

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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CITY COUNCIL  
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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March 25, 2025

Start: 1:46 p.m.

Recess: 4:23 p.m.

HELD AT: COMMITTEE ROOM - CITY HALL

B E F O R E: Robert F. Holden, Chairperson

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Joann Ariola  
Kristy Marmorato  
Sandy Nurse  
Vickie Paladino

A P P E A R A N C E S

James Hendon, Commissioner of the New York City  
Department of Veteran Services

Lamar Wheeler, Senior Executive Director of  
Housing Support Services at the New York City  
Department of Veteran Services

Cassandra Alvarez, Chief-of-Staff at the New  
York City Department of Veteran Services

Ashton Stewart, member of the Veteran Advisory  
Board, Secretary of St. Albans Board of Visitors,  
and member of VFW Post 528

Brian Ellicott Cook, Director of Government  
Relations at SAGE

Peter Kempner, Legal Director at Volunteers of  
Legal Service

Alicia Kershaw, GallopNYC

Contessa Officer, Director of Veterans Program  
for VNS Health

Coco Culhane, Veteran Advocacy Project

Eric Lee, Director of Public Policy and  
Volunteers of America Greater New York

Michael Inyosu, self

Sharon Brown, Rose of Sharon Enterprises

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

Dr. Cleopatra Brown, Cold War and Chairperson of  
Community Board 16 Veterans Affairs Committee

Tyler Levsen, Staff Attorney and Legal Research  
Advisor at Family Legal Care

Christopher Leon Johnson, self

1 COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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2 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: This is a microphone  
3 check for the Committee on Veterans. Today's date is  
4 March 25, 2025, located in the Committee Room.  
5 Recording is done by Janelle Yearwood.

6 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Good afternoon, and  
7 welcome to today's New York City Council budget  
8 hearing for the Committee on Veterans.

9 At this time, we ask that you silence all  
10 electronic devices, and at no time are you to  
11 approach the dais.

12 If you have any questions throughout the  
13 hearing or would like to sign up for in-person  
14 testimony, please see one of the Sergeant-at-Arms.

15 Chair Holden, we're ready to go.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [GAVEL] Thank you,  
17 Sergeant, and good afternoon. Welcome to the  
18 Preliminary Budget hearing for the Committee on  
19 Veterans. My name is Robert Holden, the Chair of this  
20 Committee.

21 Today's Committee hearing is on the  
22 Fiscal 2026 Preliminary Budget and the 2025  
23 Preliminary Budget Report for the City's Department  
24 of Veterans Services, or DVS. I'd like to welcome  
25 Commissioner James Hendon of the Department of

Veterans Services to testify before this Committee.

Thank You, Commissioner, and sorry for the delay. I

would also like to acknowledge my fellow Council

Members who have joined us, Kristy Marmorato, Council

Member from the Bronx, and Queens Council Member

Vicki Paladino, and are we on remote? Okay, we're

waiting for other Committee Members, some of whom

will be on remote. The Fiscal 2026 budget for DVS

totals 5.9 million, including 4.2 million in personal

services funding to support 39 full-time positions

and 1.7 million in other-than-personal services. This

results in DVS's Fiscal 2026 budget being 1.1

million, or 16.1 percent, less than the current

budget for Fiscal 2025. A little bit more than half

of this difference is because the Fiscal 2025 budget

includes 575,000 for City Council discretionary

initiatives that are not yet budgeted for 2026.

Importantly, though, this Preliminary Plan did not

include any new needs, and there was only one notable

adjustment, which transferred 676,390 dollars from

the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene in Fiscal

2025 for the Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support

Program. Notably, at approximately 5.9 million, the

Fiscal 2026 budget for DVS constitutes around 1/100,

or 0.001, percent of the City's total Fiscal 2026 budget, making it one of the smallest, if not the smallest, City agencies. There are areas where the city's veterans lag behind the national average, and the City needs to step up and address this, and we've said this over and over again in this Committee. Compounding the yearly issues DVS faces with the minuscule budget we are seeing, the new federal administration has already made huge cuts to health programs, social services, and other veterans-specific programs. While federal funding does not directly fund the budget for DVS, federal programs do provide significant services and support programs to veterans residing in the city. It is clear the City Administration is not giving DVS enough of a budget to fill the gaps left by these federal cuts. Even before the federal cuts, you know, we needed more. So, I strongly feel that we owe it to our city's valued veteran community to do a better job at supporting their specific needs and that meets DVS's needs. DVS certainly needs adequate funding, which we haven't had ever so that I'd like to state, and I think everybody will agree with that, the budget that the Mayor's Office wants to allocate clearly reflects

its level of concern for our veteran community. What more tells the story than what you're allocating to DVS. The budget needs to provide more support and more services for our city's veterans, and it really needs to begin reinforcing itself to fill in gaps left by the federal administration. I look forward to discussing DVS's budget and operations, budget actions that were included in the Preliminary Plan, staffing at the agency, and the City's support services for veterans, and reviewing DVS's metrics reported in the Fiscal 2025 Preliminary Mayor's Management Report. I am particularly interested to hear how DVS is coming up with innovative ways to address the mental health, housing and security, employment, and social service needs for our veterans.

So, I'd like to thank both my Staff and the Committee Staff for their help in preparing for this hearing. Julia Haramis, the Unit Head; Regina Paul, to my right, the Policy Analyst; William Dougherty, my Legislative Director; and my Chief-of-Staff, Daniel Kurzyna.

I would like to remind everyone who wishes to testify in person today that you must fill

out an appearance card, which is located at the desk in the rear, the Sergeant-at-Arms near the entrance to this room. Please fill it out, even if you have already registered to testify in advance.

To allow as many people as possible to testify, public testimony will be limited to two minutes per person. I also ask my Colleagues to limit their questions and comments to five minutes. It's a very, very busy day, and we have a lot of people to testify, so if we can adhere to that.

Please note that witnesses who are here will testify before those on Zoom. That's a normal procedure of all Committees.

Now, in accordance with the rules of the Council, Regina Paul, our Policy Analyst, will administer the affirmation to the witnesses from DVS. Thank you.

POLICY ANALYST PAUL: Please raise your right hand.

Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in your testimony before this Committee, and to respond honestly to Council Members' questions?

CHIEF-OF-STAFF ALVAREZ: I do.



COMMISSIONER HENDON: I do.

SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WHEELER: I do.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Before I start, I just want to thank folks who are here. I know it's been a while as far as all who are here, especially those veteran community members who are here today. Thank you so much for being with us right now.

Good afternoon, Chair Holden, Members of the Veteran Committee, other Council Members, and members of New York City's veteran community who are in attendance. My name is James Hendon. I am honored to serve as Commissioner of the New York City Department of Veteran Services, DVS. Joining me for today's hearing are Cassandra Alvarez, our agency's Chief-of-Staff, and Lamar Wheeler, DVS' Senior Executive Director for Housing Support Services. We pray that today's testimony offers you insights into the role that DVS plays in New York City's veteran community, particularly as budget season approaches. Our objective is to give you as rich a viewpoint as possible from us as you factor in all stakeholders while charting an optimal path for those who have served in the U.S. Armed Forces, past and present, and their loved ones in New York City. By way of a

roadmap, we will discuss demographics, the history of the agency, how we're structured, our service and Charter-mandated areas, agency priorities, our SWOT analysis, Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats, recommendations for the Council from a discretionary funding standpoint, and our perspective on budget issues at DVS.

In starting with demographics, the 2023 ACS five-year estimate holds that 129,311 veterans live in New York City, 29 percent are African-American, 22.3 percent are Hispanic or Latino, 5.5 percent are Asian, 0.7 percent are American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.1 percent are Pacific Islander. Approximately 41.2 percent of New York City's veterans are white. As is New York City, veterans are a majority-minority community here. Women comprise 10.2 percent of all New York City veterans in 2023. This is notable because the same data point 10 years ago, in 2015, put our female veteran population at 6.9 percent. Taking year over year from 2016 to 2023, our women veteran population has increased by an average of 0.8 percent per year. That's greater than the projected national growth rate for female veterans, according to the VA, of 0.3 percent per

year. In terms of age, approximately 29.3 percent of our population is younger than 55 years old, while 70.7 percent is 55 or older. Our largest cohort is the 75 and older group, which comprise 31.8 percent of all New York City veterans.

Something not captured in the Census Bureau's data, according to the Department of Defense, approximately 200,000 service members transition from active duty service each year. Of that group, 10,000 transition to New York State. Out of those who transition to New York State, 5,000 transition to New York City. Many transition here for school, using the post-9/11 GI Bill and Voc Rehab benefits. After obtaining their education, a majority of them do not stay. Recognizing that half of all veterans settle down in a place where they're not originally from, it's important to inspire these veterans to live, learn, and work in New York.

One other thing, the most important thing about the Census data, it significantly undercounts veterans. The Census Bureau defines a veteran as a person who served on active duty status at some point in their life and no longer serves. If you're currently serving in the military, active duty, Guard

or Reserve, and you live in New York City, you are not captured in Census data. I, a drilling U.S. Army Reservist, am not captured in Census Bureau data. Even more critically, if you're a veteran of the Guard or Reserve who never deployed on federal orders, Title 10 orders for the Guard, or being placed on orders that were not for drill or training in the Reserve, then you're not included in the Census Bureau's information, period. Roughly 40 percent of all U.S. military service members are Guardsmen or Reservists. Many are not captured by the Census Bureau according to this definition.

Because the Census data is so flawed, as a starting point, when discussing the size of New York City's veteran community, we use the number of veterans that the VA estimates are eligible for VA healthcare in the five boroughs, 152,409, 1-5-2-4-0-9. This comes from the VA's FY23 Geographic Distribution of Veterans Expenditure Report. For the most part, VA healthcare eligibility is limited to honorably discharged veterans who've served for 24 continuous months on active duty, or for Guardsmen or Reservists, those who've completed an entire federal non-training deployment. The VA data, too, does not

account for all veterans. That said, adding the number of active duty, Guardsmen and Reservists in New York City, 13,121 in FY23 per the Defense Department, to the number of veterans whom we believe are not eligible for VA healthcare brings us to an estimated size that is approximately 200,000. We cannot provide an exact number because X factors are how many Guard and Reserve veterans who have never deployed live in New York City, how many New York City veterans have a less than honorable discharge, also how many active duty veterans who have served for less than two years live in NYC.

New York City's definition of a veteran is the most permissive in the country. We recognize you as a veteran regardless of how long you've served, your component of service, Guard, Reserve, active duty, and your character of discharge. That said, ascertaining the size of our city's veteran community is difficult. All we know for certain is that the federal numbers are undercounts. I personally believe that New York City's veteran community is at least 230,000 members strong.

The Department of Veterans Services currently has contact information for approximately

190,000 New York City veterans out of a database containing 530,000 contacts. We had contact info for less than 5,000 New York City veterans in 2019. We have contact information for 190,000 now. We're actively working to get a handle on this issue and our people will recognize the policy implications.

Now to the history. The Department of Veterans Services was created through Local Law 113 of 2015. Our official date of establishment is April 8, 2016. Prior to being created, veteran community members protested outside of City Hall in 2014 and 2015 clamoring for the creation of what we now know as DVS. The genesis for the complaints, veteran non-profits that received discretionary funding from the City Council wanted their own Veterans Services Department to coordinate with for the execution of their contracts. The veterans felt like contracting with larger agencies was impersonal and that the groups did not have a certain baked-in cultural competency to see and fully deal with the nuances of the military and veteran community. It took almost two years of protesting to reach a place where the City Council voted on Local Law 113 on November 10, 2015, the day before Veterans Day. The Mayor at the

time signed the bill into law on December 10, 2015, one month later.

When the City made DVS, starting on April 8, 2016, it took the five staff who worked for the then Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs and combined them with eight staff who worked exclusively on veteran housing issues at the Department of Homeless Services, DHS. Key things about the agency when it was created. DVS didn't have its own administrative back end at the time. We were dependent on the Department of Citywide Administrative Services, DCAS. The housing group that originally came from DHS, worked in a silo. It continued to focus on addressing veteran homelessness like a laser. It did not integrate into other aspects of the agency at the time. As an aside, the veteran homeless population in New York City has decreased from 4,677 in 2011 to 624 in 2024, a greater than 85 percent decline. This is largely attributed to the leadership of the DVS housing team and the other continuum of care partners. We thank all of them for their work.

The rest of DVS was focused on being a referral agency, not a direct services agency. The center of gravity for the Core 4 Whole Health Model,

our agency strategy from 2016 to 2019, was referring veterans to groups that focused on culture, connection, community, and clinical care. For perspective, 61 out of the 62 counties in New York State has a county veteran service office. In the case of New York City, which covers five counties, we have DVS. We were the only such entity that did not help veterans submit VA claims. Many consider filing VA claims to be a foundation of veteran service. Things changed for us in late 2019. DVS began a shift, starting with my time here to focus on direct services. Technology, which is masterful in helping to facilitate referrals and optimize performance in general, is great. However, the bedrock of any government services organization is its ability to provide core services. Technology enhances those things. It does not come before them. That was a key difference in the philosophical shift at DVS. Other changes or evolutions, this is not everything, just a handful of them, include the housing team, while maintaining its integrity, became integrated with the rest of the agency. We transitioned away from DCAS support model to one where DVS now maintains all of its internal administrative functions. We developed a



VA claims unit to help the veteran community members file VA claims, and we have evolved our procurement capacity significantly, such that we're processing a growing number of veteran-oriented City Council discretionary contracts and contracting opportunities tied to State funding. In all that we do, DVS triages issues in the veteran community where there is acute need and we can provide unique value. We do what we can to deliver that value while optimizing the partners and resources available and being mindful of our mandates in the City Charter.

The structure, speaking of the City Charter, our Charter-mandated task, according to Chapter 75, Section 3102 of the New York City Charter, is to assist and inform veteran and military families in the areas of housing, healthcare, benefits, culture, education, and employment. I think of our work through multiple prisms, so I'm going to speak to how we are arrayed in terms of those contexts.

When you exclude the headquarters, think of DVS as two sides of a coin. One side involves internal operations of our agency. The other side deals with veteran services, the client-facing

component. The 39 positions authorized for DVS, 34 of those slots are currently filled. We're on track to fill four more slots in April and May. We thank OMB for those approvals. The fate of the 39th slot, which was vacated last week by someone who was on protected leave, it hadn't been used recently prior to becoming available, is internally being discussed. We're optimistic about it being filled. Our goal is to reach 100 percent strength this Calendar Year. Out of the 34 people who are currently assigned to DVS, four are in headquarters, 20 fall on the services side of the coin, and 10 fall on the operations side.

Internal operations consists of the following functions: technology, which includes IT, data analytics, tech support, and cybersecurity; fiscal operations, which includes budgeting, procurement, the processing of payments and technical assistance, logistics, payroll and timekeeping, human resources, equal employment opportunity, and legal slash compliance. There are 10 people in internal operations. Many of those people perform multiple roles in order to account for the various functions and to ensure that we have depth and redundancy when necessary.

The services side, or 20 employees, breaks down such that each Charter-mandated area is accounted for. Services can be seen through the lenses of four functions: direct services, referrals, synergies, and communications.

Our direct services are housing, which employs seven DVS team members; VA claims, which employs six team members; and indigent burials, which employs one part-time member who does not count against DVS's headcount. This is the only person who serves as an ancillary staff member in this way. This is courtesy of NYC Aging's Silver Star program. We thank NYC Aging for its partnership.

All in our agency are able to make referrals, and most often do. That said, the referral coordination process is led by one member of our agency, our Executive Director for Mental Health and Care Coordination. One team member has overall responsibility for referrals.

The synergies unit, those who can coordinate with partners, enabling DVS to deliver offerings where the whole is greater than sum of its parts, making one plus one equals three, has four team members.

Communications, which has two team members, works lockstep with our direct services, synergies, and referrals arms to amplify our offerings and tell the DVS story.

Now to Charter-mandated areas. By Charter area, our housing team covers housing; our claims team and burials coordinator cover benefits; our synergies team covers education, employment, and culture; and all teams directly and indirectly cover health. Housing and claims approach health through the lens of lack of access to VA healthcare. Synergies and referrals approach health through the context of mental health, wellness, and food insecurity.

When one looks at our agency's performance in the Charter-mandated areas, things done by our services team, as undergirded by internal operations, much of our work by Charter area follows the healthcare, Veterans Mental Health Coalition, Veteran Feeding Program, Get Covered NYC Vet, and Mission Vet Check. Details can be found at [nyc.gov/vethealth](http://nyc.gov/vethealth), [nyc.gov/vetfood](http://nyc.gov/vetfood), [nyc.gov/coverednyc](http://nyc.gov/coverednyc), and [nyc.gov/vetcheck](http://nyc.gov/vetcheck).

For housing, helping veterans take a step up wherever they are on the housing ladder from emergency housing, supportive housing, to affordable housing, to homeownership. More information is available at [nyc.gov/vethousing](http://nyc.gov/vethousing) and [nyc.gov/vetladder](http://nyc.gov/vetladder).

For benefits, VA claims support, indigent burial support, and recurring veteran and military family summits. Details can be found at [nyc.gov/vetclaims](http://nyc.gov/vetclaims), [nyc.gov/vetburials](http://nyc.gov/vetburials), and [nyc.gov/vetsummit](http://nyc.gov/vetsummit). Please note the next veteran military family summit will be held at Citi Field on Saturday, May 3rd. There will be an emphasis on employment, housing, mental health, and access to VA services.

For education, it's our Veterans on Campus Network, which is in partnership with City-based institutions of higher learning. The Military Family Advocate Program, also known as MFA, in partnership with NYC Schools. Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps, also in partnership with NYC Schools. Most details can be found online at [nyc.gov/vetstudents](http://nyc.gov/vetstudents), [nyc.gov/vetparents](http://nyc.gov/vetparents), and [nyc.gov/vetmfa](http://nyc.gov/vetmfa).

Employment, please note that employment includes entrepreneurship, includes the Veteran Business Leadership Association, VBLA, VetBizMap, Veteran Street Vendor Liaison Support, Edge for Vets, and VetJobs. Details can be found at [nyc.gov/vbla](http://nyc.gov/vbla), [nyc.gov/vetvendor](http://nyc.gov/vetvendor), [nyc.gov/vetbizmap](http://nyc.gov/vetbizmap), [nyc.gov/vetbusiness](http://nyc.gov/vetbusiness), and [nyc.gov/vetjobs](http://nyc.gov/vetjobs).

Culture. Culture breaks into two categories, one-time efforts and enduring activities. Examples of one-time efforts include, but are not limited to, erecting a memorial honoring New York City's post-9/11 war veterans and their loved ones. Details can be found at [nyc.gov/vetmemorial](http://nyc.gov/vetmemorial). Another example is ensuring that VA memorial markers are erected for all 36 New York City Vietnam War veterans who are still missing into action and unaccounted for.

Enduring cultural activities include Our Veterans NYC, a veteran community calendar maintained by the Bob Woodruff Foundation in partnership with DVS. The website is [ourveterans.nyc](http://ourveterans.nyc). Recurring New York City veteran community commemorations and activities, the Veteran Voices Project, and the City of New York's administration of the Private First

Class Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program. Details are available at [nyc.gov slash vet voices](https://nyc.gov/vet-voices), and [nyc.gov/vetdwyer](https://nyc.gov/vetdwyer). Also, there's [ourveterans.nyc](https://ourveterans.nyc.org).

Priorities. Priorities for the agency in order are data, transitioning service members, housing, claims, and culture. Say it again, data, transitioning service members, housing, claims, and culture. We do not list mental health as a separate priority because it undergirds all that we do.

Data. The goal regarding data about New York City's veteran community, particularly veteran contact information, is to get it, clean it, and share it with governmental entities with whom we can legally and ethically partner. Examples include the New York City Council, New York State Department of Veterans Services, and the VA. If all of us are doing our part to engage New York City veterans, then more of our brothers and sisters will come into the light. We're in a situation where from an outreach standpoint, more touches are always better than less. Also, to be clear, the most recently available VA information holds that as of FY23, 34.3 percent of all veterans self-identify in the United States, 29.8 percent self-identify in New York State, and 24.1

percent self-identify in New York City. Identifying our people so that we can love them through our services is the most critical thing that we do.

Transitioning service members. Our goal for transitioning service members is to identify them, attract them to New York City and the City's opportunities and benefits for veterans in general, and serve them. Thanks to years of work and partnership with the State Directors of Veterans Affairs nationwide, DVS now receives DD214 information for veterans transitioning to New York City. As soon as the separation document is cut, we get it electronically. Also, as of last autumn, we are notified once an active duty service member formally tells the military that they intend to end their active duty service and transition to New York. We know that a future veteran is inbound to us up to 18 months before their active duty service ends. It is vital to make sure these people do not fall through the cracks and become untethered to veteran services, much like what happened to many who came before them. This is our second priority.

Housing. Perennially, DVS is strong in its support of two out of four rungs of the housing



ladder. Emergency housing, those facing homelessness and in the shelter system, and supportive housing, those in need of additional support in the path to independent living. While maintaining what we do in emergency and supportive, we are working to become stronger in the upper rungs of the ladder, affordable housing and homeownership. In light of the economic uncertainty and the 1.4 percent vacancy rate in New York City, we seek to become stable ground for veterans looking for counseling and navigator services specifically in these endeavors. There exists no one-stop shop that can listen to a veteran's affordable housing and homeownership needs and then advise them on veteran-specific city, state, federal, public, private, and non-profit options. This is an example of DVS in a synergistic one-plus-one-equals-three way closing the gap.

Claims. Another gap to close, the service-connected disability rate is 31.2 percent nationwide according to 2023 census data. The rate falls to 21.6 percent in New York State and 20.1 percent in New York City. Taken conservatively, using census population data that we know is severely depressed, that suggests that at least 14,354 New

York City veterans would receive a service-connected disability rating from the VA if they applied for one. This would raise the proportion of New York City veterans with disability ratings to the national average. Our goals here are to increase the number of accredited service officers in New York City who are able to submit VA claims, inform the public about available, high-quality, free VA claim support, and help ensure that accredited service officers in the five boroughs file claims at a steady pace. We'd like to take this time to thank the Council for supporting the Veterans Resource Center Initiative, which uses a congressionally chartered veteran service organization to ensure that VA claim support is offered out of each Council Members' District office at a cadence of one day per month starting no later than FY26.

Culture. Our fifth priority is culture insofar as we hope to amplify, support, and when possible, seed events that bring together our veteran and military family community. There's several things here, as mentioned before, enduring community events, the memorial of the post-9/11 war veterans and their loved ones, and honoring New York City's Vietnam

veterans who are missing in action come to mind. One culture-supporting initiative that I'd like to focus on, for the Joseph P. Dwyer program, where the State confers money annually to promote activities that normalize help-seeking behavior among veteran and military families. DVS, along with all other counties in New York, is a Dwyer program recipient. We now receive more than 400,000 dollars per year in Dwyer funds. It took time to put this together, but we are the only recipient that is doing something as dynamic as what we do. While operating within all contracting and procurement protocol board guidelines, we effectively employ the Dwyer resources in a way that parallels the administration of a grant. The deadline for the first Dwyer program applications post-pilot stage was in December. An evaluation Committee representative of various demographics within our community was convened. We're in the process of administering Dwyer funding to winning organizations at this time. In total, 30 NYC Dwyer organizations will receive funding for 31 projects. One group applied for two different things. We're excited to watch this process unfold. The current NYC Dwyer awardees are recipients of funding in FY25 and FY26.

The opportunity to apply for NYC Dwyer funding will open every two years. The next window for Dwyer applications will be during Calendar Year '26 in advance of the funding to be remitted during Fiscal Years '27 and '28.

Now to the SWOT analysis. Strengths for DVS are we're able to connect veterans to a robust array of services and offerings. DVS has a strong grasp of the veterans in New York City, of who they are, down to the name, address, and contact information level. Our awareness in this space is growing. We leverage our brand and the imprimatur of government to inspire partners and be inspired by them to collaborate and deliberate needed synergies. We have access to housing choice vouchers that are specifically for veterans who are not eligible for VA healthcare, speaking of the HUD-VASH collaborative case management voucher.

Weaknesses. We're still a young and growing organization. For many things that we do internally and externally, we're establishing precedents by doing what has never been done before at DVS. It takes time, learned experience, and sweat equity to come up the learning curve. The evolution

of the agency has moved slower than planned due to the city's economic backdrop. I'm speaking of headwinds presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, followed by the migrant crisis. Five of the Department's eight years of existence, the most recent five, have been impacted by this challenge. The rollout of our new technology platform to undergird VetConnectNYC, DVS' digital referral portal, was delayed. The reason, additional time needed to be taken to configure our new portal to meet the requirements of Local Law 37. In essence, Local Law 37 requires City agencies to ask a veteran identifier question on client-facing forms. The quantitative aspect of those responses, how many veteran community members responded to agency X or department Y, are to then be reported, broken down by City Council District. No one, on the Speaker side or the Mayor's side, has technology that is able to take a group of addresses in bulk and tell you, for all those addresses, which City Council District each respondent lives in. Absent having someone on our team do this individually for each of the thousands of Local Law 37 respondents, we took the approach of adding this application to VetConnectNYC. It helps us

accurately and efficiently track this data point. This has led to a delay in the rollout of the new platform that undergirds VetConnectNYC. Nonetheless, the work still goes on. VetConnectNYC, as an effort, is fully functional. It always has been. The new technology component that bolsters it will be integrated this spring. Visit [nyc.gov/vetconnect](http://nyc.gov/vetconnect) to learn more.

To opportunities. The penetration that DVS has made regarding data represents an opportunity. I'm speaking to data tied to Local Law 37, data sharing agreements with the New York State Department of Veterans Services and Department of Defense, asking partner organizations to ask a veteran identifier question voluntarily, not through law, and using VA veteran identifier tools such as VA Squares. The increase in women veteran population in New York City, at a rate faster than the national projected rise in female veterans, is a favorable occurrence. The Dwyer program and resources that we are just now starting to inject within the veteran community offers a powerful lifeline of support. Also, we have the New York State Service Disabled Veteran Owned Business Program, and our agency's role

as a promoter and ambassador of it provides swift economic opportunities for large numbers of service-disabled veterans who may soon be unemployed given the current federal work backdrop.

Threats. New York City's veteran community is aging. We need to accommodate our older veterans accordingly. To reiterate, 70.7 percent of New York City's veterans are aged 55 or older. 17.5 percent are between the ages of 55 and 64; 21.5 percent are between the ages of 65 and 74; 31.8 percent are aged 75 or older. The veteran community, like all in New York City, face availability and price constraints when it comes to housing. It is incumbent on DVS to be as connected, knowledgeable, and helpful as possible when assisting and informing our community members on housing related issues. If the federal government continues the massive reduction in force that is currently planned, then we'll see more New York City veterans thrown into financial insecurity. This is economic and housing ramifications. Add to that, on one hand, we'll see an increase in the number of veterans who engage the VA for support, those who are unemployed. At the same time, the VA will be less effective at responding to

those veterans, recognizing that approximately 20 percent of its staff, more than 80,000 people, will have been terminated. It is important to note that 1 out of 10 working-age veterans is employed by the federal government. 30 percent of the federal workforce is comprised of U.S. military veterans. Separately, 20 percent of all U.S. employees works for a firm that is a federal contractor. Veterans who are direct federal employees and those affiliated with contractors will be affected.

We fear that the VA will use an upcoming review of its medical infrastructure assets to close the VA hospitals in Manhattan and Brooklyn, along with a community-based outpatient clinic on Staten Island. This process, which occurs once every four years and is known as the Asset Infrastructure Review Commission, will resume again in the spring of 2026. AIR Commission recommendations are made based on the number of veterans in a community who self-identify and use their local VA healthcare facilities. This is another reason why New York City veterans' self-identification is key.

Council budget recommendations. Items that we would encourage the Council to consider this



budget season follow. I'm speaking only about discretionary awards. These are gaps where we believe that non-profits can fill a void in the veteran ecosystem. Further, these are areas that have not been funded by the Council, to our knowledge, in the past. Non-profits that support, train, and assist mentors and veteran treatment courts. Food insecurity specific to veterans. Small business counseling and networking that is tailored towards veteran street vendors. Pre-homeownership counseling specific to veterans and organizations that support veteran and military families whose children attend public school.

DVS' budget focused. For DVS, specific to budget season, a focus for us is to strive to reduce our vacancy rate to less than 3 percent. This involves the new hires I mentioned that we will make in the coming weeks. A less than 3 percent vacancy rate translates into 38 out of 39 DVS positions filled. My dream is to get us 100 percent as we work internally on steps needed to fill that 39th spot.

Another thing that we are mindful of this budget season is increasing the number of discretionary awards that we process. Our goal is to

action all Council discretionary awards valued at 20,000 dollars or less, no later than FY28. We are focusing on the 20,000 dollars or less awards, the small dollar awards, because they speak directly to the needs of our community.

Thinking back to the creation of DVS, why veteran community members originally protested. Smaller non-profits that won these types of awards were the ones that experienced difficulty in dealing with larger, non-veteran specific agencies like the Department for Youth and Community Development, the Department for the Aging, the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, and the Department of Social Services. We've seen five discretionary awards during FY25 as a pilot to learn the nuances of this work. We're optimistic about increasing the number of awards gradually as each year goes by.

For perspective, the median number of small dollar Council discretionary awards conferred each year from FY2016 through FY2025 was 28. The median aggregate value of those awards in a given year was approximately 206,000 dollars. So 28 awards, 206,000 dollars per year on average.

In conclusion, we're doing everything that we can in what are ever-changing and complicated times to identify and deliver resources to our veterans and their loved ones. The mission of this agency begins with the words connect, mobilize, and empower New York City's veteran community. Our strategy can be summarized by the words connect, mobilize, and empower. Connect is to identify our veterans and know who they are. Mobilize is to have the veterans recognize us and know who we are and what we deliver. Empower is the act of serving them. As the smallest Department in New York City government, I always tell people that there are 39 people authorized for DVS. The next largest agency has an authorized strength of 136. The largest has an authorized strength of 48,876. We've spent ample time building our offerings, putting together our team, and getting the connect portion of our work right. As this solidifies, you will soon see a large portion of our efforts touch mobilization. Pay special attention when we begin sharing veteran contact information at the District level with you as City Council Members starting this spring. We will amplify messages, tailored borough-wide and city-wide, together.

Touches will increase, and people will come into the light. Once mobilization or veterans learning about us has been optimized, we will witness a strong turn in veteran services as we help all our brothers and sisters and their loved ones. We will empower them. This is the plan. There have been several ups and downs and back and forths in this fight, but we're here and all of us for the most part, including you, are ready. Things are not going to be perfect. However, we will achieve the vision of those veterans who protested outside of City Hall more than a decade ago. We will achieve the vision of the entire veteran community. Veterans and their loved ones wanted a department in New York City government that would be there for them and do right by them. We thank the Council for enabling us to be here and do these things.

Lastly, recognizing that DVS is eight, going on nine years old. So many people, myself included, wishes we could have snapped a finger to be where we are. The last new department prior to DVS was created more than two decades before us. This took trial and error. It took changes in leadership at all levels, internal and external, and it took

partners to help us identify where the services in gaps were. Thank you to all partners. Most importantly, it took patience and understanding. Thank you to the veteran community for being patient with us. We're building a foundation, offerings, and systems that will ideally stand the test of time. If you need us, then know that the New York City Department of Veterans Services can be reached at [nyc.gov/vets](http://nyc.gov/vets), 212-416-5250, [connect@veterans.nyc.gov](mailto:connect@veterans.nyc.gov), and using the social media handle at NYC\_Vets. Once again, it's [nyc.gov/vets](http://nyc.gov/vets), 212-416-5250, [connect@veterans.nyc.gov](mailto:connect@veterans.nyc.gov), and using the social media handle at NYC\_Vets. Please subscribe to our newsletter at [nyc.gov/vetnewsletter](http://nyc.gov/vetnewsletter) in order to learn more about our Women Veterans Empowerment Luncheon on Wednesday, April 2nd, the Edge for Vets Spring Career Workshop on Tuesday, April 15th, and the METS Military and Family Summit on Saturday, May 3rd. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Wow. Thank you, Commissioner. That's 11 pages in record time. I just want to, again, thank you for your complete testimony.

We've been joined by Council Member Nurse, Member of the Committee, and remotely Council Member Ariola.

So, I just want to go over a few things, and it's kind of like a vicious cycle, Commissioner, that, you know, we don't get enough funding and, you know, we don't make any progress on self-identification. Have we made any progress under your reign as the Commissioner to self-identify? Because it's hard to do when you just get the same budget year in and year out and we try to address it because I believe if we get, you know, 30,000 more veterans to self-identify, they would in turn get more resources from the federal government and then would spend that money in New York City so the economy would benefit. So would our veterans. So it would seem that the City, you know, could invest in DVS just to, you know, contact more veterans to get them to self-identify, but you can't even contact them. It's almost impossible with that budget that you have. So, a little investment, and we've been talking about this for a while on this Committee, it would seem the Mayor would actually want to do this and give us a few more million for DVS to be able to

contact veterans to get them to self-identify. I mean, have you made any progress in that area?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: You know, I appreciate just the concern of just putting it on the table, Mr. Chair. You know, as you always say, we can always do more with more, to call that out. For me, it's been the focus on let's get our house in order so we can fill the vacancies we currently have. So, we're really excited about getting to 38 out of 39, hopefully getting to 39 out of 39 soon. And it's, different things I'll say to this. One is, looking at our numbers, you've seen more penetration. You know, look at the veterans and their families served by DVS, went from just over 1,000 in FY22, just over 3,000 in FY23, just over 10,000 in FY24, so we're starting to get out there more. Strategically, a lot of our work has been focusing like a laser on knowing who more of our people are. So, step one, let's know who these people are. So, we're so happy to go from less than 5,000 veterans that we know to roughly 190,000 and so, for us, it's knowing who more of these folks are. The other step is going to be sharing information with you as far as all the Council Members. If all of us are reaching out

between you, us, and our other elected officials, the number of touches will necessitate more people coming to the light. Because just because you know who someone are, just like everyone here, you know who the people are in your District in theory. That's not the same thing as getting as many of them to animate. Those are two different stories. And so for us, step one has been let's figure out who the people are of the 8.3 million New Yorkers. Let's find what we believe to be 200,000-plus who are in this city. And then let's work together, all of us, to continue to ping these folks in the hopes that more of them come into the light. Like we can't force self-identification. That's the issue.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, you know in the Preliminary Plan, DVS' Fiscal 2025 budget totals 7 million, including other-than-personal services funding of 2.9 and 4.1 million for personal services, funding to support 39 budgeted full-time, like you had mentioned, positions. The Fiscal 2025 budget includes 575,000 for City Council discretionary initiatives that are not yet budgeted for Fiscal Year 2026 or beyond. DVS' Preliminary Plan did not include any new needs. Did DVS request any new needs from OMB



in advance of the Preliminary Plan? And if so, what were they? If not, why not?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: So, Mr. Chair, we've got internal discussions with OMB on that. That's what I can say is that we have internal discussions with them. We all see what's going on right here out now as far as that we always can do more with more and what the current climate is internal to the city and what's happening on the federal side, so the most I can say on this is that we're in internal conversations with our friends at OMB at this time.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Are they friends? Because I don't think they're friends because again, if we're not getting any progress, if we're not even asking, you're not even telling us what new needs you would be able to address. Certainly, we're way below the national average on disability claims for our veterans. What is it, 11, 12 percent below that?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: This one was 20.1 percent in New York City, but it's 31.2 percent nationally. That was that number.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So yeah, so we're lagging behind. And that alone, if we address that, if we've got a few more million to communicate with

our 190,000 veterans that you say it's probably closer to 230,000, right?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I believe, yeah, I believe number to be, I believe the number is greater than 230,000.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, we're not even locating the 40,000 that won't self-identify, and we're lagging behind in all the categories in New York City of our veterans receiving services, self-identifying, disability. A little investment would go a long way. And if we can't, I know, you know, you're stuck between a rock and a hard place. I know OMB is holding all the cards and they can just say, you get the same thing and you're lucky you're getting the same amount of money. But really, it shouldn't be up to the Council. It should be the Mayor that steps in and says, you know what, we have to do a little bit more investment, but I'd like to hear what new needs that you, let's just play, you know, sort of, I don't want to put you on the spot because I think you do good work and you're doing a lot with very little, but we're not going to make any progress in reaching our veterans that need services if we don't increase the budget, at least to communicate with them. If we

can't get that, then shame on us. And I'd just like to say, what would you do with a few more million to, at least that was budgeted for mailings, let's say. Let's just do something very basic.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Well, first of all, I want to, I guess the, and I'll answer it, but I just want to say this.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So you can't tell us what you're doing (CROSS-TALK)

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Like I said, it's, you know, the most I can say is that certain conversations are internal on the OMB side. I'll say that. The other piece is, you know, we can always do more with more. And then the other one, as far as, you know, for us when it comes to priorities, when we look at areas where we, you know, could envision growing, employment is one to call that out. Because if we look at the current backdrop where we see more veterans who may need help with employment and entrepreneurship support if they wind up not having jobs. Another area for us is VA claims as far as having more veterans who are able to apply for VA claims to kind of, there's so many people who have damage that's been done to their brains and bodies

who can receive the service-connected disability compensation as an example so connecting that. Another one is the housing front to continue to be right with our people in housing, which is a core issue that affects all New Yorkers. And then the other piece is burials. Given that we do have an aging population that we are stronger as far as being there for families in those times when they have a loved one who is a veteran who passes away. So those are areas where, you know, if the genie came today and said, hey, you know, Christmas came early, it would be employment, it'd be claims, it'd be housing, it'd be burials, Mr. Chair. But to be clear for us, any discussions about these things are all internal at this time, but thank you so much for the concern. We understand, and it means a lot.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So you did ask... you can't tell us what the new needs other than what you had mentioned, but OMB is not listening. Because I don't expect, I'm hopeful that we'll get more money, but I don't expect it because we never got it. We haven't received it yet, and I don't know how long. This is it for me, by the way, so I would hope that finally we can get money.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I've got to say, to me, I think the glass is half full in that we are really excited about getting to a place where we will be a less than 3 percent vacancy rate and getting to ideally 0 percent vacancy rate. That's a big deal. I've got to credit our people at OMB for that happening. You don't hear that from agencies often saying, I have a less than 3 percent vacancy rate and soon I will be at a 0 percent vacancy rate. So, as far as within the context what we have, we appreciate that. Also I want to acknowledge that, you know, we did not have any Program to Eliminate the Gap measures taken with us this past Fiscal Year, so that's something else I want to acknowledge our folks at OMB as far as things that the glass is half full here, and we appreciate what we've got so we can go out and grind.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, but isn't that sad though, that we're lagging behind. There's a need. When in any other population, if there's a need for additional resources, the City has been pretty good in coming forth, but who's more important than our veterans? Who's more deserving, let's put it that way, than our veterans? So that's why we're going to

directly appeal to the Mayor, and we're going to, you know, this Committee will, and we have been, but we're going to continue to put the pressure on.

But I just want to recognize my Colleague, Council Member Paladino.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: May I just say something really quick if it's okay? Something you said just got me thinking. I want to put this out there. If you look at this in the longer arc, not just today, but looking at this as an agency that's eight years old, about to be nine years old, we've been working to build the framework of this thing, so that as time goes by, and you get flesh, and you get more meat on it, that it will be ready, and so a lot of our work these past few years has been getting us in a place so that structurally, whenever certain needs do come, we're ready to take them on. Like I'm so excited that, you know, we are ready for certain things that involve employment, that involve housing, that involve claims, that involve burials, because we built out the systems and the architecture to be able to do these things, and so I just want to put that out there too.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I recognize my  
Colleague, Council Member Paladino.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Hello. How's  
everybody? Good.

Here we are again, and we're begging for  
money again. As my Colleague and Chairman has said,  
you know, it's a vicious cycle. Here we go, around  
and around and around. Now with all the housing  
that's being built, the affordable housing that's  
coming up, and we've talked about, you know, the  
veterans housing crisis and all of it. I want to  
know, has anybody approached you concerning the  
affordable housing and the different complexes that  
are going to be going up throughout the city to make  
way for our vets so they have a nice place to live?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you for the  
question, Madam Council Member, and I'll say a little  
bit and ask Lamar too. It's a two-way street where we  
go on offense and defense with this, as far as making  
it clear as best we can, working with our partners  
over at NYCHA, over at HPD, and even the VA, that we  
can get the word out that folks know look, if you are  
looking at developing something, you're looking at  
building units for veterans, please reach out and we

can help talk with you about project basing the VASH vouchers, the VASH continuum vouchers. That's us going on offense. Us on defense is being fortunate to have folks who do come and who are inbounds with these requests, so we can tell them exactly where to go to look at these things, and we always tell folks too, we had our HPD made an alias for this, [nyc.gov/hpdprojectbasedrfp](http://nyc.gov/hpdprojectbasedrfp). Two to four times per year, Housing Preservation and Development makes an RFP available for those looking to obtain vouchers for support. We tell folks go to [nyc.gov/hpdprojectbasedrfp](http://nyc.gov/hpdprojectbasedrfp), fill that out, and indicate in your application that you would like to build units as far as veterans housing. So, this is something where we've been very aggressive in trying to get the word out and receiving folks when they come. We assist and inform all stakeholders, including stakeholders in that community on these things.

I want to, Lamar, if anything you want to throw in on that.

SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WHEELER: Good afternoon. I just want to echo what the Commissioner just said. We are in close coordination with our



partners, NYCHA, HPD, and the VA on their projects as they have been moving forward, and we broadcast that information, we provide that information to all individuals with their inquiries currently. This is the third rung on the housing ladder for us, affordable housing. It is a concern and it's something that we're actively focusing on.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: We've made presentations to REBNY, we've made presentations to the Real Estate Board of New York, to the Supportive Housing Network of New York, to the New York State Affordable, NYSAFA, New York State Association for Affordable Housing, so we've done what we can to be on offense on this so folks know.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Because I do too. Whenever I hear about anything that's going up, I always add to it, well what about our vets, are you making room for a certain amount of housing for veterans. Now, of course, again, we come back to the same thing, which there's no self-identifying. So, the population here is growing, but it's not growing at a pace that it could actually be growing, because the more you grow and the more self-identifying, naturally, the funds follow, I would hope. So, you

know, we come back to the same thing about getting the word out, how do we do it. Bob brought up a very modest amount of, like, another two million dollars. What the hell is two million dollars, when you think about it? We're going to pass a budget that's 116 billion dollars. So, I don't understand why we cannot see ourselves clear enough to allow the vets to do your organization, like you said, that's still in its infant stages, quite frankly, to be able to get the word out and do what you need to do. The more people know, we've said this again and again with every Committee hearing, the more people know, the more they want to engage because they don't know what's available to them unless they engage. So, again, we circle back to the same thing, getting the word out.

I just want to touch, if I may, on some of the vendor permit fees and all of that. What's going on with some of our vendors? Can you bring me up to speed a little bit on that?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you for that question. With the vendors, it goes back to assist and informed. So, for us, it's making sure the vendors know if they have needs from certain agencies where to go, and that's why we put that on

nyc.gov/vetvendor, so we're not in the woods in certain ways, but if a vendor says, hey, you know, I have a need, who do I go to at the Department of Sanitation, who do I go to at Parks, who do I go to at the Department of Health or at the Department of Consumer Workforce Protection? So for us, our main role there is to tie them in to those things, and we try to bring more of our vendors in with the Veteran Business Leadership Association. It's one of the things I was recommending, if an opportunity comes for us to, we think that there's a there's an opportunity there in having, I guess, business counseling specific to veteran street vendors. That's something we think is an opportunity we'd like to explore between us or between council as far as something. But for us, a lot of it is assist and inform, Council Member, and we put that information on nyc.gov/vetvendors.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Very good.

(TIMER CHIME) What the heck was that?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That was the five-minute clock.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: That was  
(INAUDIBLE) that you had enough. Okay. One other

thing, I actually lost my train. I'm sorry. I'll come back as soon as I think of it.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to say something you mentioned about self-identification.  
(CROSS-TALK)

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: (INAUDIBLE) With every, let's say, civil service test that's being given out for our sanitation workers, for our firemen, for our police, all of this, would it be, is it against the rules to actually, I know there used to be that little box that they would check, are you a veteran, and due to the stigma that some feel is attached to identifying as a veteran, they don't check the box. But is that box still there? Because I'm thinking about how we could recruit the young veterans that are done with their service, active service, some are in reserve, and yet they go out for City work. Maybe we could figure out a way to hit this younger generation and figure out, you know, as they apply for work, what's available to them as a vet. Is there any way we could kind of tie in the two, whereas we could make it work that way?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: So right now, and Cass, jumping off, it's folks applying to use their

veteran credit or the disabled veteran credit when they apply. That's where, you know, places we can be able to, doorways where when you're applying, where we could learn who you are when it comes to civil service exams. Also, we know that there's the one-time fee waiver for military spouses. So, those are different gates for that. The other piece of it is, now that we have a handle on who is coming, the people who are inbound, they fill out a DD-2648 form where they're telling the military, I'm going to end my service at this point. I'm going to transition to New York. Having that contact is key because we can lean in to reach out to that airman before they leave the service, or that sailor, that Marine, that soldier, etc., and make them aware of all these things. And so we've got on our team, you know, under Cass, one of our folks who focuses on employment and entrepreneurship, who does engage so that the veterans do know about those opportunities.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: I'm just trying to figure out a way to get more people to come forward because there are so many out there.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: The good thing about what we're doing is we know who they are inbound now,

which is an upside. And when it comes to the self..., what I want to mention demographically, the trick is a lot of veterans are coming here. When 5,000 out of 200,000 are transitioning here each year, that's a lot of people...

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: That's a lot.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: But are they staying? And so that's the thing. So, for us, it's like live, learn, work in New York. How do we make it so that you see a pathway? A lot of them come here to learn, and they can get a job. It's living here. So that, just to give the whole thing.

COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Yeah. It's a vicious cycle of they can't afford to live here. You know, they'll go down in North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, all out west, Tennessee, wherever they can live for less and have a very good quality of life. It's the same thing that's going on with regular civilians. We're trying to keep regular folks here too, you know, people like you and me who are finding it harder and harder to stay in New York City. So, all right, I thank you for your time. Thank you very much.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Council Member Paladino.

I just want to talk about... oh, Council Member Marmorato has... okay, I'm sorry, I just noticed.

COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Thank you. Can I talk? Oh, thank you. Thank you so much for coming today.

So, I kind of wanted to build off of the veteran street vendors. Do we know how many there are currently in New York City?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Got to get the number back to you. I'm so sorry. We have that. We did get information from the Department of Consumer Workforce Protection with our live number because we held an event back in November 2023 for the group, and so we got to get back to you about that. I will say that it's more than 200, but I will get back to what we're tracking. Thank you so much for that. Yep.

COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: And do you know about how much the fee is to have a street license?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I don't know offhand. We can get back to you on that, and I got to say, I think I saw him here before, Robert Belcabere,

who's one of our leaders in the street vendor community, I believe is behind me right now, who may be testifying. I don't want to speak out of turn, but I'm hoping... we'll work to get you these data points as far as the number that we're tracking and price point for some of the licenses.

COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Okay. And has there been any discussion about potentially waiving the permit fees for veterans who are wishing to obtain these street licenses?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Not that I know of. It's not that the discussion hasn't occurred. I'm not aware of it, Madam Council Member. We got to do the homework and get back to you with these answers.

COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: If not, would you consider exploring this?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yes.

COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Okay, great. I did want to also say that at the last DVS event in my office was a complete success. We had about 10 people, family members as well, veterans and family members. I was happy because I think the first two we did was maybe less than five, but I felt like it really picked up this time. And once we start coming



once a month, I'm going to start going to all of the legions and areas in the community where we're going to make the flyers and we're going to put it out and we're going to try to do the outreach to our community specifically to hopefully have another successful event like that so I thank you for the services and I appreciate it and District 13 obviously always appreciates it.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: We appreciate you. It's crawl, walk, run for us in that once we get you all the folks in 13 who are veterans, we believe that the numbers that come to those pop-up VRCs will increase for everyone here, all in Council. And so the hope is that this spring, within the coming weeks, you'll get your first drop from us of all the veterans that we're tracking in your Districts. On average, the City Council has about 171,000 members on average of people who live in their District. We believe somewhere around 4,000 or so are veterans on average. And so as we get you this and you have it down to the email address, the phone number, the physical address, that it can help amplify things. So even as this veteran resource center initiative really comes into play, that you'll have folks

coming. You'll do events and people will be there.  
And so this is the next step for us as we go from  
just connect to the mobilize piece.

COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: It was not just  
veterans, it was their spouses and family members,  
and it was just really... like I felt good seeing it so  
I appreciate that. Thank you, guys, so much for your  
time. Thank you, Chair.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yes. And just the  
veteran resources centers in each Council District  
will make an impact, I think, in self-identifying and  
also getting the services. So that, you know, that's  
what we have to look forward to. It's just, you know,  
I'm a little impatient on that because that's going  
to take a while. That will take several years before  
I think we see the actual numbers move.

But let's talk about the federal issue  
now, which, you know, while the federal funding does  
not directly fund the budget for DVS, federal  
programs do provide significant services and support  
programs to our veterans residing in the city. The  
new federal administration has already made  
significant cuts to health programs, social services,  
and veteran specific programs, which negatively

impacts veterans residing in the city, who are already underserved, and we know this, you know, and I don't know if you have information, but, you know, with the DVS limited resources and, you know, we'll likely not be able to fill the gaps left by federal cuts unless OMB comes around, but what impact do you see in the federal changes had so far in city veterans?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'm going to answer this a couple different ways, I don't know if Lamar or Cass want to add to it. It's terrifying what's going on to call that out, just seeing everything in real time where you've got two sides of this, where our community members may be terminated from their employment on one side, on the other side they go to the VA for care and, you know, they may not have as much available on that to be able to help them. At the same time, for DVS, for many of our major efforts, it's that we were a part of a larger partnership of other entities and we're one piece in this, and so like we didn't get from 46 to 77 to 624 homeless veterans, just us. This was us working with a continuum of care that has roughly 50 members. And so for us, in the instance of housing, if the VA has

issues where it's lacking, then it's us leaning more on other members of that continuum of care to try to still deliver. With claims, we have a claims team, but we're happy that there's this Veteran Resource Center initiative funded by the Council, where you're seeing not just us, but more folks from the Veterans of Foreign Wars side who will be available to help with claims. We also see that Northwell is accepting VetConnectNYC referrals to also help veterans with their claims, and so you're not just seeing us with this, but a team approach. Same thing with employment, as far as it's not just DVS, it's working with the America Job Centers, working with our friends at Small Business Services Department, working with other entities to kind of get at this. And so at a meta level, as these things are stepping back on the VA side, the team is stepping up more. And even there's some things here when you look at it, you know, if it's a team approach, you know, we may score some more of the goals every now and then, but it's still a team so there may be some metrics where you see a certain spike on what DVS is doing, but we're a part of this larger dynamic where the other partners, even from the VA, say, look, let's

get this to you guys here, you're the best fit, etc., for things so I just want to kind of flag that as far as a way to approach what's going on.

I want to add, Lamar, Cass, anything you want to add to that?

SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WHEELER: No. I just wanted to say that as part of the New York City continuum of care trying to end veteran homelessness, I'm part of the Veteran Task Force to address those issues. We are doubling down on our collective use of resources, collectively. City resources, VA resources, resources that are in the community. We're just doubling down. We meet monthly, and in every meeting there's a large agenda. You know, how are we going to, or someone may have an issue, give you an example. Non-profit may be the primary provider for, let's say, temporary financial assistance. We talk. I'm running low. HRA, can you help me? You know, can you step in the gap until my next quarter funds kick in? We're talking, so we know what, you know, where everybody's at, and we're just communicating and trying to close ranks and fill in the gaps where we can.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But what are you  
3 seeing from the feds, the VA, at least now? Are you  
4 seeing a drop-off? Are you seeing people that just  
5 have been terminated in the VA that are not getting  
6 back to you, and is anybody filling there?

7 SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WHEELER: We're  
8 seeing a slight decline.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You are seeing a  
10 longer wait for answers?

11 SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WHEELER: Not  
12 necessarily for answers, but for appointments for our  
13 clients. We're seeing, me being housing, HUD-VASH is  
14 very critical for those eligible veterans that  
15 qualify for HUD-VASH. The last time I checked, I  
16 believe, was Monday. They still have 50, I believe,  
17 approximately 50 people that are still waiting on a  
18 HUD-VASH worker to be assigned, and they can't hire  
19 anybody.

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: It's important to  
21 note the difference between us and traditionally, we  
22 usually focus on the veterans who are not eligible  
23 for VA healthcare because we provide the follow-on  
24 social services, critical time interventions, etc.,  
25 whereas the VA focuses on those who are eligible for

VA healthcare. So, if you are HUD-VASH, you would have a VA social worker who would work with you. If you are not eligible for VA healthcare, you'd have VASH, collaborative case management, we would work with you. What Lamar is saying is we're seeing more cases where there's no VA social worker, there's this backlog, and so we're filling in that gap. That's a knock directly to what he's seeing in housing. I just want to make sure we explain that.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, are you hearing from the VA workers that a lot of people are being cut, and I have a bigger caseload? I mean, that's obvious, I would think if you have less employees, fewer employees, less workers, that there's going to be longer waits on all of the above.

SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WHEELER: What I am hearing, Chair, is that there's a lot of uncertainty about everything.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

SENIOR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR WHEELER: Just uncertainty. They're not saying that, I haven't heard anyone lose their jobs yet, but there's a lot of uncertainty about how services will be applied going forward.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. So, Commissioner, if you could let this Committee know that we could somehow advocate on your behalf that if you see a drop-off in any particular area that we need to notify Washington and VA, that you let you actually inform my office and the Committee's offices, and we can at least say things maybe that you couldn't say to them, but we could also know where we could help your cause and certainly help the veterans cause. I'd appreciate that.

Now let's go back to the positions that you're trying to fill. What are some of the bigger challenges, like for, obviously training personnel within DVS, it would take some time. So, if you're going to hire new hires, if you did have the money for new hires, it would take some time to train the personnel. But if you had more positions, so if we're going to ask OMB for more positions, such as having more staff, provide better administrative and logistical support for our veterans, let's say even for the Advisory Board, what are some of the biggest challenges you have as Commissioner of DVS to keep the staff up to date? Not only what's going on with the VA in Washington, but also on a local front here.



COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think one part of what you said I want to speak to, it takes time to bring in folks who have certain expertise in this agency. You know, on Lamar's side of the house, as far as with housing, it takes years to have someone come in and who's skilled and able to handle all these different housing challenges veterans present and understand not just the traditional programs, but all the veteran affiliated programs, even offerings that non-profits provide, etc., so it takes time to have someone who is a Jedi, so to speak, on the housing side. Same thing for claims. Where there's not just the training to get accredited and learn how to process the claims. You've got, you know, Mike Bucchini (phonetic) runs our claims team. If he was here, he would say it takes about a year or so for that person to get decent at it. It takes three to four years for them to get very good. It's almost equivalent to a doctor providing an operation. Do you want the doctor who just started figuring this stuff out, or do you want a doctor who's got more reps and at-bats before you go into surgery? And so I think a key piece is just these are such bespoke roles that we have in things that we offer between the core

services of burials, of housing, and of claims so I'd say that's a piece.

Another dynamic here is maintaining your awareness of all the goings-on, of all the things that keep changing in what you do. You know, there are veterans who go to lawyers to have their claims work submitted, to give you an idea of just how nuanced and how tricky it can be and how bureaucratic it is, and so to stay aware of different changes and protocols and policies. We know the VA right now, when you submit a claim, they use an IBM tool that is AI now to go through that claim, to provide an initial assessment, etc. Okay, well, let's learn more about that AI so we can speak to it, because if the VA has fewer raters due to reduction of force, folks are going to rely more on the AI, and we need to be able to account for that. That's a professional development piece, as an example, and the continuum of care on the housing side also is constantly doing professional development to make sure folks are aware of, once again, city, state, federal, public, private, non-profit options, so that when you come to someone from DVS, we can speak to you about all that is available to you when trying to help.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. You know, I have most of my staff, when I hired them over seven years ago, it takes a long time to maneuver all the City agencies and to try to find out the contacts and then how to solve a particular problem with constituent services so I understand it and how valuable having staff that's been around over seven years. When I lose one, it is a tremendous haul, because, obviously, you have a small agency, I have a small office, you know, we have eight or nine constituent service people, but they're so valuable that they have experience, and losing one is devastating, because you lose the expertise, you lose how to maneuver in and out of City agencies, the bureaucrats that certainly, that they come in contact with, it's very difficult, so I understand that.

But let's talk about the Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program. In the Preliminary Plan, there was an adjustment for the Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program, which transferred 676,390 dollars from the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene in Fiscal Year 2025. With this additional funding, DVS' Fiscal 2025 budget for this program is 1.1 million, dropping the baselined amount

of 416,000, starting in Fiscal 2026. How is this amount calculated, and how will this additional funding be utilized?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you so much for that question, Mr. Chair. I want to level set, and then get in the weeds of what's going on with the Dwyer piece.

Let's talk about how it's calculated, and I'll go back to the other dynamics. The City has received funding tied to the Joseph P. Dwyer program since FY23 for the New York City, as far as how we recognize the City. The State, it ties back to FY21, I'll get into that a little bit. So, since the, you know, April 20, 2020, and FY21, that's when Dwyer money, that spigot first turned on, come to the City of New York. Money did not come to us at all during FY22 of the State. It all went to the Headstrong Project. It was a member-directed situation where one of the members of the Senate made some tweak at the State level, and all that money went directly to the Headstrong Project during the State's FY22. So, when we talk about this money, I'll speak State and I'll stay in City for the rest of this time. It's State FY21, State FY23, State FY24, State FY25, State FY26.

And so when I speak about this, I'm going to be speaking how that carries over to us as a City, FY23 to FY26, and so I just wanted to level set on that.

Now the other pieces with Dwyer, things that must be said, we've taken a novel approach with how we execute Dwyer. This is the only municipality in the state that does Dwyer the way we do it, where it's run almost like a grant, if you will, and it took time to do that within the constructs of government. Putting together a concept paper, a quest for expressions of interest, running a pilot program, and we're currently in operation as far as going from crawl to walk to run. Another thing with Dwyer, the money takes a circuitous path. It travels from the State's Department of Health, or Office of Mental Health, to the City's Department of Health, to us, and so because it's taking that long path, for years we would get the money and not have much time to spend it so we'd get it and be like, oh this is old State money, you only have so much time to spend it. It created certain backlogs. That will not happen moving forward. Starting in July, Office of Management and Budget will recognize Dwyer money right away for us. So instead of us being in a

situation where we have this lag and are caught up with, hey, the money just arrived, you have just a few months to spend it, sometimes less time than that, we will be able to, as soon as Fiscal Year begins, count all this money. The next thing to say about Dwyer, there's a 70/30 split in how this money is conferred. No more than 30 percent of Dwyer funds go to the overhead aspects of it. Anything that involves say communications, the data component, any sort of reporting and monitoring, etc. Any staff that we have that supports Dwyer, no more than 30 percent. The remaining 70 percent or more is going to go out to the community so it's intended for the community. And the other piece, we do this, when I speak to this, I'm speaking to five years of funding as far as all those years that we've got. So '23, '24, '25, '26, all these years of funding and looking at it holistically. We got caught up in a situation where we needed to push out money on the overhead side first because we had these short turnarounds, and so you saw more money at first going to the overhead side. You're seeing as we distribute, in real time we're sending out money to recipients, you're seeing

it get to where we're reaching that 70 percent balance as far as what's going out into 2026.

And so with all that as a backdrop, the total amount of Dwyer money that's been remitted to the City of New York from the State in the life of the program, it's 1.8 million dollars or 1,822,000 dollars remitted, and that's the life of the program from what we've been spending from FY23 all the way through FY26, 1,822,000 dollars. The amount that has been spent thus far, \$345,879.94. Say again, \$345,879.94 spent thus far. The amount remains to be spent, we've got to keep getting out, \$1,476,120.06. \$1,476,120.06 remains to go out. When you look at how much has gone to the overhead piece, it's going to just keeping everything, you know, the administrative side, so far it's \$399,720.06 that's going out on the overhead piece. Excuse me, let me rephrase, how much has gone out so far, it's \$145,879.94 on overhead has gone out thus far, \$145,879.94. When it comes to what's going to the community, 200,000.00 has gone to the community thus far, and so it's about 42 percent, it's 42/58 is the cut right now, but in real time we're funding projects.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But you really have to have a team to manage this too.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yeah, and that's another thing, when we talk about the overhead piece, when we talk about overhead as far as what it supports, also the personnel too, as far as there's a data, there's personnel, there's the comms of it, but for now the key pieces are that we're in a place where it's 42 percent has gone out, but we have so much more money that's going to be pushed, so you'll see us land the plane at 70/30, and so, you know, we look at how much the total amount is 1.8 million. What's not yet been spent, what needs to be spent is about 1.5 million, it still needs to be spent, and then we're getting to a place where by the end of FY26 you'll see us at 70/30 with this, where in real time, like literally today, we're pushing out more money.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But why are we doing just one Fiscal Year worth of funding?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Good question. So, right now, it started out, the first year was 150, the next year funding, remember we skipped a year in the State's (INAUDIBLE), the next year was 400, it



went up to 416, then it's currently going to be at 428 as far as the FY25 amount, and then after that, because the State does a cost-of-living adjustment, we know that it'll be at least 428 with what comes from FY26.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: How many veterans have been served by this program so far in Fiscal 2025?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: So far as far as pilot projects, and we're just now sending money out that's going to be used by the recipients in '25 and '26, and so when I speak to what's been served, I got to speak to what came before that through the pilot aspect of Dwyer. So the pilot aspect of Dwyer, and that's FY23 and 24, you have four different projects, and it's four projects valued at, and I want to correct that, I'm sorry, it's five projects, you look at four during FY23 and then one during FY24, and so you've got, you know, five projects where it's more than 87 that have been served through those five projects. It's 87, but it's all unique persons served as 87. So, if you're doing chair yoga and the yoga is meeting, say, regularly, you only count it one time. If you're doing equine therapy and that program's

meeting regularly, you only count it one time, and so it's 87 served by those five projects, you know, as far as the pilot period for FY23 and '24. Forgive me, there's one of the projects where I do not have the number on me right now, so you got to forgive me for that. That's why I say it's 87, but we'll get you the number when you add that fifth project.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, we have a basic number for '25, but what about '26? How many veterans do you expect in Fiscal 2026?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'll say it like this, you've got 31 different projects that money's going out in real time for '25-'26, so 30 different recipients for 31 different projects for those years. I don't want to put an estimate. I got to get back and talk with Ellen Greene, who's running this whole thing, you know, our Assistant Commissioner for Strategic Engagement, but we are seeing with the pilot, it was a cohort-based model, and it was something that focused on peer-to-peer engagement in socialization settings, and so when you look at what was happening before, where you had these unique folks, but who were meeting regularly, you know, we pray to see more of that and with a larger imprint.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: How do you get the word out on this? What type of advertising do you do?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: We were mentioned at different veteran public engagements as far as if there was, you know, a parade or a different commemoration or an event we spoke at, we would say. We also kept it in our newsletter. We also mentioned it, you know, and in this hearing, oftentimes I mentioned Dwyer because the deadline was December 2nd, and so we're happy. Our goal was to have at least 30, and we wound up having 31 efforts funded, ultimately through Dwyer, and so for us it was traditional things that were available to us. We think that now that the community sees this and knows every other year DVS will have this funding opportunity available, we think we'll see more traction with it, and we hope to have more people apply.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, the advertising and outreach for the program, do you think it's been effective, or could you do better if we had more funding?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think it's what you said, as far as it takes time to build new things

and to get the word out for things and recognize that we already have overhead that we account for through Dwyer. We've got resources through Dwyer to help get it out. It's just it's a new thing you've got to educate the public. You have some folks who may be wary at first about doing this, but now that they see it, and especially once people see these projects, the 31 activities in action, I think we'll see more folks when the time to apply next year for the FY27-28 funding comes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right. So, tell me how involved will DVS be in the implementation of the program? You know, if for-profits or non-profits are taking the lead, what role does DVS expect to take?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Well, we got to manage this from a contracting standpoint in that it's still something that flows through us through either micro-purchases or master contracts so there's the contracting component, and then there's also the reporting aspect of it. Once we get into the next iteration of Dwyer, you'll see a more dynamic approach where everyone will be in the master contract, and it'll be us saying, okay, well this is

what you want to do, let's have a back-and-forth, we can determine what to, you know, to send resources to, and what to not send resources to, so we'll be able to, in a very balanced way, through a master agreement and task orders, fund things in real time. It's almost like a general on the battlefield directing resources based on what we see, but you need data to do that, you need reporting to do that, and we hope to spread the word about these activities to all in the community.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I have a couple more questions, and then I think we could listen to, obviously, the public, but I want to talk about something near and dear to me, RTM therapy, which I had brought up at several hearings. Various studies have demonstrated that reconsolidation of traumatic memories, we call RTM, and meditation are effective approaches in addressing post-traumatic stress and other mental health concerns among veterans. In the Council's Fiscal 2025 budget response, we called on the Administration to fund 50,000 dollars for an RTM pilot program, which is a very small amount, to provide this trauma treatment to City veterans impacted by PTSD, but no additional funding was

included in the final budget. This year, I put forward Intro. 1171 to conduct a one-year feasibility study on implementing a pilot program for RTM. Which path does DVS think is the best for RTM at this point, allocating funding directly in the budget or supporting passage of this Intro.?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Let me think on it, because I feel like for the question, I'm going to repeat the question, it's the ideal, the goal is for RTM to be funded and for it to be more embraced overall is the goal, and the question is, is it having 1171 pass with the feasibility study, or is it, you know, having this be something that's just accounted for in the budget right away? I think it's a good question as far as what, which path, because either of them will get you where you got to go with this thing. I think what's tough about the feasibility study, and we mentioned this in our last hearings, Mr. Chair, what's tough about the feasibility study is that we've got to be careful as to not seem to be performing a third-party review of a medical modality, and that's something that is avoided in general by our Department of Health and by all in City government is to avoid doing that, that's

something that's typically done by academic institutions and others external to government... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: (INAUDIBLE) I get it.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: If it's an operational analysis, that is something that we are able to do, so if it's about the operational side of it and not the academic side of it, then that is something that we are able to do, and so that is something that's available as far as a feasibility study. I really think it's a question of strategically, is it more important to have some sort of operational assessment of what this could look like and how it could be, you know, relayed, which is what 1171 is seeking to do, or do we just put the money on the table right away and just have them begin as far as whatever non-profit, be it Operation Warrior Shield or the Recovery Recognition Project, just give them money, say, look, start doing something. I feel like that's a strategic choice. You know, for me right now, if you ask, I think that 1171 makes more sense to get an idea of the operational side, so we know how deep the rabbit hole goes here. I think if you're looking at one or the other

investment, so you've got more wind behind you to be able to say, look, this is the assessment of it, here's how all this lays out, and so now let's talk about a larger thing. That's just me from you asking the question right now, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. I know. For me, I don't care how we achieve it, just as long as we have the program, and so I would say 50,000 dollars, I mean, that's such a small amount that the Administration should actually really make this a program, because what we can learn from it is that, I mean, I spoke to many, many veterans, I also spoke to the doctor that came up with the treatment, and maybe it's the point of, I'm very optimistic, you know, on this, because a lot of things haven't worked for our veterans in the past, and they're not getting the treatment. I mean, just the other day, a couple of days ago, I've spoken to a disabled veteran in the Iraqi war, and he was talking to me about the anniversary when he was deployed and how he was affected by it, and he never got any treatment from the VA, and I did talk to him about RTM, and he never heard of it, but I said, I think it's worth a try. We're at a point where so many Vietnam veterans are



certainly affected by PTSD, and they haven't received treatment at all in decades so I'm looking, you know, for such a small amount, just to show people that it works. I think it works, and speaking to the people that have gone through the program, and there are hundreds of doctors and counselors that are trained in RTM in this metropolitan area so everything's in place, we just have to have a small amount of money, but I appreciate your response on it.

Let's talk about the real property tax exemption for Cold War veterans, which we had spoken on this Committee several times. In May of 2022, Introduction 377 of 2022, sponsored by then-Council Member Borelli, was introduced to grant a real property tax exemption to Cold War veterans who served on active duty in the United States Armed Forces between September 2nd, 1945, and December 26, 1991, and were honorably discharged. This exemption would apply to the veterans' primary residence, and the exemption would be for 15 percent of the assessed value on residential property, capped at 39,000, and would remain in effect for 10 years. Additionally, Cold War veterans who are disabled due to their service would be eligible for an additional exemption

of up to 130,000. This legislation was reintroduced in the current session as Introduction 740, with Council Member Carr as the sponsor. What is DVS' position on extending property tax exemptions to Cold War veterans, and does the Administration agree with that position?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to pass to Cass to speak to this, but in so many words, we're supportive of it. I have a question, Mr. Chairman, and I'll throw to Cass for this. Has Intro. 740 officially been heard?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Okay. Thank you.

CHIEF-OF-STAFF ALVAREZ: I'll just add on to what the Commissioner had said, that we're generally supportive. We're just running the traps internally to see how DVS can best advocate.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We brought it up at several hearings, though, and it won't amount to a lot of money. We estimated, again, a very small amount for the State, but, you know, other municipalities have implemented this exemption. What do you think New York City and State haven't really come across?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I can't speak to the larger piece. I do know that the story I was told when we first started looking at this, when it first was flagged, coming out of Council Member Borelli, was that years ago, the Council decided to push two out of the three property tax exemptions available to veterans. I don't know if it was about the economic issues at the time, but this was more than ten years ago when we first embraced these exemptions, and there are three different exemptions that every tax jurisdiction is able to employ that the State has authorized when it comes to veterans. One is the eligible funds exemption. One is the alternative veterans property tax exemption. Another is the Cold War veterans property tax exemption. Eligible funds exemption is basically, I can use monies that I've earned in the military towards my purchase, and it can have favorable tax implications. It's the one that's not used as much, but it is existing. The alternative veterans tax exemption is, I am a wartime era veteran, and I can use this exemption. This is what is used by a lot of folks right now. I use it myself. And then there's the Cold War property tax exemption, which effectively is, it's for peacetime

era veterans, and so when we first looked into this, it was a decision on the Council's side to only embrace two out of the three. We presume it may be for revenue reasons or budget reasons. We pray that it can be fixed at this time, and you know, I don't know the inner workings, but know that, like I said, the Administration is supportive of this.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I would hope so.

Okay, I guess that's...

COMMISSIONER HENDON: And Mr. Chair, I want to clarify one of the questions on Dwyer. You've got it right. It is 87 for all those five projects, as far as 87 unique veterans for the five projects. We hope that in the future when we're reporting, we'll be able to speak to not only the number of veterans, but the number of instances they've been engaged with Dwyer. And to be very clear, total from FY23-26 in the City Fiscal Years, it's 1,822,000 total allocated to the City of New York. So far, what remains to be spent is \$1,476,120.06, and in real time, we're seeing money pushed out to the communities to get this stuff done. Just wanted to say those things for the record.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. Thank you for that, and then thank you, Commissioner and your Staff, for the testimony today. I think we covered a lot of ground. I know that you will stay for the public testimony, as you always do, and we thank you for that. You're one of the few Commissioners and Staff that does that, so I want to thank you again. And again, thank you for waiting this long for this hearing, which we got pushed back a few hours, but again, I thank you for your 11 pages of testimony. We have a lot of facts that we could look at and decipher, but again, thank you, Commissioner, for your work. Thanks.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you.

CHIEF-OF-STAFF ALVAREZ: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. I now open the hearing for public testimony.

I remind members of the public that this is a formal government proceeding and that decorum shall be observed at all times. As such, members of the public shall remain silent at all times.

The witness table is reserved for people who wish to testify. No video recording or photography is allowed from the witness table.

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

If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant-at-Arms and wait to be recognized. When recognized, you will have two minutes to speak on today's hearing topic, and it's the Preliminary Budget. That's the topic.

If you have a written statement or additional written testimony you wish to submit for the record, please provide a copy of that testimony to the Sergeant-at-Arms.

So, I will now call the first panel. Ashton Stewart, Brian Ellicott Cook, Peter Kempner, and Joe Bello.

ASHTON STEWART: Thank you so much, Chair Holden and the City Department of Veterans Services, Commissioner Hendon. My name is Ashton Stewart. I'm a member of the Veteran Advisory Board, Secretary of St. Albans Board of Visitors, and member of VFW Post 528, who is a recipient of the Dwyer Program. They're very excited about that. I submitted my testimony. I

just wanted to highlight a few important things in there. First and foremost, I participated in a Veteran Mental Health Coalition presentation with the City Department of Veterans Services last week, talking about the correlation between PTSD, dementia, and TBI. New research is coming out about this all the time. It's super important to learn more about it and to educate other providers to try to address some of the issues that you were bringing up. Just this month, I had two PTSD cases, Vietnam veterans. I was driving over to one's house to give him a proclamation and honor his service. I knew that he had survivor's guilt. The wife called me when I was just about to get there, telling me we got to reschedule. I learned the next day that it was because he was having suicide and homicidal tendencies and they had to remove him and put him in another facility. He was on home hospice before that. Needless to say, it made me feel very conflicted, like if I would have got there sooner, would have it made it better, would have it made him more triggered? I don't know, but we have resources for families to share through the We Honor Veterans program, which MGHS is a part of, to show caregivers

and providers how to recognize PTSD and how to comfort the patient, redirect them, put some music on, just acknowledge them and try to understand that, you know, when the mind is weakened because of dementia or their health conditions, this can happen, especially of Vietnam veterans, and we're seeing more and more in our hospice program at MGHS. I was working with DVS this morning getting the indigent burial reimbursement put in place for a veteran with no family and no income. I can't tell you how (TIMER CHIME) important these programs are. The statistics that the Commissioner shared are staggering with the aging population of veterans. I've been beating my drum about this for months. We could really use some support. I need some help in my program because I'm the only person running it right now at MGHS, but we really wanted to be able to be there for the veterans and their families. We're also designing a pocket card with the State Department of Veterans Services to help educate providers. There's less than 3 percent in New York State who are culturally competent to work with veterans, and we really want to make a change on this. We are putting QR codes and resources within the card so they'll know exactly



what to do and how to engage with the veterans. Thank you so much for the opportunity to share my testimony.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. You're on the front lines and working with our veterans. Are you familiar with RTM at all?

ASHTON STEWART: I've heard of that type of therapy, yes, and I wish I could speak more about the effectiveness of it, but at this point I'm willing to get behind anything that's going to help.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. That's the way I feel. Let's try different things and let's see, because most of, you know, we had the veteran suicide rate had dropped, you know, years. Until 2006, I believe, we were below in veteran suicide, below the national average. Now, since 2006, we've gone up, and many more veterans are committing suicide than in the past, so that's why we're looking, I'm looking for, the great thing about RTM that I, when I spoke to Dr. Burke, who came up with this in the early 2000s, it's up to, you can have five sessions and really see a big difference in the individual. So, we're not talking about a large, you know, like years of therapy, we may be just talking about weeks of

therapy that could save a veteran or save a person, save a family, and that's why I'm so behind RTM, because I'm looking, you know, I'm very optimistic. I did have family members on who engaged with RTM and they speak highly of it. That's why I believe in it, but if we could get this 50,000-dollar pilot program off the ground, that would make your life a little easier.

ASHTON STEWART: I'll be so grateful for that, especially with the younger veterans where the TBI conditions have skyrocketed because of weaponry, and there's not enough knowledge about the damage that is causing for these vets, and I'm sure suicide ideation is a big part of it, and we've got to do everything we can to support veterans and their families (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But you're seeing on the front lines what it does to the family, too.

ASHTON STEWART: Yeah.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Which...

ASHTON STEWART: Oh my god.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: It can affect so many lives, more than just a veteran, that's what you've been talking about.

ASHTON STEWART: Absolutely, yes. Yes, sir. Thank you for everything you're doing.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you.

ASHTON STEWART: I appreciate your efforts.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you so much.

BRIAN ELLICOTT COOK: I'll be quite punctual. Good afternoon, Chair Holden, Members of the New York City Council Committee on Veterans. My name is Brian Ellicott Cook, and I serve as Director of Government Relations at SAGE, the nation's largest and oldest organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBTQ+ older adults, and I'm here to testify on behalf of SAGE Vets, the only program in New York City specifically supporting LGBTQ+ older adult veterans. LGBT veterans have served with bravery, often while facing discrimination. Many experienced exclusion under harmful military policies, leaving them with lasting trauma. In New York City, 56 percent of LGBTQ+ veterans are over the age of 50. SAGE Vets works to ensure that they have access to vital services, from healthcare to legal assistance. With your support, we've achieved significant victories, including discharge upgrades, eviction

prevention, and direct connection to our local VA hospitals. Last year, Finance Chair Justin Brannan stated that the budget was more than simply a financial plan and a list of the expenditures to our City's statement of values. It shows the rest of the world what the greatest city on the planet cares about. Yet, we can review the FY26 Preliminary Budget. It's clear that DVS remains stagnant. Its headcount basically unchanged, and it's budgeted roughly 494,000 dollars less than FY25 adopted budget. Unfortunately, today's political climate further threatens LGBTQ+ veterans, hostile rhetoric, and discriminatory policies of heightened fears, particularly for transgender veterans. Our City must stand firm in providing support and care. SAGE Vets respectfully requests a 100,000-dollar renewal of the legal services initiative in FY26 budget, and your continued support ensures that we expand our reach, provide essential resources, and uphold the dignity and well-being of our LGBTQ+ veterans. Thank you for your dedication to our New York City veterans.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Brian. Let me just ask a question. You said about the legal, the

100,000-dollar legal. What about medical services and mental health services?

BRIAN ELLICOTT COOK: So, SAGE Vets does run a weekly support group, which we do. The initiative that we get for the funding is for purely for the legal stuff... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Legal part, but what about, you know, again, a population that is...

BRIAN ELLICOTT COOK: We're also state funded, which is where the money for our programs like art and the supports, that's where it comes in. We did also apply for the Dreyer funding fund, and we're still waiting to hear back.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. So, we'll try to put a good word, but I think... (CROSS-TALK)

BRIAN ELLICOTT COOK: And one thing that I wanted to bring up briefly, because you're so passionate about the RTM and the PTSD stuff, is actually we're seeing a skyrocketing amount of re-traumatization because of what's going on in Washington. In Rochester, a trans veteran completed suicide at a VA hospital after that announcement by the Trump Administration. I, as a trans person, am working daily with our SAGE Vets team to make sure

that our trans vets know that they can come to us.

And this, because you're so passionate about PTSD, I wanted to amplify that it's only getting worse.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And that's why we need additional funding for DVS and all the programs, and that's why I'm not asking for a lot of money just for a pilot program that probably would work for most veterans, and in a short period of time. Because that could save a life, and that could save a family's existence. Because that's why it's so important to reinvest in our DVS now. But thank you, Brian, for all your work on the front lines again.

PETER KEMPNER: Good afternoon, Chair Holden. My name is Peter Kempner. I'm the Legal Director at Volunteers of Legal Service. Our purpose is to leverage private attorneys to provide free legal services to low-income New Yorkers to help fill the justice gap.

The VOLS Veterans Initiative focuses on providing free legal services to veterans age 60 and over, focused on end-of-life and incapacity planning, allowing them to age in place with dignity and respect in their community. We provide them with last wills and testaments, powers of attorney, healthcare

proxies, living wills, and other advanced directives.

These documents enable our clients to ensure that

their dying wishes are fulfilled and that they are

able to maintain income and services during their

lifetime. We also enable our clients' caregivers to

make medical decisions in line with their beliefs.

Our guides, fact sheets, workshops, and trainings are

aimed at overcoming confusion about planning for the

future. And through this work, we empower older

veterans to take charge of their finances, property,

and medical care, helping them continue to live in

the communities for as long as possible. Every year

since 1994, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

conducts a survey in which participants rank the

needs of homeless veterans in the community. This is

called the Challenge Survey, and this past year it

found that six out of the ten highest unmet needs for

veterans were legal in nature. And so ensuring that

there's access to free legal services for veterans,

active duty service members, and their families is of

utmost importance. Last year, the City Council

dedicated 600,000 dollars for its Legal Services for

Veterans Initiative to help bridge the access to

justice gap for our City's veteran community. The

organizations that receive this funding provide a wide range of legal services, and it (TIMER CHIME) is of utmost importance that that funding remain in place in the upcoming Fiscal Year. The amount of funding dedicated to providing free legal services to veterans is small but critical, and we would just like to thank the Council for its past support for this initiative and hope that that money is restored in this coming Fiscal Year... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But as veterans, again, the age is, you know, we're getting to a point where more veterans are getting to a point where they're seniors, like me, and certainly the Vietnam veterans are aging. You would need more money than 600,000. I mean, I don't know how 600,000 goes a long way for legal.

PETER KEMPNER: It certainly doesn't, Chair Holden, and we would welcome an increase... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But do you run out of funding?

PETER KEMPNER: Oh yeah. I mean, this doesn't cover the services that we provide. We hobble it together from private foundations, private donors,



2 our law firm partners, State funding, and so the  
3 ability to have more funding would really enhance the  
4 services that us and the other legal services  
5 providers that receive this funding.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So how much do you  
7 need? How much do you need to...

8 PETER KEMPNER: I mean, we would love to  
9 see the money doubled or tripled. I mean... (CROSS-  
10 TALK)

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I want OMB, I want  
12 people to hear this, and it shouldn't only come from  
13 the Council. We should actually fund a program like  
14 this on a regular basis to the tune of well over a  
15 million, I would think.

16 PETER KEMPNER: I absolutely agree.

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: As our veterans get  
18 older, and we've seen that.

19 PETER KEMPNER: Yes, and this year marks  
20 the 50th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam War,  
21 and so the youngest of the Vietnam era veterans are  
22 in their late 60s at this point.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But your organization  
24 probably does more than just legal. I mean, you're  
25 there for the veteran, right? I mean, you do talk

2 about their lives, their wishes, their families,  
3 right? I mean, you listen to the veterans, so it's a  
4 much more important service than just legal. I know  
5 that's your goal, but you have to actually listen to  
6 a lot more from the veterans to make them feel  
7 comfortable (CROSS-TALK)

8 PETER KEMPNER: Yes. There is a counseling  
9 process. This is not something that's easy to do,  
10 right?

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

12 PETER KEMPNER: Especially when somebody  
13 is in their later years, because you're really asking  
14 them to face their mortality...

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

16 PETER KEMPNER: And those are difficult  
17 conversations, and it's difficult for our clients to  
18 put that signature on the piece of paper, and it is  
19 important that we do that in a culturally competent  
20 and trauma-informed and sensitive way.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, again, for  
22 all your work. Thanks. Joe.

23 JOE BELLO: Before I begin, I just wanted  
24 to say I'm one of those veterans who protested for  
25 this agency over a decade ago, and real quick about

that. The Commissioner had stated in his testimony that there's still a young agency, but next year will be a decade, and in November or December 1st, he'll be the Commissioner for five years so at what point do we start to say we're still young, or we should have grown? So, I think that I just wanted to make that point before I started.

Chairman Holden, Members of the Veterans Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's preliminary budget hearing. Last year, Finance Chair Justin Brannan stated the budget was more than simply a financial plan and a list of expenditures. It is our City's statement of values. It shows the rest of the world what the greatest city on the planet cares about. Yet as we review the Fiscal Year '26 Preliminary Budget, it's clear that DVS remains stagnant, its headcount basically unchanged, and its budget roughly 494,000 less than the Fiscal Year '25 adopted budget. The Administration's continued lack of investment is unacceptable, and our community deserves better. However, with this potentially being the final budget under this Administration, a funding increase seems highly unlikely, and I think we need to be honest

about that. Therefore, my primary concern are the strain on DVS staff and the agency's continued lack of communication and transparency. As I've shared with elected officials across the five boroughs, they often seem to know more about what's happening at the agency and what's coming than the community does. The lack of transparency is especially troubling regarding veteran resources. Over a year ago, the Council passed a Mental Health Roadmap for Veterans. Local Law 38 required DVS, in coordination with the Office of Community Mental Health and other designated agencies, to conduct outreach on veteran mental health resources (TIMER CHIME) via social media, radio, print, and digital platforms. We have yet to see that action besides a few Instagram posts. Additionally, Local Law 37 required DVS to compile survey data from City agencies and report to the Speaker. This report was due on December 15th, and I'm a little confused at how this report that was by the agencies needed to be done through VetConnect. Speaking of VetConnect, VetConnect is intended to connect veterans with services through a network of providers, including the VA, government agencies, and non-profit partners. Yet questions remain about the

platform's effectiveness and the transparency of the data DVS collects. Nearly a year ago, Unite Us was removed as the platform provider without any public explanation, and a negotiated acquisition contract was awarded to a Texas-based non-profit called Combined Arms. However, DVS failed in its due diligence to assure that Combined Arms had an appropriate platform to operate VetConnect, forcing the agency to currently rely on a makeshift solution akin to Google Docs, which undermines the program's intended report. As a result, Combined Arms, as we've heard, is now developing that platform, while no Local Law 215 reports have been posted on DVS's site for either July 2024 or January 2025.

Mission VetCheck. Last week, during Mental Health Week, the Administration issued a press release stating that between November 2023 and June 2024, DVS contacted 10,000 veterans through Mission VetCheck. However, given the agency's limited staff and resources, as well as the scale of outreach within that timeframe, it was highly unlikely that DVS made those calls. It was far more plausible that NY Cares and its volunteers conducted that outreach. Notably, the press release highlights more than 400

referrals, but doesn't specify, and it was not specified in the testimony either, to what those veterans were referred to, the impact of those referrals, or what services were provided. While Mission VetCheck connects veterans to resources, this lack of transparency is concerning, and I am concerned that DVS may use these numbers to inflate its reporting, particularly through the MMR. To be clear, Mission VetCheck is a referral program, not a mental health service, and while 10,000 veterans may have been contacted, the actual effectiveness of these referrals remain unclear.

I'm getting to the end. While I have always supported increased funding for veteran services, I cannot, in good conscience, support or endorse another year of funding for we in the community are referred to as the Paul Vallone Initiative, i.e. the Veteran Resource Centers. Paul was a good friend for many years, and I believe he would be disappointed at how this funding has been managed. Moreover, the Council's Veterans Initiative only saw a 30,000-dollar increase for Fiscal Year '25. The allocation is roughly 2.8 million in discretionary funding across five initiatives,

continues to be insufficient. I would urge this Committee and the Council's BMT to redirect the majority of the monies for next, for if it's up there for Fiscal Year '26, to significantly increase the Council's Veterans Initiative.

Finally, for several years now, I've listened to DVS tout its accomplishments, but once again it's disheartening to see little tangible results. The agency continues to lack communication, transparency, context, and measurable outcomes across its programs, whether it's the resource guides, disability claims, including the number of successful claims that they've done since 2020, the DRIER program, the VSO building violations, Covered Vet NYC, the DEW program, transitioning servicemen, and even the post 9/11 fall of service memorial. Three years into this Administration, the veterans community remains an afterthought reduced to handshakes, optics, and half-hearted measures.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I saw you, Joe, I saw you shaking your head during the Joseph P. Dwyer program. Could you elaborate on that a little bit, like why you're skeptical, and how much should we give a pass to DVS because their budget is

inadequate? So, I mean, it's kind of like they're maybe stuck between a rock and a hard place.

JOE BELLO: But I think if they're stuck between a rock and a hard place, then we as a community and the Council, even the Administration, needs to have an honest conversation about what actually DVS can do and can't do. Over the past five years, the current Commissioner has added on programs after programs after programs, and what we wind up seeing is people wind up being stressed out and leaving. And it's not like he's telling us. We hear it in the community. So, I think we would have to talk about a DVS 2.0 and what that would look like and what, in reality, if that funding is not going to change, what can DVS take on? And I go back to Laurie Sutton's days when she used to say DVS was supposed to be the spoke in a wheel to refer to services. So, I think we have to have that conversation, and I think that's probably going to come in the next Administration (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: (INAUDIBLE) does stop with the Mayor. The Mayor can put a few more million into their budget so they can communicate a little



bit and to do the things that you said they should be doing.

JOE BELLO: I agree. I mean, I wrote up, I wrote up.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Is there a coincidence that the veteran, DVS, is the smallest budget of any City agency in this Administration?

JOE BELLO: Yeah.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And the Mayor did say, when I brought this up at a budget hearing with him, and I'll say this on a stack of Bibles, anybody wants to listen, he did say we shouldn't have to do the work, the City should not have to do the work of the VA, which I thought is, is ridiculous.

JOE BELLO: Yeah, that's a horrible answer.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah. (CROSS-TALK)

JOE BELLO: (INAUDIBLE)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I don't think he understood how horrible it sounded.

JOE BELLO: And what confuses me, and I'll say this for the record too, is that this Mayor, and even as the Commissioner has highlighted it, he was the Chair of the Veterans Affairs Committee in the

New York State Senate so it's not like he didn't have any kind of understanding around veterans and its issues.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

JOE BELLO: So, for him to say that is, is just, is, I think it's disrespectful, and it's disappointing.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And we're not asking the DVS to do the work of the VA. We're asking them to communicate, to try to fill a need that New York City veterans have, and it's communication. We're not asking for like 500 million dollars here. We're asking for a few more million to make this agency work better. And adding a few million out of a budget of 109 billion is a drop in the bucket.

JOE BELLO: No, I agree. I mean, think about it this way. When we went through the pandemic and Mission VetCheck first started, you know, even today the Commissioner testified about the, what our demographics look like in the city, correct? We have, we are an aging veteran population, and so at some point we're going to have to have a conversation about what that looks like, not only with the

Department of the Aging, but you know, other agencies as well, and he's just not doing that at all.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: The Mayor's financial people should be telling them that if we get more money, millions more for veterans in this city who deserve it, who have it coming to them, they would actually increase the economy of New York City to benefit so it's a small investment, and it would pay off in dividends.

JOE BELLO: And I agree, because I would say to you that one of the things we say, and we used to say it in the Veterans Advisory Board as well, is that New York City has the resources, but they need to be better funded, but we are not veteran friendly.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

JOE BELLO: I mean a city of 8.3 million people with, you know, if you go by the Commissioner's 200,000 number, even though I disagree with that, but they're a needle in a haystack, and a lot of the Administration has just forgotten about that.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

JOE BELLO: You asked me about Dwyer.

BRIAN ELLICOTT COOK: Can I make one...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, Brian just wanted to say.

BRIAN ELLICOTT COOK: I'm sorry. Can I make one suggestion? I know the budget's limited, and so is our time, but might I suggest that you and Chair Hudson have a joint hearing for Aging and Veterans together (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right, we requested, yeah.

BRIAN ELLICOTT COOK: Because she is also facing, we at SAGE also advocated that our centers need 10 million dollars to prevent almost 60 of them for closing this year, and I think the way that the aging population of veterans, and the aging population of just your everyday New Yorker, need to come together.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah. We did have a conversation on that already so we are planning that in the future, but thank you for that. Yes.

Do you want to?

JOE BELLO: Well, just regarding Dwyer, because you asked. So, you know, the Commissioner's testified it several times over the years. I've gone back over that testimony about in Fiscal Year 2022,

the program received 150,000. It increased to 400,000, and this Fiscal Year for the State, it's 510,000. So, I think the problem we've kind of been having listening to the Commissioner and having conversations in the community is there seems to be a lot more money going into overhead than to actual programming. No money has gone out. Let's be clear about that. He keeps saying the money's coming, but no money has gone out, and I think the lack of communication and transparency from the person he has running that program, and we've had this conversation before, by the way, I think is appalling. So, you have a lot of these not-for-profits and groups out there that are willing to do this work, and yet there's no communication, and so I think that there's been no explanation for the delays, nor why some organizations are being asked to accept less funding than originally requested. Furthermore, we didn't even get, and the Commissioner testified about this, we didn't even get an update on the status of the four pilot programs that they operated. I mean, one of them we know was tile remediation at an American Legion post in Southeast Queens. How is that peer-to-peer? So, I mean, again, I am very concerned. I've

actually asked if we can hold a separate hearing on this specifically and bring in some of these, the vendors that applied, and I'd like to ask, and I know you don't (INAUDIBLE), but I'd like to see the Comptroller audit this program, and for the State Senator to hold a hearing on it.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, thank you again. Thank you to this panel. Excellent testimony. Thanks so much. And thank you for staying this long and sticking it out.

The next panel is Alicia Kershaw, Coco Culhane, Contessa Officer, and Eric Lee.

Alicia, Alicia Kershaw. Yes. Thank you again for staying this long and waiting.

ALICIA KERSHAW: Thank you for staying. I'd like to thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I have to stay.

ALICIA KERSHAW: I guess I do too, actually. Thank you for your support and for giving me the opportunity to speak. I'm here on behalf of GallopNYC, a therapeutic horseback riding program that works with people with disabilities, including veterans. We have wide-ranging programs which are described in our written testimony. Horses and

people, actually military horses and people, have a very long history, and we tap into that deeply rooted relationship to help veterans. We have a 2,000-person wait list. Many, many of them are veterans. We get calls from veterans weekly. We prioritize veterans when we schedule programming. We're fortunate to have support of the City Council, and we've applied for funding from Dwyer, and I would like to say without getting into the prior panel, but I know what it's like to run an under-resourced agency.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But did you say you had 2,000-person wait lists?

ALICIA KERSHAW: 2,000, not all of the veterans.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Oh, okay.

ALICIA KERSHAW: I don't think our veterans wait list is very long, because we do make an effort to bring them in.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You give them a priority?

ALICIA KERSHAW: Yeah. Our veterans work is an example of mental health work that's a growing area for us. Just this month, we received permission to directly employ mental health licensed

professionals, and so we are working hard to continue to expand our services for veterans. We also are working on research. I don't know if the RTM would fit into our program, but I'm definitely going to look into it because I do agree that there's not enough out there that works for veterans, and we do have something we feel works, so we're trying to prove that through research. It's one of our goals. We are working with the VA now. We get referrals, and we are working with an in-house substance abuse rehab group, which has been very, very, very successful.

(TIMER CHIME) I had a little anecdote, but I'll save it.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Finish it, yeah.

ALICIA KERSHAW: Well, another way we're expanding with veterans and their families. We have a veteran named Juan Tarona (phonetic), who rides with us with his family, and he spoke at our gala about how important it was to be riding with his family and have an opportunity to reconnect with his family. He's done, I think it's two tours, two or three tours overseas, and he's very, very grateful for the opportunity that we provide to bond with his family through our horse program.



CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Did he tell you how it helped him, like certainly bond with his family, become a more well-rounded person, connect with, you know, obviously the horses?

ALICIA KERSHAW: I think, yes, and a lot of it is, I think there's two main pieces of it. One is spending time with his family in an activity that they all can enjoy, but the other is that time with horses opens people up, and I think he finds it easier to communicate with his family when he's had his time with horses.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's great. Thank you. Thank you for your testimony.

ALICIA KERSHAW: Thank you.

CONTESSA OFFICER: Good afternoon, Chair Holden and Members of the New York City Council Committee on Veterans. My name is Contessa Officer, and I am the Director of Veterans Program for VNS Health. I am also a veteran. I served in the U.S. Army Reserves and National Guard. Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

In Fiscal Year 2024, the VNS Health Veterans Program offered services to over 1,500 New York City veterans or veteran family members. We are

the largest hospice and home health service provider to veterans in New York City. The VNS Health Veterans Program is unique in that we focus on reducing social determinants of health through increasing veterans' and their families' access to quality healthcare options in the home and community, while at the same time connecting them to additional benefits available through the VA, such as home health aid hours, durable medical equipment, and benefits for veterans' spouses and dependents. The program also refers veterans to community-based resources, such as supportive housing, transportation, and educates clinicians on veteran issues, such as suicide prevention. Our veteran team members visit veterans in their homes to recognize their military service, work with their healthcare team, and provide support to families as they navigate the VA benefits process. We are grateful for the 170,000 we received in City Council discretionary funds for Fiscal Year 2025. In this upcoming year, we are seeking 500,000 to expand outreach and connect more veterans to care. This year, the Veterans Program began a partnership with the New York City Department of Veterans Services to provide more veterans access to healthcare services.

This new partnership will require additional funding to support veterans across New York City referred to the VNS Health Veterans Program. Veterans will receive individualized support (TIMER CHIME) from healthcare professionals to include services from our Care Management Program and/or health plan. Thank you again for this opportunity to testify. We appreciate the City Council's leadership on veteran issues and offer our ongoing partnership in collaboration.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Contessa.

By the way, you said you served 1,500 veterans.

CONTESSA OFFICER: Yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: With a funding of 170,000.

CONTESSA OFFICER: Yes. We make it work.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I don't know how. So how many could you serve for 500,000?

CONTESSA OFFICER: I would say we could serve, you know, double that. You know, we have a small team of five. However, we're tenacious, we're ambitious, and we're always looking at ways to be more effective. We reach out to all the veterans that are identified at VNS Health. We call them, we speak with either the veteran or their caregiver, and we

really assess what their needs are, not just connecting them to the VA, but to healthcare, right? So if we had more funding, we would be able to build our team, we would be able to do more projects, we go to the homes, we have care packages that we give to the veterans, we spend time with them, but we're such a small team that we can't do that, you know, in the capacity that we would want to.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, it's obvious.

CONTESSA OFFICER: So the will is there, we just need the money.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Show me the money, right.

CONTESSA OFFICER: Show me the money.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, again, with all the wide-ranging services you're offering our veterans, it seems to me like a good investment.

CONTESSA OFFICER: Absolutely. It's the best investment, and the veterans would say so as well. They cannot believe that when they're getting healthcare, somebody actually cares about the fact that they were a veteran.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. Well, thank you, again, for your service. Thanks.

COCO CULHANE: Hi. Coco Culhane from the Veteran Advocacy Project. I'm going to go off script a bit. I just wanted to say the changes at the VA haven't really happened yet, so any shortages that were being referred to are existing problems, right. I mean, they laid off 1,900 people, and some 1,600 have been reinstated, and I don't know how much that's impacting our local facilities, but, you know, some of it is also that they're coming back to work, and there's just chaos, right, so if that's happening already, imagine if they lay off, you know, 18 percent of the workforce, and it's going to be up to the local community to step in and take care of those veterans, and to provide those services. The other thing on the federal level is, so much of this funding is just up in the air, and nobody knows. Right now, we're waiting to find out, like, are we going to have to, you know, downsize, and so much of legal services funding is federal, and it's a scary time. So, I think that hasn't happened yet. Well, that's not true, immigration and fair housing, but I think the point is that we need to be prepared for a crisis in the services in the city, because really, we're federally funded. A lot of this work.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, we know they're not expanding Veterans Affairs, and so there has to be an impact down the line certainly, and was the VA ever operating like it should? You know, that's another thing, because there has been, you know, horror stories that we're hearing years ago, even, so if they cut the agency, even by 10 percent, there's going to be a ripple effect down the line so that's why we need to (TIMER CHIME) all of us, and you know, we need to increase more the not-for-profit services that is being, obviously, are being offered to our veterans, and thank you, again, for being on the front line of your work for so long. But go ahead, if you have some additional.

COCO CULHANE: Yeah. I just wanted to add a couple more things. You know, all of the elimination of DEI programs, the elimination, you know, the Pentagon took down all of the pages that were about Black service members and women, and you know, there's public outcry, and they put most of it back. But one of the biggest reasons that we see people coming to us for discharge upgrades is systemic racism, and so if we are, you know, if there was an era where this was being integrated into

military service, and we were still seeing a huge need, it's kind of scary to think, well, if there's basically a green light for people to abuse power, and is what, you know, I think it looks like for the military right now. And you know, the number one tool that we have with discharge upgrades is this thing called the Kurta Memo, and it basically, you know, says that the boards have to consider mental health conditions or trauma that may have impacted someone's behavior. And it's just been taken down from the website. And so again, it's something that's totally up in the air and could be fine, but the need there is already so huge. We have a wait list. We're so grateful for the City and our partnership with DVS, because that funding has allowed us to chisel away at the wait list.

And then just wanted to say, in terms of benefits, I think there's so many VSOs that have downsized, and so many VSO offices that have closed. We used to have something like nine right on (INAUDIBLE) so funding more counselors to do appeals, applications, whatever it is, I think is vital, and I think we need to be looking at the data. You know, these numbers can go all over the place, and I think

we need to have data in order to understand the need. What I saw is that New York is actually right at the national average, that there's about 29 percent of vets who are service-connected. So, whether or not, but regardless, there's always more we can do, and there's a huge wait for these VSO services. And then my testimony, written testimony, includes suggestions and things like coordination between SSVF programs and HRA on one-shots, and things like that that are not costly and could make a difference in the way that we, as a community, serve veterans.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right, but, you know, again, I've been talking about, because I have a lot of VSOs in my District, and Queens essentially has a lot, I think, I mean, compared to the other boroughs, but we're seeing them close, but I think many of our City leaders don't understand the importance of the VSOs, that it is so important to a veteran to have some mentorship through the VSOs, to come together and talk about the issues, and many of them are not even recognizing they have PTSD and how the VSOs are helping them with that, and we've seen it over and over again so that's why I called on the City Council to try to fund some Member item initiatives to give



each Council Member, 51 Council Members, money to allocate to VSOs. And there's always been a question, well, where do we allocate it to? And we could allocate it to Washington, even, to the VA. It doesn't have to go to DVS, but if it went to DVS, so be it. But I think we need to have that, that conversation. We haven't had it yet so I haven't been very successful at that.

COCO CULHANE: And I just want to also point out, there's a difference though, between those posts that are, I think, you said mentorship, and more social. They're not doing benefits claims, right? So, I was only referencing... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I know, I know, but I broadened it, but it's very, very important to issue some defense of VSOs because every year we lose a few more, but thank you, thank you, Coco. Eric.

ERIC LEE: Hi. Good afternoon. Thank you, Chair Holden, and Members of the Committee for allowing me to testify today. I'm Eric Lee. I'm the Director of Public Policy and Volunteers of America Greater New York, a 129-year-old anti-poverty organization, which serves over 750 veterans every year. We're one of the largest supportive housing

providers for veterans in New York City, and we're also proud of our involvement in the City's initiative to successfully end chronic homelessness among veterans. I will submit written testimony, but I'll summarize that today.

So, thank you, Chair Holden, and members of the Committee for, and the entire City Council, for your unwavering leadership and commitment to supporting veterans who served our country. We're extremely grateful for the Council's steadfast support of VOA-GNY through the Veterans Community Development Citywide Initiative, and we're seeking this Committee's support in our funding renewal request for FY26. Given the growing uncertainty in the federal government, which we've heard about today, the funding for the Council, which is provided by the Council for this initiative, is even more critical to enriching the lives of the veterans which we serve. We use this funding to enhance services for veterans within our citywide VA-funded SSVF program, as well as veterans housed within our multiple permanent housing supportive sites. This includes art therapies, which you, Chair Holden, championed as an extremely impactful source of therapy for both the

mental and emotional well-being of veterans. Through this initiative, we also connect veterans to employment and training opportunities in high-demand fields like transportation, healthcare, and construction. We also are seeking an expansion of funding this year from 74,000 to 100,000 to be able to help veterans cover costs for things related to training and employment, as well as housing placements and basic needs, as well as enriching therapeutic programming, education, and recreational services (TIMER CHIME) at our congregate supportive housing sites, which have set-asides for veterans. Mind if I make two more points?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Go ahead.

ERIC LEE: Thank you. So, thank you, Chair Holden and Council Member Nurse for co-sponsoring Intro. 29, and we urge the Committee to join in advocating for the passage of this legislation, which would provide training for first responders to recognize the signs of traumatic brain injury, or TBI, in survivors of domestic violence. Veterans and survivors both disproportionately suffer from TBIs, and while the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs does mandatory screenings, there is no comparable

screening for survivors, and wider training and screening would help both populations. We would also welcome your leadership in prioritizing funding so that first responders in the FY26 budget have funding available to train them on TBI, ensuring that they have tools needed to save lives.

And my last point is we support veterans and others in institutional settings, and we applaud Council Member Paladino for championing Reso 16 of 2024, which would increase the personal needs allowance, putting more money in the pockets of deserving Americans. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Eric. You're not asking for a lot of money. You're asking for an increase of from 74 to 100,000, which is, how many veterans do you serve?

ERIC LEE: Over 750. So, the way that we use the funding, we hire a part-time coordinator within our SSVF program who connects veterans to different resources, and then the other funding that's left over after funding that staff position, we use to layer on to our other programs where we house veterans in our supportive housing sites.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: It's money well spent, so thank you, Eric. Thank you for your testimony. Thank you all.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Next panel is Michael Inyosu and Sharon Brown. Michael, did I pronounce your name right, correctly? No? All right, thank you.

MICHAEL INYOSU: I have to say it's an honor to be here. I just wanted to bring out something is that I know that you've been very helpful to veterans for many years, and I was hoping to thank the other co-sponsors of the Cold War property tax exemption, and I was going to ask Councilwoman Sandra, can't think of her last name, Nurse, to see if she could also co-sponsor the bill. We lost Council Member Borelli for his resignation, so there's only eight left, and I feel that it's very important to me that I was a honorable discharge from '75 to '79 on an aircraft carrier, the CVN Kennedy, and when I call up to try to get a property tax exemption for the Cold War veterans, they do not consider me a veteran, and I know you're big on co-sponsoring that for a while, Chair Holden, and I wanted to see if I can. I'm trying to do this for like seven years, and with DVS as part of it for them

to put that out, where it would be, I pay 6,000 dollars property tax. It would be a 600-dollar-per-year savings for me and my wife on a fixed income, coming up on our 50th anniversary. I missed it by two weeks. I joined prior to the Vietnam era. No, no, that's fine. I'm very thankful for everything that we do for our veterans. This is something that would affect me, and I'll expect yes, no, or maybe, and we've been trying for many years for this. So, for 600 dollars, it (TIMER CHIME) would give me and my wife 50 per month towards groceries or things. It's not a lot of money. If I move now, because of the rate of inflation and things, so if I move one block out of New York City, this is already a New York State law. I move one block out, I get it. So, the simple, there's five, I think, words. New York City, please opt in to this program. We have that alternative that the Commissioner was mentioning. There's a couple of them. I didn't use any loans, so I am looking, I am trying to be a voice for the Cold War veterans that are out there. There's probably not many of us here, but I want to be a voice where I want to be recognized for my service for those four years where we practiced for war, and I'm a veteran.

And Governor Cuomo, at the time, it took three times for him to recognize City workers to buy back their pension time of three years that cost me 10,000 dollars, which is well worth it, my pension. But he said that a veteran is a veteran, and when it comes to Cold War veterans, you're telling, not you, sir, they're telling me that you're not, Mike, you're not.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. And again, it's not a lot of money that we're talking about. Even to the City, we're not talking about the City losing money, a lot of money, on you saving 600 dollars... (CROSS-TALK)

MICHAEL INYOSU: 10 years.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah. So, it's not a lot of money. And how many years did you serve on the aircraft carrier?

MICHAEL INYOSU: Four years, '75 to '79.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Four years.

MICHAEL INYOSU: Yes, yes sir.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And what type of work did you do?

MICHAEL INYOSU: I was a jet engine mechanic.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, you probably  
3 experiencing some hearing loss too, probably.

4 MICHAEL INYOSU: Actually, for some  
5 reason, I never did.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I know people that  
7 served on aircraft carriers.

8 MICHAEL INYOSU: Yes, and I worked with  
9 the subways, but no, I haven't.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You didn't? You're  
11 lucky, you're very lucky.

12 MICHAEL INYOSU: No, no, very lucky.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Doesn't mean in the  
14 future you won't have it, but hopefully we'll keep  
15 offering.

16 MICHAEL INYOSU: We're just trying to  
17 recognize Cold War... (CROSS-TALK)

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Four years should be  
19 worth a tax exemption. I mean, that's what we're  
20 talking about here.

21 MICHAEL INYOSU: I'm sorry to interrupt,  
22 it's like that's 600 dollars equates to the 6,000  
23 that I pay. It would give me one year of property tax  
24 exemption for those ten years, and then it ends. So,  
25 I just want to recognize the Cold War veterans.



CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. And you're 100 percent, that's why we have the bill, and that's why hopefully this Council will pass it, but thank you again, Michael. Thank you.

MICHAEL INYOSU: Thank you.

SHARON BROWN: Hello. My name is Sharon Brown from Rose of Sharon Enterprises. Before I begin, remember the hostages, release the hostages, let Yahweh's people go, defend Israel.

Okay. The veteran budget should be one of the highest budgets there are going into this budget season. They defend and defended the nation and the nations around the world. When our veterans were fighting and our military fight, everyone is safe around the world because of what they do. They should not have a problem with housing. They should not have a problem with businesses. They should not have a problem getting permits and things to sell on the streets and things like that, but they should actually be considered first for business. We need to have veterans first, where we're considering veterans first for things. They should be considered for housing. They should go from street directly into homes without all of the red tape, all of the

qualifications, and they shouldn't have any qualifications as far as having to be in any kind of mental health program. They need to get directly into housing. They shouldn't stop in some kind of program. Whatever they want to do, not are forced to do, whatever they want to do with themselves, they can do it from their own homes, homes and apartments. We need our military homeless to be in houses. This is a very important situation. I can no longer stand to see veterans being abused. Cold War veterans, it's obscene that any veteran is not considered a veteran (TIMER CHIME) and they are not first for funding. Let's take care of our military and our veterans because they have taken care of us.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. Thank you, Sharon, for your testimony. Thank you both for your excellent testimony.

I'm now going to call on people on Zoom, on remote.

First on Zoom is Cleopatra Brown. Cleopatra, you have two minutes.

DR. CLEOPATRA BROWN: Yes. Good afternoon, everyone. Can you hear me?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yes, we can hear you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Good afternoon, Chair Holden, Councilwoman Sandy, and the Members of the Committee on Veterans. My name is Dr. Cleopatra Brown. I am a Cold War veteran with a service-connected disability. Currently, I serve as the Chairperson of Community Board 16 Veterans Affairs Committee. I would like to thank the New York City Council Committee on Veterans for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Community Board 3 and 16 Veterans Committee and those veterans who are unable to attend this budget hearing. I come before this Committee to respectfully request that the veterans' budget be increased for the following reasons. One, to create City VASH vouchers and hire housing coordinators to assist veterans with obtaining vouchers and finding apartments for them before they face homelessness. No veteran should have to become homeless in order to receive a housing voucher. Currently on Housing Connect, residents of community boards are given a 20 percent preference and the City employees receive 5 percent preference, while veterans, those who have served, protected, and fought for this country receive no preference at all. Rather than allocating funds to support veterans who

have served and fought for this country, the City has recently increased funding for 2,000 migrants to receive housing vouchers for all undocumented family members, regardless of income. Meanwhile, you have veterans living in shelters are required to work at least 10 hours per week to qualify for a CityFHEPS voucher and remain on the waiting list for a HUD-VASH voucher due to the shortage of case managers.

We also need to hire additional staff to be assigned to non-veteran healthcare facilities, colleges, veteran organizations, and community board veterans to identify and assist veterans in obtaining the necessary benefits, disability compensation, veteran specific events, and assigned to shelters to work with the City in locating apartments for veterans. In the previous Administration, the engagement community outreach specialist was assigned to Community Board 3 and 16 to attend meetings, provide resources, and assist with veterans' events. It will be a blessing if we can have someone to fill that position. Also to hire an advertisement and marketing agency that will conduct direct mailing and emailing campaigns, create monthly newsletter to highlight veteran organizations, services, and

resources available to veterans, promote veteran-specific events, and conduct surveys to assess the needs of veterans in each District. Also to provide grants to veteran and legal services organization that assists veterans in submitting and appealing claims for disability compensation and discharge upgrades. This assistance is especially important for those who have been unfairly given other than honorable or dishonorable discharges.

Also to allocate funds to local veteran organizations such as, but not limited to, the American Legion Post, the Disabled American Veterans, the Vietnam Veterans of America, the Black Vets for Social Justice, and Services for Underserved, just to name a few, who are providing services to veterans.

In addition, providing funding to community boards with veteran committees to conduct outreach events aimed at providing veterans with resources and informing them of the benefits to which they are entitled.

We also respectfully request that the New York City Council Committee on Veterans establish a local law to amend the Administrative Code of the New York City Department of Finance in relation to

implementing the Real Property Tax Exemption for Cold War Veterans under the New York State Property Tax Law Section 458, the tax exemption...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. Thank you, Cleopatra. We got to move on. Thank you so much, and I agree with everything you said. Thank you for your service to the Community Board, too. Thank you.

Our next panelist is Tyler Levsen.

Tyler, you have two minutes.

SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Starting time.

TYLER LEVSEN: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We hear you.

TYLER LEVSEN: Okay. Thank you. My name is Tyler Levsen, and I am a Staff Attorney and Legal Research Advisor at Family Legal Care, formerly LIFT. Thank you to Chair Holden and Members of the Veterans Committee for the opportunity to speak today about the issues veterans are experiencing in family courts. I'd also like to thank the City Council for its continued support, without which we could not assist veterans and their families to confront issues at the heart of their well-being, like child support, custody, and visitation, and domestic violence. Our work is especially important now, as thousands of

veterans have been laid off from their federal jobs, and the VA faces possible budget cuts, layoffs, and termination of contracts, affecting the programs that veterans rely on. We hope you will continue your support for our essential services and resources for veterans. Over 80 percent of litigants come to family court without an attorney, and Family Legal Care is the only organization dedicated solely to empowering New Yorkers to represent themselves in family court. Each year, we help over 28,000 people to self-advocate for positive outcomes in their child support, custody, visitation, and domestic violence cases. Veterans need specialized support to deal with those issues, as there are unique aspects to their situation and laws that impact the process and results for them. For example, most of the veterans we serve are struggling with child support arrears from cases that could be modified. This can lead to enforcement actions against them, such as having money garnished from their military retirement pension or VA disability benefits. If the wrong amount is being collected, or if it is withheld improperly, this can lead to financial hardship. Family Legal Care is here to help. My colleagues and

I provide one-on-one legal advice consultations, as well as legal information at the City's courthouses or through our bilingual helplines. We also conduct legal education workshops and webinars on common family law issues for veterans. The court's decisions touch the lives of thousands of children and families with profound long-term effects on their safety, economic security, health, and well-being. The demand for free expert legal advice has never been greater, continues to grow, and Family Legal Care is the only organization in New York City filling this need. With continued support from the City Council, we continue to be a part of the solution. Thank you for your time.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Tyler. Do you help veterans in Veteran Treatment Court also?

TYLER LEVSEN: No, we do not. Our work is solely focused on family court.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. Great. Thank you so much. Thanks, Tyler. Thanks for your work.

Our next panelist is Christopher Leon Johnson. You have two minutes.

SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Starting time.



CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: My name is Christopher Leon Johnson, and I'm in the Bronx right now. I just came from a women's empowerment event. I wanted to tell the City Council to please allocate money to the Worker Justice Project and to the Street Vendor Project, because they are the two organizations that work with veterans. They have veterans in the committee and the organization that deliver food and serve our people with mangoes and stuff like that, aAnd yeah, serve our mangoes and stuff like that. At the same time, the City Council needs to protect our veterans, serve our veterans. We need to love our veterans for what they do, but at the same time, they need to really protect our veterans, you know what I'm saying? Veterans Affairs matters in 2025, and I'm kind of busy right now in the Bronx, but yeah, like I said, preserve the funding for the Worker Justice Project and the Street Vendor Project, protect our veterans, house our veterans.

Thank you, Chair Holden, for serving us for the past eight years as a Council Member, and I know this is your final budget hearing, pre-budget hearing for your tenure, and I'm going to miss you,

bro, so I'm kind of busy right now, but like I said, protect our vendors, protect our street vendors, protect our deliveristas, protect our veterans, allocate, make sure they get over 1 million dollars in funding. We need the deliverista hub outside City Hall. Like I said, this year, veterans should be prioritized over everybody else because they serve our country. You might not like their politics, you might love their politics, but they serve our country. They did something that I'm too scared to do, I know a lot of us are scared to do, and they serve our country, and you know, and so God bless our veterans, God bless our veterans 2025, and yeah, I'm in the Bronx right now, so yeah, but thanks for hosting here, Mr. Holden, so thank you, take care.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Chris. I'm going to miss you too.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: All right. Same to you, bro, appreciate it.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you so much. Thank you. Be careful out there.

We have two people that have registered, but we don't see them on Zoom, David Stifler

2 (phonetic) and Alex Stein. Are they on remote, last  
3 call?

4 Okay. I'm sorry, but we don't see you on  
5 Zoom, so if there's anyone else present in the room  
6 who has not had an opportunity to testify, but wishes  
7 to do so, please raise your hand.

8 Okay. Seeing none, this hearing is  
9 adjourned. [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 April 28, 2025