her appointment to lead
7 the Committee. I commend her commitment to advancing
8 thoughtful and compassionate mental health policy in
9 this Council and I appreciate her efforts to move
10 this legislation forward expeditiously in the new
11 session. I am proud to sponsor the Preconsidered
12 legislation to require the Department of Health and
13 Mental Hygiene to publish an annual report on
14 suicides in New York City.

15 While some of this information currently exists
16 within broader mortality data, it is not
17 comprehensive enough to meet the needs of providers,
18 advocates and families seeking effective solutions by
19 collecting and reporting data by age, race,
20 ethnicity, gender, occupation and borough residents,
21 we can better understand the risks are greatest -
22 where the risks are greatest and direct resources
23 more strategically.

24 The mental health crisis facing both our young
25 people and our older adults demands that we act with

2 urgency and precision. I'm grateful that this bill
3 is being considered and advanced early in this
4 session and I look forward to working with Chair
5 Cabán, the Administration and our advocacy partners
6 ahead of its passage to expand its reach and ensure
7 it serves all relevant populations impacted by
8 suicide and self-harm. Thank you.

9 I think now we're just going to go ahead open the
10 hearing for public testimony.

11 I want to remind members of the public, this is a
12 government proceeding, decorum observed please. I
13 don't think we're going to have that issue and uh the
14 witness table is reserved for people who wish to
15 testify. No video recording or photography is
16 allowed from the witness table and further members of
17 the public may not present audio or video recordings
18 as testimony but may submit transcripts of such
19 recordings to the Sergeant at Arms for inclusion in
20 the hearing record.

21 If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please
22 fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant at Arms
23 and wait to be recognized. When you are recognized,
24 you will have three minutes to speak on today's
25 oversight topic and legislation. If you have a

2 written statement or additional written testimony you
3 wish to submit for the record, please provide a copy
4 of that testimony to the Sergeant at Arms and you may
5 also email written testimony to
6 testimony@council.nyc.gov within 72 hours of this
7 hearing. Audio and video recordings won't be
8 accepted.

9 Do you want to [INAUDIBLE 00:04:30]? I do?
10 Okay. I was going to give you the power. Okay, they
11 want to let the Council Members botch the names
12 instead.

13 Uhm, okay, the first panel will include Fiodhna
14 O'Grady, Kumarie Cruz, and John Whitaker(SP?).

15 FIODHNA O'GRADY: Would you like me to start?
16 May I start?

17 CHAIRPERSON CABÁN: Yes please.

18 FIODHNA O'GRADY: Good morning. How are you? Or
19 good afternoon Chair Cabán, Council Member Aldebol.
20 My name is Fiodhna O'Grady and I'm Director of
21 Government Relations at Samaritans of New Yorks
22 Suicide Prevention Center. We're one of 400
23 Samaritan branches in 40 countries. Thank you for
24 the opportunity to speak in strong support of Intro.
25 1162.

2 Samaritans operates New York City's only
3 confidential 24/7 suicide prevention hotline funded
4 by the Council, answered by 80 to 100 trained
5 volunteers.

6 We also support families grieving after a suicide
7 and work and provide training in schools and
8 communities to prevent crisis before they escalate.

9 Samaritans is also deeply engaged in suicide
10 prevention policy at the city, state and national
11 levels. As a member of the National Council for
12 Suicide Prevention, that tracks how changes in
13 federal systems data collection and crisis response

14 infrastructure effect local communities. We
15 recognize the critical need to ensure the local
16 suicide surveillance systems and oversight,

17 particularly for populations known to face elevated
18 risk including LGBTQ+ youth and veterans and from
19 that vantage point, I want to be very clear. Timely

20 and transparent data matters. We are encouraged that
21 this bill requires demographic and geographic

22 breakdowns because disparities in suicide risk are
23 real and demand targeted prevention strategies. As
24 this law moves forward, we urge you to pay careful

25 attention to implementation.

2 That includes ensuring the reports are timely or
3 include provisional data so that they are not
4 delayed. Coordinating across agencies so the
5 information is complete, establishing clear privacy
6 standards that protect families while also - while
7 still allowing data to be released and being
8 transparent when information is limited or
9 provisional.

10 Please also consider including sexual orientation
11 and gender identity only where possible, so
12 populations known to face elevated risk are not left
13 out of the picture. Annual suicide reporting will
14 strengthen the city's ability to understand what is
15 happening on the ground, identify emerging needs and
16 expand in real time to communities under strain. It
17 allows policymakers to invest where the need is
18 greatest and helps community based organizations
19 adjust outreach and education efforts before more
20 lives are lost.

21 Congratulations on your new position as Chair of
22 this Committee and for your long support for mental
23 health as a member of the Mental Health Committee in
24 prior years. I look forward to working with you and
25

2 your team. Thank you for your leadership and for
3 your commitment to protecting New Yorkers in crisis.

4 KUMARIE CRUZ: Good afternoon Chair Cabán and
5 members of the Committee. Thank you for the
6 opportunity to speak today. My name is Kumarie Cruz
7 and I serve as the Director of Bereavement and
8 Education Services at Samaritans of New York.

9 Thank you again for letting me get the
10 opportunity to speak in support of this today.

11 The majority of my work is with people who are
12 living in the aftermath of suicide loss. I sit with
13 parents, partners, siblings, friends who are trying
14 to make sense of something that is senseless,
15 something that has shattered their entire world and
16 have changed their lives forever.

17 I also work with schools and community groups to
18 help people talk openly about suicide before a crisis
19 becomes fatal. Today, I want to underscore just how
20 critical this legislation is. When the city has
21 accurately timely information about suicide debt, it
22 can better recognize where pain is concentrated.
23 Which communities are under strain and what kind of
24 prevention efforts are most urgently needed. Data,

2 when used carefully and responsibly, becomes a way to
3 prevent future loss.

4 As this mandate is implemented, we urge the
5 Council to ensure that strong, privacy protections
6 are paired with transparency? That agencies
7 coordinate effectively and that missing or
8 provisional data are clearly explained, rather than
9 omitted.

10 These details will determine whether the report
11 becomes a living prevention tool or simply a
12 retrospective document. We also encourage the
13 Council to look closely at populations known to face
14 elevated suicide risk, including LGBTQ+ New Yorkers
15 and how to consider sexual orientation and gender
16 identity data that could be used in corporately -
17 that could be incorporated safely and thoughtfully.

18 This bill [INAUDIBLE 00:10:39] an important
19 message, that New York City is committed not only to
20 respond to crisis but to learn from them in order to
21 prevent the next one.

22 Thank you for your time and dedication to this
23 work.

24 JOHN WHITAKER: Good morning. My name is John
25 Whitaker. Thank you to the Chairwoman and the rest

2 of the Committee for hearing us out. I'm here at the
3 invitation of Five Borough Veterans. I'm testifying
4 on my own behalf. I've worked in the veteran
5 community for some time now, nearly 12 years and I've
6 worked in the security industry for nearly 12, 13
7 years dealing mostly with homeless and indigent
8 populations, including drug addicted and mental
9 health issue individuals.

10 As a veteran and as a member of 25th Infantry
11 Division. I spent time in combat and things
12 including mental health crisis's, drug addiction,
13 criminal revenges, things of those nature can
14 sometimes be prevalent in veterans, particularly when
15 under mental stress once they get out of the military
16 and they leave that sort of protected environment and
17 go onto the city.

18 As a new Yorker, obviously, the city I think is
19 most - one of the most, although the federal
20 government has certain requirements statuses and
21 benefits they bring to their families. It's actually
22 the city that has the most on the ground knowledge of
23 our communities borough by borough, city by city,
24 block by block in order to help out veterans. As an
25 admitted attorney, I've been an attorney since 2022.

1 I got the opportunity to work with Legal Services NYC
2 Justice Project with NYCHA, with other housing
3 challenged veterans and although we've made a lot of
4 progress in the last 30 years, we've moved from the
5 sort of stereotype of the homeless veteran with on
6 the street corner, which was an unfortunate
7 stereotype and we developed a different legal aspect,
8 different organizations have come up with new
9 housing. Things like Samaritan Villages, things like
10 uhm veteran, Volunteers of America with housing. We
11 still face - we still have veterans facing all sorts
12 of mental health issues, crisis's whether that's
13 addiction, whether that's criminal records and
14 unfortunate circumstances and I'm here to strongly
15 support as a veteran and as someone who has worked in
16 security for a long time and somebody who worked from
17 the legal field. Uh, we need clarification on our
18 actual population here as far as veterans go because
19 that's the only way they can actually help veterans
20 on the ground. We can identify and then we can bring
21 to these services more and more services whether
22 that's Wounded Warriors, whether that's anything
23 else. Thank you for your time.

2 CHAIRPERSON CABÁN: Thank you. I want to follow
3 up with a couple of questions and also, I know that
4 there was a hearing and that you all had the
5 opportunity to testify and I think it's good to get
6 it on the record again. We're going to be talking
7 and directing you know these things to a new
8 administration and the more we can get on the record,
9 I think the better. Sir, I want to thank you for
10 your service. It resonates a lot. My grandfather
11 was a Korean War combat veteran who came home with
12 PTSD and self-medicated. And so, you know we go - we
13 have one of the largest veteran communities in both
14 of our gardens in Queens and when we go every
15 Veterans Day, every Memorial Day and talk to the
16 families, there's so much that doesn't get talked
17 about but it takes just one opening to start really
18 having families talk about the impact that you know
19 service and the intersection with how it's effected
20 their mental health and their family and their
21 families mental health.

22 So, really appreciate that you're here but my
23 follow up question is uhm, you know in addition to
24 the types of data that are included in this
25 legislation and the naming of also adding sexual

2 orientation, gender identity, are there other data
3 sets, demographic areas that you think would be
4 helpful to be thinking about? And any of you and all
5 of you can answer.

6 FIODHNA O'GRADY: Uhm, yes and what we've done
7 too is to give you a document that we sent over to
8 Joana, which is a list of the sort of time limits
9 interagency and uhm population wise. Yes, veterans,
10 veterans in the U.S. are more likely to die from
11 suicide than they are in active combat. So, it's a
12 huge issue and then for suicide in general, we know
13 that that we have White men, actually older White men
14 are more at risk and then for our youth especially,
15 we're looking at you know one in ten of our - that's
16 probably my phone, I'm so sorry.

17 One in ten of our high school students are
18 actually attempting suicide and 17 percent of them
19 are seriously thinking about it. So, for education
20 etc., it is a big issue that mostly gets through the
21 state on all the legislations for DOE. So, anything
22 locally that could be done and LGBTQ youth and trans
23 youth are even higher and higher like nearly twice
24 but I'm not quoting the actuals.

25 Is there anything I left out Kumarie?

2 CHAIRPERSON CABÁN: And another thing I think
3 about that obviously is in the scope of this bill but
4 in terms of increased suicide risk, people who are
5 involuntarily committed, also end up with much higher
6 suicide rates and that's an intervention that I think
7 probably would agree that the mental health and the
8 health community would agree is probably used more
9 often than it should, especially considering the
10 risks and the data and the research that doesn't
11 support the effectiveness of uhm, you know forced
12 substance use treatment for example.

13 FIODHNA O'GRADY: Yes, and those transported
14 against their will because they've called 988 or
15 they've called the police. There is you know,
16 there's a study and I can send you the link but I
17 think it's up to about 30 percent of those who were
18 transported against their will upon leaving hospitals
19 are actually at far greater risk for an extended
20 period of time. And then they lose that actual time
21 that they're kept one, two, three days. They don't
22 have a phone for the first 24 hours. Their jobs are
23 interrupted. Their children are not picked up from
24 school. There's you know, this has to be looked at
25 and 988 is also a confidential line. It's a

2 wonderful, wonderful service. However, it's
3 confidential but up to a point and that point is not
4 explicitly expressed loud and clear in the website of
5 988. You have to go down to the sort of like ten
6 font privacy policy at the end of some of the pages.
7 You click on that and then you click on another one
8 about confidentiality and then you click on another
9 one to find the actual confidential - whereas our
10 hotline, which you guys fund, we're 100 percent
11 confidential, which across many nations and our 400
12 branches is a standard in the industry and is an
13 essential tool for suicide prevention, in addition to
14 988. It is not instead of and we really like 988.

15 CHAIRPERSON CABÁN: Yeah, thank you. Thank you
16 so much and thank you for your testimony. It sounds
17 like also you know just that for you all to have
18 access to this data would help you identify folks
19 with a [INAUDIBLE 00:18:35] right and be able to
20 reach out to folks before you know before suicidal
21 attempts or incidents but also before some of the
22 unfortunate interventions that actually can
23 exacerbate the crisis.

24 FIODHNA O'GRADY: And the last thing I would say
25 is that the National Youth Risk Behavioral Survey as

2 of 2023 has been completely abolished and that has 20
3 years of data biannually and we also are contacting
4 Sarah and others to ensure that the DOHMH owns their
5 own data for the city for those periods of time or to
6 legislate. Can we somehow do our own survey and when
7 you click on the U.S. data for the Youth Risk
8 Behavioral Survey, that also does you know safe sex,
9 tobacco, all kinds of things. That's gone in the
10 federal and that's what we're worried about at the
11 National Council. Can we get the state or the city
12 to sort of own that data and also, the fact that uhm,
13 you know there is so much risk. And on the page, it
14 also states now right on top, there are only two
15 genders and they've moved when they did the control
16 find trans, LGBTQ, bi.

17 CHAIRPERSON CABÁN: Well, again, thank you for
18 your testimony. Thank you all.

19 PANEL: Thank you.

20 CHAIRPERSON CABÁN: And please forgive me if I
21 don't pronounce your name correctly and correct me if
22 I do. The next panel is going to include Gerard
23 Placide, Michael Matos, and Becton James Edward.

24 MICHAEL MATOS: Good afternoon Council Members.
25 My name is Michael Matos and I serve as the president

2 of Five Borough Veterans. I'm here today because we
3 have a unique opportunity in front of each of us.
4 Yes. No, Five Borough Veterans. No worries.

5 New York City has the chance to be more
6 transparent on how suicide impacts our society but
7 beyond the general public, each of you has the
8 opportunity to take the first steps in preventing
9 veteran suicide in New York City.

10 I'm sure we all understand how analyzing the
11 impact this tragedy has on our communities as a
12 positive note but let me tell you four reasons why
13 you should include veteran status as a data point in
14 this survey. First the reason being veterans face
15 one and a half times higher of a risk experiencing
16 suicide compared to our non-veteran community
17 members. By including veteran status in this survey,
18 we are able to better understand how it impacts our
19 military connected members in five boroughs.

20 Reason number two, we open the door for the NYC
21 Department of Veteran Services, a severely
22 underfunded agency to target their resources to the
23 neighborhoods identified as higher risk for their
24 outreach, allowing supportive services to be
25 implemented effectively.

2 Third reason being you take the first steps in
3 helping align New York City with the Veteran Suicide
4 Prevention priorities of the federal and state
5 governments, as Governor Hochul recently outlined in
6 her recent governors challenge. And finally, by
7 separating veteran status from occupation as a
8 standalone datapoint, you ensure the inclusion of
9 members of our community who are retired, disabled,
10 or unemployed, making our efforts to prevent future
11 loss of life that much more effective.

12 It's incredible how such a small administrative
13 change can have the potential to save so many lives
14 in our community.

15 So, as we continue to support the passage of this
16 bill, we at Five Borough Veterans, urge you to
17 conclude a separate data point specifically for
18 veteran status. Thank you.

19 GERARD PLACIDE: Good afternoon. My name is
20 Gerard Placide. I'm a United States Army veteran.
21 Affectionately known in the military as the singing
22 soldier.

23 While my name may have been known in the United
24 States and signing at the White House, a host of
25 different things, I'm a Caribbean American, Native of

2 Trinidad and Tobago. So, I come from a background
3 where suicide in and of itself is a tabu. I, myself,
4 having attempted suicide nine times in my life. I'm
5 grateful to my colleagues, both on the left and right
6 of me. I support this bill. I also had the
7 unfortunate privilege of singing at many of my
8 colleagues funerals as well.

9 I live here in Brooklyn and uhm just within the
10 last six years, having gone through the ringer,
11 decided that I wanted to go back to school. And in
12 six years, I must say, even though I was hospitalized
13 at the VA, from my GED to my Master's, I maintained a
14 3.7 to 3.9 GPA average.

15 Today, I have a son who lives me on and even
16 though it's a challenge, I would implore the Council
17 to do whatever is necessary to help us.

18 Thank you for bringing this to the forefront and
19 it is my hope that even in my community in East New
20 York and the Caribbean community where this has been
21 deemed a tabu. Part of me, I was excommunicated from
22 the community but thanks to the people, my colleagues
23 here, I have a second chance and a fighting chance.

24 I thank you.

2 CHAIRPERSON CABÁN: I just want to say - I just
3 want to take a second and thank you for your
4 testimony, for your openness, your vulnerability for
5 sharing your story and congrats to you and all that
6 you've accomplished and it is deeply appreciated.

7 Go ahead sir.

8 JAMES EDWARD BECTON: Thank you. Good afternoon.
9 Thank you so very kindly for your time and attention
10 towards this. My name is James Edward Becton III. I
11 represent professionally standing here with Five
12 Borough. Personally, I am here as a judicial
13 delegate for the Working Families Party and I'm here
14 - ah, is everything copasetic? Indeed, thank you so
15 very kindly. Excuse me.

16 Again, I'm here professionally representing Five
17 Borough Veterans. I'm an affiliate and once member
18 of the New York City Veterans Alliance. Personally,
19 here working as a proactive citizen and a Judicial
20 Delegate for the Working Families Party. So, I'm
21 very interested in legislation that will aid us as
22 individuals.

23 Statistics very rarely mislead as facts do in
24 fact give any type of care to any type of feeling. I
25 support this legislation as it will allow the

2 statistics to do the heavy lifting and speak for
3 themselves. I believe the process of individual
4 identifiable representation particularly with regards
5 to veterans who I consider a super civilian. We are
6 assets. There are quite a many things that we have
7 been taught and learned and exercised as leaders that
8 should be kept into account particularly with regards
9 to us. This type of representation will offer a real
10 time check of those who are in real time suffering
11 veterans, amongst other people and these assets,
12 these assets that our veterans put into focus about
13 how we are suffering and have been suffering for as
14 long as I have been in conscientious existence.

15 I'm 51 years of age and every cycle these issues
16 continue to be subjects but these are issues that do
17 not need to be. These problems are problems that do
18 not need to be. These types of issues are issues
19 that can be taken care of and focused on by the
20 individuals that we put in power to represent us.
21 This type of legislation will do that and put front
22 and center, the fact that we the people should always
23 be your first and only priority of care.

24 The passing of this type of legislation puts
25 literal proof forward that you do and will care. And

2 as noted earlier, these issues are not statistics but
3 the result of a failing system and the failures of
4 those who are behind it. This is an opportunity to
5 neutralize and show that there is proactive care and
6 opportunity for us.

7 Thank you so very kindly for your time and
8 attention.

9 CHAIRPERSON CABÁN: Thank you.

10 PANEL: Thank you.

11 CHAIRPERSON CABÁN: Got it, okay. Thank you to
12 everyone who's testified. If there is anyone present
13 in the room or on the Zoom that hasn't had the
14 opportunity to testify, please raise your hand.
15 Seeing no one else, uhm, let's see. Oh, I would like
16 to note that written testimony, which will be
17 reviewed in full by Committee staff may be submitted
18 to the record up to 72 hours after the close of this
19 hearing by emailing it to testimony@council.nyc.gov.

20 Thank you. Thank you again and particular thanks
21 to the veterans that are here today that spoke
22 directly to their lived experience. Uhm, it's never
23 easy to do that and you are taking your experiences
24 and because of that, I think some really critical
25 amendments are going to be made to this bill to make

2 sure that we're capturing more of data that's needed
3 to support you and your loved ones and your family
4 members.

5 So, thank you very much and with that, we're
6 going to gavel out. [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 February 5, 2025