

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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December 3, 2025
Start: 1:06 p.m.
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HELD AT: 250 Broadway-8th Fl. Hearing Rm. 3

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

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Joann Ariola
Simcha Felder
Kristy Marmorato
Sandy Nurse
Vickie Paladino

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

James Hendon
Department of Veteran Services Commissioner

Nicole Orlando
Department of Veterans Services Deputy Chief of Staff

Donne' Smalls
Department of Veterans Services Director for Housing Support Services

Eric Perez

Irvinia Moody

Timothy Pena

Christopher Leon Johnson

Jason Loughran

2 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good afternoon and
3 welcome to the New York City Council hearing of the
4 Committee on Veterans. At this time, can everybody
5 please silence your cell phones. If you wish to
6 testify, please go to the back of the room to fill
7 out a testimony slip. At this time and going
8 forward, no one is to approach the dais. I repeat,
9 no one is to approach the dais. Chair, we are ready
10 to begin.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Sergeant.
12 [gavel] Good afternoon. I'm Council Member Robert
13 Holden, Chair of the Committee on Veterans, and
14 welcome to our oversight hearing. The topic is an
15 update on implementing recommendations from the City
16 Council's Report Card Initiative. The Department of
17 Veterans Services was chosen as one of the first
18 three agencies to be reviewed as part of the City
19 Council's City Agency Report Card Initiative, and DVS
20 was the first agency to have its review completed.
21 City Council Speaker Adrienne E. Adams had introduced
22 the initiative at her 2024 State of the City Address,
23 noting that the Council would be conducting its own
24 evaluations of city agencies in order to judge their
25 delivery of services to New Yorkers. The Council's

2 Compliance Division conducted and assessment of DVS'
3 operations and performance between June 2024 and
4 March 2025 using a variety of sources of information.
5 The assessment looked at seven pillars of agency's
6 structure and operations, and they are: leadership,
7 strategy and direction, service delivery for New
8 Yorkers, relationships and collaboration, workforce
9 development, financial and resources, management,
10 digital government, and measurement analysis and
11 knowledge management. The Council's Compliance
12 Division published its findings and recommendations
13 in a report last March. The report noted that DVS
14 was celebrating its 10th anniversary which the
15 Council felt it was an appropriate time to look back
16 and evaluate its work in its first decade as well as
17 to look forward, and that's why we're really doing
18 this, to look forward to its work for the next 10
19 years. Based on the analysis presented in the
20 report, DVS was awarded an overall grade of C for its
21 current level of performance. And again, grades are
22 subjective. I taught for 40 years in CUNY, and you
23 know, grades are an evaluation, and it not
24 necessarily always the most accurate. So, take it
25 for what it is. A grade of C was defined as adequate

2 performance and capability with some internal
3 processes needing improvement. The report offered
4 seven key findings. DVS makes-- and this is number
5 one. DVS makes an effort to meet veterans where they
6 are likely to be. DVS has tried to use its resources
7 wisely while recognizing that it could not do it
8 alone. There is a gap between DVS' reported practices
9 and the experiences described by veterans and
10 advocates. Continuity of care is critical to the
11 long-term health, stability and financial well-being
12 of veterans, and DVS has created various support
13 channels for veterans to access its services and also
14 collaborates with several government and non-profit
15 agencies on a number of initiatives. DVS needs to
16 rebuilt trust with the New York City veteran
17 community, and DVS must do better in leveraging other
18 New York City agencies to reach and to serve more
19 veterans. Finally, the report provided 15
20 recommendations, and I'll cover some of them: short-
21 term and long-term planning which is always very,
22 very important, the operations of Veterans Resource
23 Centers which we've expanded, the communication
24 methods to use with veterans, continuity of care,
25 call tracking and monitoring, relationships with

2 veterans advocates and veterans service
3 organizations, VSOs, and DVS staffing, contracting,
4 digital strategy, and more. At the committee's first
5 hearing on the report last April, the Commissioner
6 responded to each recommendation, noting that DVS
7 would implement many of them, and also, noting that
8 DVS felt that a few were not warranted, and maybe the
9 Commissioner will touch upon that today. Today,
10 about seven months later, I look forward to hearing
11 the Commissioner's review of the 15 recommendations
12 and the current status of each one. And I know from
13 the testimony the Commissioner has presented at
14 hearings since last April that some progress has been
15 made on important recommendations. So, I look
16 forward to hearing about them today. Before turning
17 to the business at hand, I would like to just make
18 one comment on behalf of a special group of veterans
19 as we wind up November which is National Veterans and
20 Military Families Month. This story comes out of
21 Margraten in the Netherlands. The site of the
22 Netherlands American Cemetery where more than 8,000
23 U.S. soldiers who fought in World War II are buried.
24 Last year our committee voted on Council Member
25 Menin's resolution that commemorated the 80th

2 Anniversary of D-Day. The resolution was later
3 adopted by the entire Council. The resolution told
4 about the rows and rows of graves of 9,386 Americans,
5 most of whom died on the beaches of Normandy and the
6 ensuing campaign whose sacrifices are forever honored
7 at Normandy's American Cemetery and Memorial in
8 Colleville-sur-Mer, France on the site of the
9 cemetery established by the U.S. first Army on June
10 8th, 1944. The graves of American soldiers marked by
11 white crosses and stars of David in foreign
12 cemeteries are of course sacred. Just last month,
13 two displays commemorating the role of Black soldiers
14 in World War II were removed by our federal
15 government from the visitor's center at the
16 Netherlands American Cemetery. In Fall 1944, the
17 U.S. Army's 960th Quarter Master Service Company, a
18 mostly Black unit, arrived in Margraten to dig graves
19 at the newly created cemetery. First Lieutenant
20 Jefferson Wiggins told of seeing soldiers under his
21 command crying as they dug those graves. So, this
22 month, Jancie Wiggins, his widow, said this, "The
23 removal of the displays is disrespectful to Black
24 American soldiers who served and to their legacies
25 and their families certainly cherished." Local Dutch

2 residents in Margraten also have brought flowers to
3 these American graves for decades. The Dutch
4 officials have called for the reinstatement of the
5 displays at the cemetery to honor the 172 Black
6 soldiers who came to liberate Europe and are now
7 buried on Dutch soil. So, I want to say that this
8 committee honors-- I want to say this to Mrs. Wiggins
9 that this committee honors your husband's service as
10 well as the service of all Black American soldiers in
11 World War II including and especially those who are
12 buried on foreign ground. And at this time, I'd like
13 to acknowledge my colleagues who are here today. We
14 have Council Member Simcha Felder and on Zoom we have
15 Council Member Ariola, and Sandy Nurse was here.
16 She's going to return. So, we look forward to her
17 participation. I'd also like to thank-- this is my
18 final Veterans Committee hearing as Chair, and I'll
19 be leaving the Council after eight years, and I
20 cherish my time on this committee and working with
21 the Commissioner and DVS. They're friends, and I
22 consider you guys family, because we work so closely
23 together, but I'd like to also thank my committee
24 staff who worked hard, Alejandro Carvajal [sp?], our
25 Committee Counsel to my right, Regina Paul-- she's

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2 somewhere floating around-- our Senior Policy Analyst
3 and Margaret Barnsley, our Financial Analyst. And
4 finally, I want to thank my Chief of Staff, Daniel
5 Kurzyna who's in the back there, who's birthday is
6 today. Okay, Council Member-- I was told Council
7 Member Paladino is on Zoom also. So, I'd like to
8 turn it over to our Committee Counsel to administer
9 the oath to witnesses from the administration. Thank
10 you.

11 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Good afternoon.

12 Please raise your right hands, and I will call on
13 each of you individually. Do you affirm to tell the
14 truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth in
15 your testimony before this committee and to respond
16 honestly to Council Member's questions? Commissioner
17 Hendon?

18 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I do.

19 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Nicole Orlando?

20 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: I do.

21 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Donee' Smalls?

22 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: I do.

23 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. As a
24 reminder to all of our witnesses, please state your
25

2 name prior to your testimony for the record. You may
3 begin.

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Good afternoon,
5 Chair Holden, members of the Veterans Committee, U.S.
6 military service members past and present, and
7 veteran community supports, benefactors, and allies.
8 My name is James Hendon. I'm proud to serve as
9 Commissioner of the New York City Department of
10 Veterans Services. Joining me today is Nicole
11 Orlando, Deputy Chief of Staff and Director of
12 Veteran Transition, and Donee' Smalls, Executive
13 Director for Housing Support Services. We are
14 honored to appear before you in this discussion that
15 follows up on the points made in the April 2025 City
16 Council DVS Scorecard. First and foremost, I'd like
17 to once again thank and acknowledge all who are part
18 of this process. I want to acknowledge our team at
19 DVS, many of whom contributed to the agency's
20 response. I would also like to recognize those in the
21 Council who were directly involved in this. By unit
22 I'd like to call out the City Council compliance,
23 data operations, web development, Committee on
24 Veterans, event production services, Oversight and
25 Investigations, and those who contributed to the

2 editing of this document. Last but not least, I'd
3 like to recognize all veterans and community
4 advocates who contributed. Any day when we are
5 talking about veterans is a good day. I recognize
6 that we all have different roles, but everyone's
7 unified goal who's involved in this process is to see
8 better outcomes and services delivered to the U.S.
9 Military service members past and present and their
10 loved ones in this great city. Before getting into
11 the weeds on certain aspects our response to the
12 scorecard and where the agency stands in the wake of
13 the report at this time, I want to acknowledge
14 certain foundational issues and what is a well-
15 intentioned, but in certain places flawed analysis.
16 For one thing, I want to remind the Council that DVS
17 estimates there to be more than 200,000 veterans in
18 New York City, especially when accounting for those
19 who either A, currently serve in the military of all
20 components, active duty Guard and Reserves, or B, our
21 former guardsman and reservists who were never placed
22 on active duty status. The Census Bureau does not
23 count these groups. As an example, I, Commissioner
24 of the NYC Department of Veterans Services have
25 served in the military for 23 years, seven as an

2 active duty officer who deployed to Iraq and
3 Afghanistan, 16 as a U.S. Army Reservist. I am still
4 serving. I am not counted in the Census Bureau's data
5 as being a veteran. That said, while we estimate
6 that more than 200,000 veterans live in New York
7 City, according to a City Council spokesperson who
8 communicated with the media when the report was
9 released, "Only 21 people surveyed as part of the
10 report." 21 out of more than 200,000 veterans is
11 less than 0.01 percent of our community. The size,
12 makeup and method of selection limit what can be
13 inferred repeatedly leaning all this small group
14 throughout the report without clearly noting those
15 limitations does the analysis a disservice. This
16 brings me to my second point. Leaders from the
17 largest veterans service organizations in New York
18 City were not included in this discussion. The VSOs
19 that have a strong enough presence in New York City
20 to have paid full time staff operating in the five
21 boroughs at the time of the Council's analysis were
22 the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars,
23 Disabled American Veterans, Wounded Warrior Project,
24 Blue Star Families, Black Veterans for Social
25 Justice, and Hope for the Warriors. No senior person

2 from each of these VSOs participated in the Council's
3 surveys nor its discussions to our knowledge. I'm
4 speaking of no district commander for the American
5 Legion or VFW, no leadership from the DAV Department
6 of New York, no person who leads the New York City
7 teams for the Wounded Warrior Project, Blue Star
8 Families or Hope for the Warriors, and no one at the
9 C Suite level from Black Veterans for Social Justice,
10 New York City's largest home-grown veterans service
11 organization. We respect the views of the 21
12 participants. We also believe that omitting senior
13 VSO important [sic] voices, those with scale, case
14 load and citywide reach constrains the utility of the
15 findings. For future surveys, please start with the
16 question who are the largest actors in this domain,
17 and are there senior leaders at the table? That
18 approach will strengthen any conclusions drawn. The
19 last thing I want to touch on before we discuss the
20 scorecard is its contradictions. In many cases, one
21 page says one thing, another page says something
22 else, or what is said in the scorecard does not match
23 with reality. Case in point: Borden Avenue Veterans
24 Residence is a Department of Homeless Services-run
25 shelter with select beds that are subsidized by the

2 VA that exclusively houses veterans in New York City.

3 One page says DVS has no presence at Borden Avenue

4 Veterans Residence. Another page says the truth

5 which is that we maintain a daily presence at Borden

6 Avenue. One page of the report says that DVS is not

7 transparent about data. Another page points out that

8 DVS makes information available through the Open Data

9 Portal, Mayor's Management Report, and Local Law

10 reporting. I would also like to point the public to

11 nyc.gov/vetreports, a website where we publish our

12 data-related information reported for porting and

13 outputs. One page says that DVS does not provide

14 descriptions of roles in the agency. A description

15 of each role in the agency along with explanations of

16 our methods of data collection, definition for

17 specific terms, summaries of our programs, and DVS'

18 overall performance information can be found in the

19 annual report that we submit in accordance with Local

20 Law 44 of 2019. This too can be found on

21 nyc.gov/vetreports. Most airing [sic], one page says

22 that our work "has not translated to consistent

23 improvement of services, communication, or outreach."

24 Meanwhile, the most recent Mayor's Management Report

25 shows increases in each of the following metrics when

2 you compare the averages of FY 22 and 23 to FY 24 and
3 25: Veterans and their families served by DVS, 345
4 percent increase from an average of 2,203 veterans
5 and families served in FY 22 and 23 to an average of
6 9,811 served in FY 24 and 25. Requests from veterans
7 and their families: 518 percent increase from an
8 average of 5,058 requests in FY 22 and 23 to an
9 average of 31,262 requests in FY 24 and 25. Public
10 engagement events attended by DVS to promote veteran
11 resources, 48 percent increase from an average of 196
12 events in FY 22 and 23 to an average of 291 events in
13 FY 24 and 25. Online site visits, 113 percent
14 increase from an average of 77,025 visits in FY 22
15 and 23 to an average of 163,870 visits in FY 24 and
16 25. Homeless veterans and their families who
17 received housing through DVS' Veteran Peer
18 Coordinator Program, 59 percent increase from an
19 average of 88 who received housing in FY 22 and 23 to
20 an average of 140 in FY 24 and 25. I've said this
21 before. If I am grading a student who has
22 significantly improved their performance in key
23 metrics, anywhere from a 48 percent increase to a 518
24 percent increase-- 518 percent is more than five-
25 fold. While I can find flaws in anyone, including

2 that student, it is difficult for me to say that the
3 student's grade should be a C. Apart from the less
4 than 0.01 percent of the community's comments which
5 excluded feedback from leadership of New York City's
6 largest veterans service organizations. You have to
7 do things positively in the fields of leadership,
8 service delivery, collaboration, workforce
9 development, digital government, and knowledge
10 management to drive an organization towards an
11 impactful place. We believe we are accomplishing
12 that objective. Now, there are pro tips and findings
13 worthy of being acknowledged in the score card, many
14 of which we will get to. I want to make sure that we
15 do not accept every single word written in the
16 document as gospel. Like human beings, these things
17 are messy. It is important to separate the wheat from
18 the chaff in determining what is key as we look to
19 improve the delivery of services to veterans in the
20 City of New York to reconcile the findings of the
21 report between what select respondents communicated,
22 and how we see things at DVS. The at most 21
23 respondents in my opinion want DVS to be at maturity
24 with this process and systems right now, want DVS to
25 receive enhanced resources to perform its work right

2 now, and what DVS to fulfil the needs which can be
3 seen in New York City's veteran community right now.
4 This is all understandable and acceptable. We agree
5 to those challenges. For DVS, we view things through
6 the following lenses. How do we address current
7 needs while operating in a land of constraints, doing
8 the best we can with what we have. This is in light
9 of limited resources triggered by the 2020 to 2023
10 COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 to 2025 New York City
11 moderate crisis. How can we address current needs
12 being mindful of our entire charter? Per Chapter 75
13 of the New York City Charter, the NYC Department of
14 Veterans Services is tasked to assist and inform
15 veteran and military families in the areas of health
16 care, housing, benefits, culture, education, and
17 employment. How do we address current needs while
18 looking to empower all veterans, not just those on
19 one side of the bell curve. Next thing we think
20 about are how do we galvanize partners such as the
21 onus to serve our brothers and sisters and their
22 loved ones does not fall on one entity, but on all of
23 us, city, state, federal, public, private, nonprofit
24 from domains including but not limited to academia,
25 industry, government, the philanthropic space,

2 entrepreneurship, and finance. Most significantly,
3 while addressing current needs which can be seen, how
4 do we build an agency that can respond to the three
5 existential challenges facing our community, needs
6 that are comparatively unseen. Those existential
7 challenges are A: a majority of veterans do not self-
8 identify. A reminder that the self-identification
9 rate according to the VA in FY 23 was 34.3 percent
10 nationwide, 29.8 percent in New York State and 24.1
11 percent in New York City. B: The VA does not market
12 its services. The FY 26 budget for the U.S.
13 Department of Veterans Affairs is \$441.3 billion. It
14 is second only to the budget for the Defense
15 Department. A lot of items specific to marketing
16 appears nowhere in the VA's budget documents. For
17 perspective, the VA's budget consists of five volumes
18 with a total length of 1,588 pages. Not displaying a
19 budget for marketing is a glaring and intentional
20 error. C: The veteran population is declining. The
21 VA projects an annual rate of decline of 1.82 percent
22 nationally and 3.19 percent in New York State. Year
23 over year, since this data suggests a 4.83 percent
24 annual rate of decline in New York City. We need to
25 persuade current New York City veterans to stay and

2 transitioning active duty service members to live,
3 learn and work here. Established on April 8th, 2016-
4 - DVS is nine years old. Our first three years of
5 existence, 2016 to 2019, centered on logistically
6 establishing ourselves as a Department and
7 functioning primarily as a referral agency. The last
8 six years, 2020 to 2025 has seen the agency expand to
9 become a referral and services institution. Our
10 approach over the past several years to address
11 current and existential challenges has been 1: Obtain
12 veteran data so that we can learn who our
13 constituents are. We've worked to obtain veteran
14 information at the city, state and federal levels.
15 We also obtained veteran contact information from our
16 own events and programing. DVS leads other states in
17 collaborating to obtain transitioning service member
18 contact information from the defense department.
19 This approach has enabled us to grow from having
20 contacting information for approximately 5,000 New
21 York City veterans in 2019 to more than 150,000
22 veterans in 2025. Two: build offerings that inspire
23 veterans and their loved ones to self-identify. Our
24 direct services are housing, claims, and employment.
25 We fill gaps not being filled in the existing

2 ecosystem in each of those areas. Further, DVS
3 continues to make referrals where applicable as we
4 have always done. Synergies, that is programs with
5 partners where one plus one equals three. New
6 policies and new laws passed are ways that we create
7 new offerings, sharing the burden all around. Our
8 hope, one of our many offerings is strong enough to
9 draw each veteran community member from darkness into
10 the light. Examples of offerings that I'm speaking
11 of include but are not limited to the health care,
12 the veteran feeding program, provides food and
13 secures veterans with access to meals,
14 NYC.gov/vetfood. The Veteran Mental Health
15 Coalition, a community of practiced mental health and
16 social services professionals who currently and
17 potentially will interact with military-connected New
18 Yorkers, nyc.gov/vetmentalhealth. For housing which
19 is all at nyc.gov/vethousing, the Mitchell-Lama
20 Veterans Preference Transparency-- now, veterans can
21 see how many people are using the Mitchell-Lama
22 Veterans Preference to be housed in each Mitchell-
23 Lama development. This organically evens out the
24 veterans preference wait lists for Mitchell-Lama
25 housing. Hearing, vision and mobility units, and

2 Housing Connect: DVS and the VA can sign off, verify
3 in service connected hearing, vision and mobility
4 disabilities for veterans applying for disability
5 set-aside units at Housing Connect. The Housing
6 Connect Veterans Preference-- there now exists a
7 veterans preference in Housing Connect.

8 Specifically, there's a 10 percent preference for
9 municipal employees and U.S. military veterans. The
10 VS home loan: A veteran who is eligible for
11 [inaudible] in New York City-- in the New York City
12 region, West Chester, Long Island and five boroughs
13 needs to only provide one percent of the purchase
14 price to purchase a house, condo or co-op. Sony May
15 [sic] through participating lenders and in some cases
16 the Hebrew Free Loan Society provides financing to
17 the veteran household to cover the remaining balance.
18 This includes closing costs. In New York City, a
19 household with one or two people is eligible for Sony
20 May if their household income is \$194,400 or less. A
21 household with three or more people is eligible for
22 Sonny May if their household income is \$226,800 or
23 less. Nyc.gov/homesforveterans. It benefits the
24 Vallone Veterans Initiative. A full-time Veterans of
25 Foreign Wars veterans service officer works out of

2 each City Council Member's district office one day
3 per month-- nyc.gov/vetvallone. Mission Vet Check:
4 Volunteers calls more than 15,000 veterans per year
5 to check in on them, thank them for their service and
6 make sure they take advantage of the benefits and
7 offerings-- nyc.gov/vetcheck. For culture, the PFC
8 Joseph P. Dwyer program, DVS supports more 25
9 community-led hyperlocal wellness activities
10 throughout New York City. Activities include but are
11 no limited to chess, yoga, equine therapy, and
12 pickleball. Each activity serves to normalize help-
13 seeking behavior amongst veteran and military
14 families-- Nyc.gov/vetdwyer. The Veteran Voices
15 Project, a program which enables veteran community
16 members to record their oral histories and archive
17 the recordings with the Municipal Archives and
18 Library of Congress: nyc.gov/vetvoices. In
19 education, the Veterans Tuition Award program
20 expansion: As of this year, the scholarship provided
21 by the State of New York to veterans, the Veterans
22 Tuition Award has been expanded to include combat and
23 non-combat veterans, nyc.gov/vetstudents. The
24 Military Family Advocate program: Department of
25 Education principals identify representatives, one

2 per school, to be trained by DVS and serve as a
3 liaison for military-connected students, staff and
4 faculty, nyc.gov/vetmfa. For employment, Vet Jobs.
5 Vet Jobs is an aggressive case coordination specific
6 to job-seekers. Vet Jobs assess a job-seeker,
7 determines the best employment and/or workforce
8 development option for them, then connects the person
9 to set opportunity. In situations where no other
10 provider is able to assist the veteran, DVS steps in
11 providing direct support. This is often the case
12 with veteran community members who apply for public
13 sector jobs and/or those who need to navigate New
14 York City and New York State programs like NY Helps,
15 55A, 55B, and 55C, nyc.gov/vetjobs. The Veteran
16 Business Leadership Association, an effort which
17 provides veteran business owners with professional
18 mentorship, technical assistance, certification
19 support, networking opportunities, and promotion
20 through being featured in our map of veteran and
21 military spouse-owned businesses, nyc.gov/vetbizmap.
22 More details in general are at nyc.gov/vetbusiness.
23 And three [sic], part of our approach to address
24 existential challenges has been to continue refining
25 our operations, processes and core functions.

2 There's been a great deal of growth since DVS was
3 first established in 2016. Back then, into our first
4 three years, the Department of Citywide
5 Administrative Services, DCAS, effectively held our
6 hands as we performed administrative duties such as
7 payroll and timekeeping, human resources, information
8 technology, fiscal operations, equal employment
9 opportunity, legal, logistics, and compliance. Now,
10 we do those things independently. From a process
11 standpoint, key milestones that DVS has reached as of
12 late are, A, the Department is more active in
13 processing City Council discretionary contracts.
14 Starting in FY27, all City Council discretionary
15 awards for veteran programs valued at \$25,000 or less
16 will be processed by the Department of Veteran
17 Services. B, in FY26 DVS changed technology partners
18 for our online services platform, Vet Connect NYC.
19 We now use a provider, Combined Arms, which is a for
20 us, by us veteran-owned and operated organization.
21 The new Vet Connect platform more easily dovetails
22 with DVS client and community needs. To that point,
23 all DVS workflows and procedures specific to client
24 services are being captured in Vet Connect. C, the
25 Department will execute its first multi-year master

2 agreement contract complete with a list of winning
3 vendors to support the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer program--
4 funding for Dwyer program providers starting in FY
5 27. To pan back, the charter for the agency tasks
6 DVS to assist and inform veteran and military
7 families in the areas of health care, housing,
8 benefits, culture, education, and employment. Among
9 other things, DVS has spent the past nine years
10 building the agency and establishing offerings in
11 each charter mandated space. We deliver those
12 offerings through either providing direct services--
13 once again our direct services are housing, claims,
14 and employment, making referrals, or collaborating
15 with stakeholders to execute synergies. The meta
16 strategy tied to our work is connect, mobilize,
17 empower. Connect: we, DVS and the broader veteran
18 service ecosystem learn who the NYC veteran community
19 is. Mobilize: The NYC veteran community learns who
20 we are and what we have to offer. Once again,
21 speaking beyond the DVS, the we includes all who
22 provide veteran services, benefits, and support.
23 Empower: we serve them, veterans and their loved
24 ones. These three phases, connect, mobilize,
25 empower, have overlap. Some portion of them is

2 always occurring at the same time. That being said,
3 the principle energy of this agency in its first nine
4 years has been focused on connect, in addition to
5 being born. We are in a period of transition as DVS
6 shifts its focus to mobilize. Veterans will learn
7 who we are during mobilize, because we now offer
8 several things that can capture people's attention
9 and draw them into the light. They can then be
10 served by us. Our offerings are rooted in access,
11 affordability, and opportunity. We spent years
12 building an apparatus that can absorb what comes when
13 getting to the future state of empower. Empower at
14 100 percent means that you have maximum self-
15 identification coupled with maximum utilization of
16 benefits, coupled with best in class execution of
17 partnerships. We have been focused like a laser on
18 building an ecosystem capable of performing at this
19 level. For the scorecard on Parks, the assessment
20 team compared New York City to San Francisco-- the
21 Parks Department, excuse me. The assessment team
22 compared New York City to San Francisco, Los Angeles,
23 Chicago, and Minneapolis. In our space, because New
24 York City is the only municipality with a Veterans
25 Services Department, not a commission, board, or an

2 office, we're home to so many veterans. The best
3 organizations to compare us to at the state level--
4 are state level Department of Veterans Services for
5 states with comparable veteran population sizes.
6 Those are Iowa whose Department of Veterans Affairs
7 is 47 years old, Connecticut, 80 years old, New
8 Mexico, 22 years old, and Vermont, at least 107 years
9 old. For context, New York State's DVS is 80. When
10 you look at those peers and most states and
11 territories, few are built to attack the three
12 existential problems the way that we are. Once again,
13 the existential problems facing the veteran community
14 are one, low self-identification, two, a lack of VA
15 marketing, and three, population decline. Few
16 departments position themselves to be proactive like
17 us with an eye towards engaging all veterans. The
18 reason? There's reluctance to innovate in the face
19 of resource constraints. With partners, you can
20 build a network that is able to receive an influx of
21 veteran service requests and resolve them as they
22 come. Without partners, veteran service agencies find
23 themselves in a chicken versus egg dynamic of I don't
24 want to aggressively market veterans benefits and
25 services because I'm incapable of addressing a

2 massive number of requests if they arrive. Our
3 posture at DVS is both/and. We market as we scale so
4 demand grows in step with capacity. We pair outreach
5 with service readiness, then use what we learn from
6 intake and fulfillment to tighten the loop, and we do
7 it with partners so the system can absorb a surge,
8 triage quickly, and keep faith with the people we
9 bring in. Without that partner network, agencies
10 become restrained. With it, you can create demand
11 and meet it responsibly. That is what it means for
12 us to be on offense in helping veterans and their
13 families in New York City. When addressing the needs
14 of today, we are endeavoring to build an agency and a
15 broader veteran support ecosystem which will make it
16 easier for veterans to self-identify, live, learn,
17 and thrive in the five boroughs decades from now well
18 into tomorrow. And I want to repeat, we're doing all
19 these things in support of the future and all New
20 York City veterans while presently achieving more
21 than three-fold growth and the number of veterans and
22 their families served, more than five-fold growth in
23 the number of service requests we respond to, 48
24 percent growth in the number of public engagement
25 events we attend promoting veteran resources, more

2 than two-fold growth in the number of visits to the
3 DVS website, and a 59 percent increase in the number
4 of homeless veterans and their families who receive
5 housing through the DVS Veteran Peer Coordinator
6 program. Regarding the scorecard and our actions and
7 response to its major critiques, things not already
8 mentioned-- the strategy for DVS along with short,
9 mid-term, and long-term goals now appears on the
10 agency's website at nyc.gov/vetmission. The massive
11 digital strategy plan for DVS is posted on
12 nyc.gov/vetmedia. The data sharing policy with DVS
13 is posted on nyc.gov/vetreports. A formal feedback
14 form can now be found at nyc.gov/vetcontact. A
15 greater degree a case-related details and a smarter
16 grouping of client requests and descriptions is
17 incorporated into the Combined Arms technology that
18 now undergirds Vet Connect NYC. During this fiscal
19 year, FY26, six positions were added to DVS'
20 headcount which will implicitly increase the level of
21 quality assurance and quality control from an
22 internal checks and balances standpoint. Those
23 positions are three coordinators who have been added
24 to our Housing Support Services team and three who
25 have been added to our Veteran Support Services team,

2 also known as VA Claims Unit. During this fiscal
3 year, two positions were added to DVS' which will
4 explicitly increase the level of quality assurance
5 and quality control of our reporting and actions.
6 Those positions are Vet connect NYC Coordinator. One
7 person will oversee, help optimize, internally
8 evaluate the flow of all of our Vet Connect services
9 and referrals. The Senior Advisor for Operations--
10 the Senior Advisor for Operations will provide
11 command and control over the Housing Support Services
12 team and the Veterans Support Services team. This
13 will be an added layer of internal oversight, quality
14 assurance, and quality control. Leaders of the VSS
15 and HSS units will report to the Senior Advisor for
16 Ops. Since the scorecard was published in April of
17 2025. DVS has executed agreements which allow us to
18 share veteran contact information broken down to the
19 district level with all Community Boards, Borough
20 Presidents, and city and state legislators in New
21 York City. One by one we're currently executing
22 similar agreements with federal elected officials.
23 There are several benefits to doing this. One to
24 point out which addresses a scorecard criticism, if
25 all of us, DVS, Community Boards, Borough Presidents,

2 City Council Members, State Assembly Members, State
3 Senators, Congressmen, Senators, etcetera-- if all of
4 us send mailings to the veterans in our catchment
5 areas at least one time per year, then we will have
6 significant amplified the level of non-digital
7 outreach to older veterans in the community. I've
8 just mentioned key areas of feedback where we are
9 able to respond. Key areas where we were not able to
10 respond or did not respond are: our Veteran Support
11 Services team meets remotely, and when needed in-
12 person physically with clients who are not able to
13 meet during traditional business hours. This is a
14 more efficient use of time and resources one where we
15 can flex to the veteran, meeting them closer to where
16 they are as opposed to having members of our VSS team
17 positioned in a stationary location on nights and
18 weekends. DVS is unable to share its ideal number of
19 employees. No agency can. We do not want to get in
20 the way-- or without knowing, negatively impact
21 delicate budget negotiations that are ongoing between
22 the Mayor and City Council. These types of
23 conversations transcend DVS and have ripple effects
24 on other agencies and efforts. For that reason, it
25 is above our level to explicitly weigh in on these

2 matters when it come to us. Recognizing these
3 constraints, we endeavor to be as open and
4 transparent as possible on all other veteran
5 services-related issues. We pray that our
6 participation in these Veterans Committee hearings of
7 which there are nine to 11 hearings per year-- we
8 attend all hearings from start to finished, provide
9 Council Members and the public with an accurate
10 depiction of the strengths, weaknesses,
11 opportunities, and threats for agency and New York
12 City's veteran community as a whole. The Department
13 of Veteran Services follows New York City Human
14 Rights Law. As of 2017, the law prevents
15 discrimination on the basis of being or having been a
16 uniformed services member. This means that DVS as an
17 employer cannot discriminate against someone for
18 being a member of uniformed services. Conversely, we
19 cannot discriminate against someone for not being a
20 member of the uniformed services. We hire the best
21 person for each job. We promote our job openings to
22 the veteran community, posting them in our weekly
23 newsletter, and sharing them with veteran military
24 spouse-focused workforce development partners. That
25 said, these opportunities are also found on

2 nyc.gov/jobs. That website, City Jobs, is the
3 official portal for all who seek employment with the
4 City of New York. All are welcomed and encouraged to
5 apply to work at DVS. For perspective, when looking
6 at the number of veteran employees at DVS compared to
7 our authorized strength, 34 percent of our headcount
8 as of this month is filled by veterans. That is 17
9 out of 50 positions. The next closest agency to DVS
10 in this metric is the FDNY at 8.4 percent, followed
11 by the Sanitation Department at five percent,
12 followed by the NYPD at 4.8 percent, followed by the
13 Department of Corrections at 4.7 percent. While 34
14 percent of DVS employees have served in the U.S.
15 military, 25 percent of U.S. Department of Veteran
16 Affairs employees have served in the armed forces as
17 of September of 2024, based on the most recent
18 available data. 70 percent of the veterans employed
19 at DVS are community coordinators. Three of our
20 employees or six percent are military spouses. As
21 mentioned in the report, DVS holds annual veteran
22 summits, roundtables with specific groups, i.e.
23 veteran street vendors, housing advocates, mental
24 health providers, Hispanic veterans, etcetera. We
25 attend Community Board meetings. We have a contact

2 the Commissioner page on the DVS website. We proctor
3 a military community survey every two to four years.
4 We participate in all NYC Veterans Advisory Board
5 meetings, and we hold three to five community
6 engagement session each year. For community
7 engagement session along with advertising the virtual
8 sessions in our newsletter, on social media, and the
9 DVS website, we invite more than 240 community
10 benefits organizations, more than 160 veteran service
11 organizations, and the staffs of all city, state, and
12 federal legislative officials who represent New York
13 City to attend. Separate from individual stakeholder
14 meetings, we attended more than 300 public events in
15 FY25. The Council engaged 21 people about DVS. For
16 the subset of those 21 respondents who have issues
17 with the agency, there are several forms through
18 which that feedback can be shared, including
19 completing our newly created feedback form which is
20 located at nyc.gov/vetcontact. The NYC Veterans
21 Advisory Board is an example of a group that had
22 feedback about DVS operations which we responded to.
23 The City Council hearing held on September 22nd, 2025
24 about the VAB illustrated our response. Our member
25 responding to the 2024 Veterans Advisory Board report

2 can be found at nyc.gov/vetboard. If these
3 advocates, and I do not believe I've seen all the
4 people referenced in the report attend City Council
5 hearings. We don't know who they are. If these
6 advocates-- and I do not wish to engage DVS directly,
7 and do not wish to attend DVS connective activities
8 and other veteran I believe I've seen all the people
9 referencing the report- to not wish to engage DVS
10 directly and do not wish to attend DVS connected
11 activities, or other veteran forums where they can
12 provide feedback and will be present, then we
13 encourage them to continue communicating with us
14 through the Council. We have no issues if you choose
15 to do this discretely. We ask that you continue to
16 be part of the conversation. To all who offered
17 feedback to the agency through this scorecard, there
18 is value in saying something. Thank you for what you
19 did. Look no further than the developments that have
20 arisen from this report to see that you have a voice.
21 Reflecting on all that has been said this far, the
22 long view to me-- first, a child is a different
23 person every six months. DVS, relatively a child in
24 New York City government is nine years old. We are a
25 growing, learning, and self-correcting organization.

2 Add to that, building programs where government is
3 involved and there are resource constraints is a
4 process. This is not to mention that a majority of
5 our clients do not self-identify as veterans. In
6 growing to reach maturity, these things take time.
7 For an advocate who took issue with something they
8 saw from DVS at a specific moment, at age three, we
9 need to acknowledge that age three is not the same as
10 age five which is not the same as seven, which is not
11 the same as nine or 10 or beyond. For those
12 observing us, please ask the rhetorical questions, is
13 DVS listening to feedback? Is the agency correcting
14 itself? Are they improving? Second, in public
15 service and in government historically there's a lag
16 between when policy innovations is executed and when
17 it penetrates and is fully realized by those who
18 benefit from it. I think that's where we are right
19 now. You will see a situation very soon where more
20 veterans come to us. Us equals all in the veterans
21 services ecosystem for helping -- for help getting
22 money from the VA, for access to veteran's affordable
23 housing, and for life-changing employee and
24 entrepreneurial opportunities among other amenities.
25 This is already happening in real time. Viewing it

2 from the outside, it's hard for somebody to
3 distinguish a direct service from a referral, from a
4 synergy. Based on how things traditionally worked
5 it's easier to say all this should and likely is
6 being done by DVS, when in actuality we are executing
7 a team approach, an outside review these synergies
8 and offerings and assumes DVS is doing too much.
9 They're spread to thin, when in reality our partners
10 are performing the heavy lifting. Moreover, if all
11 that we did was focus on the basics and not put these
12 offerings together, then at best, we would increase
13 New York City's veteran self-identification rate from
14 24.1 percent to the national average of 34.3 percent.
15 Putting aside the issue of veteran population
16 decline. But we're not putting that issue aside, and
17 we're not settling for 34.3 percent. Our goal is
18 punch through the target and reach a 100 percent
19 veteran self-- and reach 100 percent veteran self-
20 identification. As sure as the goal in the veteran
21 communities to bring the veteran unemployment rate to
22 zero, the veteran suicide rate to zero, and the
23 veteran homeless population zero. We will settle for
24 nothing less when it comes to the number of veterans
25 in New York city who do not self-identify. We want

2 that number to be zero as well. This means that all
3 veterans will tell people that they have served.
4 They will allow themselves to receive earned
5 benefits, honors, and services. We're committed to
6 accomplishing that goal. We're playing for the long-
7 term. We're coming for everybody. To the veterans,
8 you committed to protect all of us, we commit to
9 serve all of you. We are so grateful to the
10 Speaker and the Council for being on this journey
11 with us. Despite some of our issues with the report,
12 it means the world to us that our have dedicated
13 these resources and time towards DVS being our best.
14 It was an honor to be the first in the process. As I
15 said, any day when we're talking about veterans is a
16 good day. A separate topic, recognizing that this is
17 the end of the year and the end of the
18 administration's term. For the record, that the City
19 Council has done well and things where collectively
20 there could be improvement in the eyes of DVS follow.
21 First, the great things: expanding the Veterans
22 Advisory Board to include veteran family members,
23 codifying Vet Connect NYC, passing Local Law 37 which
24 includes veteran identifier questions on client-
25 facing city forms, creating the Vallone Veterans

2 initiative which has a VFW accredited veteran service
3 officer working each Council Member's district office
4 delivering services to their constituents once per
5 month, passing Intro 740 of 2024, the Cold War
6 Veterans Property Tax Exemption which will become law
7 this month-- valued at \$10 million per year, this is
8 the largest city investment into the veteran
9 community since the creation of DVS, it is larger
10 than that by dollar amount, and growing DVS by 25
11 percent manpower-wise with the adopted FY26 budget,
12 and then the City Council Scorecard process. Areas
13 of improvement: to Council Members who have not done
14 so yet, please reach out to DVS or the Council
15 Connect team to obtain contact information for the
16 veterans in your district. Ask the Local Law 37
17 questions on constituent intake forms at your
18 district offices. Those questions are--
19 paraphrasing-- have you or a member of your household
20 ever served in the U.S. Armed Forces? If so, do you
21 consent to being contacted by DVS? Formally, add
22 veteran representation to the Street Vendor Advisory
23 Board. Codify the Veteran Business Leadership
24 Association. Increase Council discretionary funding
25 to veteran-serving nonprofits. With the exception of

2 the Vallone Veterans Initiative which we are
3 eternally grateful for, there was no increase to the
4 level of Schedule C funding dispersed in the field of
5 Veteran Services from FY 23 through FY 26. Have all
6 groups that receive city tax levy dollars to serve
7 the veterans. Communicate with DVS so that at a
8 minimum we can work with them to enhance their
9 outreach. Beyond that, we can also provide those who
10 need it with military cultural competency training
11 and other support. And then for the few City Council
12 District offices that have not yet scheduled
13 recurring office hours with the VFW in support of the
14 Vallone Veterans Initiative, please do so. Lastly, I
15 want to thank the Veterans Committee of the City
16 Council for its service. Acknowledging committee
17 members Chair Robert Holden, Council Member Kristy
18 Marmorato, Council Member Vickie Paladino, Council
19 Member Joann Ariola, Council Member Sandy Nurse, and
20 Council Member Simcha Felder. Thank you for your
21 leadership. To the departing members, Chair Holden
22 and Council Member Marmorato, thank you for your
23 service. This is not goodbye. Once a member of the
24 veteran community, always a member. Please continue
25 to contribute to the conversation about what we can

2 do to help U.S. military service members past and
3 present along with their caregivers, survivors, and
4 families. Finally, the NYC Department of Veterans
5 Services can be reached via telephone at 212-416-
6 5250. Say it again, 212-417-5250. Email at
7 connect@veterans.nyc.gov. Once again,
8 Connect@veterans.nyc.gov. Online at nyc.gov/vets.
9 Once again, it's nyc.gov/vets. And through social
10 media using the handle @nycveterans. Once again, the
11 handle is @nycveterans. God bless you. God bless the
12 City of New York and God bless America. Thank you.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Wow. Thank you,
14 Commissioner. You saved the best for last. That was
15 really enlightening, and I want to say hard-hitting,
16 because it, you know-- I would not disagree with
17 anything you said. And the fact that anytime you try
18 to grade an agency that's woefully underfunded by
19 everyone-- but you just mentioned about the Council
20 Member initiatives or discretionary funding. We've
21 been fighting. This committee's been fighting to try
22 to increase that. We haven't been successful. But I
23 also, you know, both sides of City Hall have not
24 supported DVS, and I'll say that for the record, and
25 I'll say that-- I said that to the Mayor. I said that

2 to the Speaker, and that's a shame. It's a shame
3 because if we put the money into DVS, we would see
4 increase not only in veteran support services from
5 the VA and from other agencies, but it would
6 certainly help the tax base. We are-- veterans would
7 get more money, and that would certainly help New
8 York City and, of course, veterans. So, your
9 testimony is-- again, was enlightening and true. And
10 I thank you again for your service. I could not think
11 of a better Commissioner to work with in my four
12 years on this committee as Chair, and I think
13 everybody will agree with that who's worked with you.
14 So, again, I just-- that's neither here nor there at
15 this point, because I'm going to ask some questions,
16 but you answered a lot of them in the testimony.
17 Because I have a few questions here about leadership
18 strategy and direction. You answered-- you know, you
19 published the report card, recommended that DVS
20 publish short and long-term agency strategic plans,
21 and you've done that on your website, and you--
22 obviously the stakeholders, VSOs and CBOs and service
23 members contributed. So, in looking at the-- and the
24 scorecard, again, it's subjective. I wouldn't have
25 given the agency a C, but that's, again, that's me,

2 because I know what the agency is up against. I know
3 the expanded roles that you've taken from referral to
4 obviously a lot more. And you mentioned about
5 growing as an agency, and comparing it to state
6 agencies is unfair. So, I think your assessment is
7 right on. And just the fact that we expanded the
8 Veteran Resource Centers and trying to get more
9 flexible with the hours, and try-- you know, doing
10 more on that. It was very important. Tell me about--
11 now you mentioned a budget. We had talked about this
12 before, like a budget in-- that you should have. If
13 we doubled the budget, it still wouldn't be enough, I
14 think. I mean, so if we got \$5 million-- mostly you
15 were allocated 5+ million each year, and then I think
16 now it's \$7 million--

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing] Yes,
18 yes.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: a little more than
20 that. but to reach every one of the 200,000
21 veterans, I would think we'd have to quadruple, and
22 do a regular mailing. But as far as what you
23 mentioned about Council Members helping and this
24 committee helping, I think certainly we could put a--
25 we could do a mailing to all the veterans. Our

2 council can do it. That we could try to get them to
3 self-identify and just try to say that-- and make a
4 case of why they should self-identify. So, I think
5 this Council, before they assess an agency that's
6 woefully underfunded,, should get their own house in
7 order. You know, if we're going to be part of a
8 solution, then we should help out more. How many
9 Council offices have taken you up on the Veteran
10 resources?

11 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Oh, as far as the
12 Vallone initiative?

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yes.

14 COMMISSIONER HENDON: It's-- right now we
15 got-- it is in 41 out of 51 Council Member offices.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] So, 10
17 Council Member's have not even contacted.

18 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And it's a back and
19 forth right now just to get that time scheduled as
20 far as when they want to have that person in there in
21 a recurring way. So, right now, 41 out of 51 Council
22 Members have it; 10 we're currently with, Mr. Chair.
23 Oh, us and the VFW. And we've been tying in with the
24 Council finance team to recognizing this is a contact

2 from-- you know, so we're all working together trying
3 to get to 51 out of the 51.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You answered about
5 13 of my questions, because we just assessed. You
6 know, looking at it. I'm reading what I-- my scripted
7 questions have been. I don't want to waste your time
8 or anybody else's time. But how did DVS-- did DVS
9 implement call-tracking software to monitor when
10 calls are returned and to track when a case is
11 closed?

12 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So, I'll start this,
13 and I'll ask Donee' to help me out with finishing
14 this. we already track these things as far as using-
15 - you know, it's the main line call volume report we
16 use that flows into, you know, our--

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] The
18 software, though? Do you have the software.

19 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'm going to ask
20 Donee' to kind of help me with out this.

21 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: Donee'
22 Smalls. While DVS does not currently have an
23 automated call-tracking software, we do monitor
24 response time performance.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, but what that
3 help if we had it?

4 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: Yes.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. So, it would
6 make your-- because you don't have a lot of
7 personnel. Like, we don't have-- I think many of the
8 DVS employees are doing a lot of different things,
9 and that just one. So, that software, if you could
10 look at that and Commissioner find out and ask the
11 Council, or you know, in your budget put that in
12 there, because that would help.

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And I want to
14 clear-- right now we-- it's manually inputted as far
15 as when that person's made that first call to us.
16 That's what we're talking about as far as bridging
17 that gap, but right now it's manually something. So
18 we capture when someone does call. Let's say someone
19 calls on a night, on a weekend, or a time when we
20 don't have some man on the phone, we capture that,
21 and then once we do have the person come back--

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] I know,
23 but if we had the software--

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing] But
25 it's manually--

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But if we had
3 software that actually would log it, and I think and
4 then even remind DVS about, you know, this-- it's
5 been 20 days or whatever, and you just remind that
6 person, it would help follow through and follow up.
7 So, I think anything-- you know, again, this is what
8 we need in the way of resources. So, you did-- you
9 know, so the report recommended that DVS should audit
10 its internal processes through a continuity of care
11 lens in order to track its services in a holistic
12 way. It recommended DVS create veteran profiles for
13 veteran DVS encounters, which you said you just did.
14 So, you-- has DVS created veteran profiles that were
15 recommended in the report? You've done that.

16 COMMISSIONER HENDON: The new Vet
17 Connect, yes. The combined [inaudible] Vet Connect
18 now.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And what does that
20 look like?

21 COMMISSIONER HENDON: It's more of the
22 idea of being able to have an account, so a user
23 name, log-in, for you when you log on as a community
24 member who is going to be using Vet Connect, and that
25 you can always come back it. So, we can be able to

2 access that profile. The prior system didn't do
3 that. the prior system that asked you-- you know,
4 their-- they wanted to say, okay, give me your phone
5 number, give me some basics, and then it would not
6 create a profile. We had to-- you know, every
7 request was starting from scratch from the veteran's
8 perspective, whereas now, a veteran who worked with
9 us for say years, can look back and say, okay, well,
10 I can see everything a part of my journey working
11 with DVS, and we can, too.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, and you know,
13 the report, we recommended relationships building and
14 collaboration with groups. And how has DVS improved
15 this relationship building effort since the report
16 card was issued?

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think what's tough
18 about that is I pushed back on the premise that
19 things were broken. I think of it as more so that
20 we're on a constant arc of improvement as far as
21 reaching out and engaging different communities. So,
22 since the report was published, it's 265 events we've
23 attended since it was published. You've had two
24 community engagement sessions since the report was
25 published. We usually do three to five per year.

2 You've had, you know, multiple-- there was a major
3 summit that we had at City Field. We had a veterans
4 film festival. We've had for-- record attendance for
5 our most recent Veteran's Day breakfast which is 659
6 folks attended. There have been just various other
7 things. Now, throw to Nicole, too, to add to this as
8 far as just the penetration.

9 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Thank you, Chair
10 Holden, City Council Members. I'm Nicole Orlando.
11 SO, for us also, separate of just the events that
12 Commissioner mentioned, an approach we have taken is
13 focusing on the employment entrepreneur and education
14 space. So, make sure we're really targeting those
15 areas. And separate of any events that we've
16 attended, spoken on, collaborated with, we have
17 facilitated 25 unique employment events, 12 unique
18 entrepreneurship-based events, 10 education-focused
19 events, and we've also facilitated two taps courses
20 on base at Fort Wadsworth.

21 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And there's more.
22 We can add to this, but it's the idea-- this is since
23 the report. So, this is-- for us it's we're
24 continuing to do what we do, but with just the

2 volume's continuing to increase with this. It's not
3 necessarily--

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] But
5 what have you-- going to all these events, what have
6 you learned in the way of-- have you learned sort of
7 new areas that you weren't aware of, and the feedback
8 that you're getting from some of the vet-- the older
9 veterans?

10 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And I want to add,
11 you've got the survey, also, as far as the veteran
12 military community and family survey where it-- the
13 top three things, or the things that we have as our
14 direct services are housing which is the greatest
15 need in the community. Then claims, which is another
16 one as far as that's helping giving someone economic,
17 you know, money in your pocket. And then employment
18 is something that's come-- something where we've seen
19 gaps in the employment ecosystem. We're filling them
20 right now. Those are things that really come from
21 interacting with community and just constantly taking
22 in all this input. But I'm sorry.

23 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Yeah. And just to
24 add to that, I think what we've noticed is that being
25 out there in the community more makes the community

2 feel safer to come to us with other things that they
3 need assistance with. So, a lot of the times with
4 the student veterans, you know, we're on campus.
5 We're going to their events. They feel comfortable to
6 come to us and say, hey, I'm graduating soon, I need
7 a job. Or to come to us and say hey, I was thinking
8 about starting a business where I may need housing
9 support. So, I think it's our presence just gives
10 them that comfort to reach out when they need
11 something.

12 COMMISSIONER HENDON: You see, more
13 people where it's multiple things. They realize oh,
14 you can help me with this. Then it just-- you folks
15 see all that we've got to offer between us and
16 partners, and are really embracing it.

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, I mean, just
18 if we had more personnel in DVS you can-- we could
19 hire more people to cover some of these Community-
20 based organization meetings and so it's actually-- it
21 goes with the budget, but you know, we just-- how do
22 you go-- there could be like five meetings a night in
23 each of the boroughs, let's say. And I know you go
24 to all the boroughs, and I don't where you get the
25 energy, but you do it, because every time I call you,

2 you're at some other events. So, it's not, you know,
3 certainly not noticed. But have you conducted, DVS
4 conducted a workload analysis to determine the
5 optimal staffing? Have you ever done that?

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We did it before he
7 last hearing, but this goes back to the point where
8 we-- I can't speak directly on what we think the
9 ideal number is. We went through this. That's why I
10 had that part in the testimony where--

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] I know,
12 but--

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing] But
14 we've done it internally. Yes, we--

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] What I
16 think we need to do coming on, you know, the
17 beginning, like certainly starting the beginning of
18 the year, if we can assess that and just see what
19 would be an ideal personnel strength to communicate
20 and to follow up with, you know, communications and--
21 you know, I did hear-- I do hear from some veterans
22 and it might be the same individuals sometimes who
23 say that DVS doesn't follow up. I said, well, did you
24 follow up? Or did you call them back, or the person
25 didn't know, and you know, you get complaints like

2 that. I mean, that's from the general public, not
3 only veterans. We hear it in our offices. But I
4 have to take DVS off that list of agencies that don't
5 follow-up, because again, you're a small agency and
6 you-- you know, obviously, overwhelmed if-- like you
7 said, you've been increasing your services, but yet
8 your budget hasn't increased--

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing] Mr.
10 Chair, I don't think you should take us off.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: tremendously.

12 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We should be held
13 accountable just like anybody else.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, I know. I get
15 that.

16 COMMISSIONER HENDON: don't take us off
17 that list. There's a--

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] No, I'm
19 not saying that. I'm saying that there's-- not to
20 blame the agency DVS necessarily. I think we have to
21 look the administration, the mayor and of course the
22 City Council administration who haven't supported DVS
23 like they could have, and then that's what this
24 committee has been saying all along, well they should
25 have. So, with additional positions that we had

2 talked about, and hopefully added-- you know, you did
3 add some in fiscal year 26. Can you walk us through
4 DVS's recruitment process and the status of the new
5 positions that you've got.

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'll say a little
7 bit, but I really want Donee' and Nicole to be able
8 to get in on this. The larger way that I look at is
9 our headcount is at 50 right now, and we've hired,
10 you know-- we have a group that's going to start this
11 coming Monday. Once that group starts, we'll be back
12 to having six slots not filled. So, you know, when
13 you get to Monday you'll be at 44 as far as the total
14 number of folks in the agency, and we're looking at
15 filling those six slots. The six slots not yet
16 filled, we have two housing coordinator seats that we
17 still need to fill. We have the Queens Veteran
18 Support Services seat-- claims coordinator agency for
19 Queens. You've got the intergovernmental affairs
20 representative, the director of IGA. You've got the
21 chauffeur who-- a person who just recently retired.
22 And you have the Vet Connect NYC coordinator. So,
23 you've got those six slots that we're yet to fill.
24 And then to go back as far as the new needs to speak
25 to what was added, it was nine and then ten added as

2 far as what came from the adopted budget, and the
3 recent addition of 10th add to the agency. Three
4 four housing, three for the claims team, one for
5 outreach, one to help just with the burials as far as
6 burials coordination for our veterans. One for Vet
7 Connect Coordinator, and then that senior advisory
8 for operations. So, you have those ten as far as new
9 needs, but really it's about being in a spot we've
10 got six more roles that have yet to be unfilled in
11 DVS.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright. But I
13 have-- have things improved with response times,
14 let's say, because of the extra funding or the extra
15 resources?

16 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Absolutely. I'll
17 say it like this, you know, we always say we can do
18 more with more. And one example is, you know, just
19 having a full-time receptionist. You know, think
20 about when the Council scorecard, the coverage
21 period, we didn't have a full-time receptionist on
22 staff at the time. We do now. And that is as
23 opposed to it being a mission where, you know, one
24 day it'd be one person. One day it'd be another
25 person. It was constantly revolving between our

2 claims and housing folks. But now, having someone
3 full-time, so that's an example of how with more
4 staff you can just see just stronger performance.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Have you-- has DVS
6 consulted with DCAS or the Law Department on lawful
7 avenues to increase veteran representation in the
8 agency workforce?

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We-- it's
10 frustrating when I follow-- we have to follow city
11 human rights law. So, we can't discriminate and say
12 I'm not going to give you this job because you're not
13 a veteran. At the same time, we do what we can to
14 get these job opportunities out in front of all who
15 would let our community know between what we do and
16 other--

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] So, we
18 can't say that-- we can't say that veterans are
19 preferred.

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yeah, I can't.
21 It's--

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Can't
23 do that, but we could certainly have the person
24 interviewing ask the question, are you a veteran?
25 Which we do, we have that law, but--

2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing] We-- I
3 can add-- that's for intake. So, if I'm going to be
4 served by-- I'm filling the initial intake form--

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Right.

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [inaudible] services
7 from a department, they can ask have you or a member
8 of your household served? Would you like to be
9 contacted by DVS? But we cannot discriminate on the
10 basis of uniformed services status. Meanwhile, we're
11 at 34 percent of the agency is veteran, which is
12 higher than the VA.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, your agency,
14 but--

15 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing]
16 [inaudible]

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: but I'm talking
18 about--

19 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Yeah. So, we also
20 have collaborated with DCAS in general with
21 increasing the number of veterans in civil service.
22 So, in June, DCAS accepted our proposal which allows
23 applicants who have left New York to go to service to
24 qualify for residency credit, even if they're not

2 located here because they're deployed to get those
3 credits for civil service.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's great.

5 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: And then in
6 addition to that, what we do is--

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Who's
8 idea was that? Come on. That was a good idea.

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: That was Nicole.
10 That was Nicole's idea. That was Nicole idea.

11 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: So, that's
12 something that we felt there was a-- we were hearing
13 a lot of stories from veterans who were trying to get
14 down that civil service path, specifically with FDNY,
15 NYPD, and what we felt was there was something more
16 that needed to be done, and we're very grateful to
17 our partners at DCAS who helped us with that. And
18 even in just in addition to that, one of the hats I
19 wear is our employment lead here, and what we do is
20 to make sure that any time DVS has opening positions
21 or any other city agencies for that matter, we ensure
22 that we're promoting them on social media directly to
23 our veterans, and ensuring that our screened and
24 qualified candidates that we work with already on
25 employment are notified about these opportunities and

2 almost matched. And then separate of that, we are a
3 proud Skill Bridge partner and VA work study site
4 which allows active duty service members and veteran
5 students to serve on our team as ancillary staff
6 members.

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And then let's talk
18 about digital government. You mentioned in your
19 prior testimony that many of the report card's
20 recommendations relating to digital strategy would be
21 accomplished via the launch of Vet Connect. Now that
22 Vet Connect is online, have you conducted any user
23 testing with older veterans, disabled veterans or,
24 you know, veterans who don't have, you know, access
25 to digital literacy. So, if so what user testing has

2 been conducted and what user testing does DVS plan to
3 do moving forward?

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: We've really just
5 begun user testing. It's being conducted by our IT
6 teams in progress right now. So, I don't have a
7 response at this time on it. So, once we know more,
8 we'll circle back, Mr. Chair. It's in progress, but
9 it's just started for us.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But what have you
11 learned from the first months of Vet Connect, I mean,
12 just generally?

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So, right now,
14 we're in the process of-- launched July of this year,
15 so FY26 launched. When-- we're still improving it,
16 nipping and tucking it, because it's a new platform
17 for us. The user experience is a piece that we're
18 working on as far as making sure that, you know, the
19 fonts are, you know, certain ways or there's certain
20 programs located in different places, and so making
21 it as easy as possible for the service providers, for
22 veterans, and staff to use. A lot of it has been
23 user experience related feedback we've been getting
24 as of late.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But what feedback
3 have you been getting from people or even staff?
4 What is-- do you get recommendations from staff?

5 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Right now, I'd say-
6 - I want to throw to Donee' on this. It's about-- as
7 far as having things be located in a convenient place
8 when someone goes through the platform. So it's an
9 organic experience.

10 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: Yes. And for
11 the housing team, because we monitor to many
12 different areas in housing, that we want to make sure
13 that the data is captured correctly. So, we're
14 giving input to our IT team so they can take back to
15 the end-users to let them know how to separate each
16 housing category.

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yeah, the old Vet
18 Connect didn't capture all the work flows, and so
19 this is a new one where we can capture all of our
20 workflow as more of our teams.

21 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: Yes.

22 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Which is really a
23 game-changer.

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Does Vet Connect
25 track resolution time?

2 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: It does, yes.

3 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: It does.

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I have to flag,
5 though, one thing to point out is depending on the
6 unit, these cases take time. Something can go to the
7 claims team, take a couple of weeks as far as getting
8 that claim submitted, and all that's about-- will a
9 veteran get certain information so we can help them.
10 But then housing, you could have some cases that take
11 months. And so employment, too. It could take weeks
12 for that-- it's just-- so some of these cases
13 depending on-- these are nuanced. So I just want to
14 call that, but yes, the new system does track the
15 times, resolution times.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright. So, what
17 would you say. I mean, you mentioned 15 pages of
18 testimony, and you mentioned things that you've
19 improved. What would you say is the biggest change
20 at DVS since the report was issued?

21 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Size the agency, by
22 far.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Sorry?

24 COMMISSIONER HENDON: The size of the
25 agency, the size. It-- you know, 39 when that report

2 was released. We're at 50 right now as far as the
3 authorized size. I think that's the biggest change.
4 And then other things I'd mentioned. I'd add the
5 sharing of data with our elected officials as far as
6 our legislative electeds, you know, our council
7 members, our state assembly members, our state
8 senators. We're working through the federal
9 electeds. I think that's a game changer, because each
10 of you are community leaders, and so if we are-- have
11 this line of communication with you and then you know
12 who your veterans are, that's powerful. And I think
13 that's a huge change since that report.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's how we should--
15 -- again, we should communicate on the district, the
16 council district level and really kick it to the
17 council. If your budget doesn't include or excludes
18 your agency from communicating on a regular basis,
19 certainly help from other agencies-- and one would be
20 I would say the City Council should be the first
21 place to look. And I think we could do-- certainly
22 we could do so much more on the local level.

23 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I have to say, Mr.
24 Chair, so we mentioned size of the agency. We
25 mentioned data sharing which I believe is a game

2 changer. I need to call out employment has just been
3 growing-- it's coming into its own as a direct
4 service, because we realize that there's so many gaps
5 in the employment ecosystem we're trying to just sit
6 in and plug them, and that's something that's going
7 to-- a change that's just been kind of evolving in a
8 certain direction. It's been, you know, jack-
9 knifing.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, you say-- you
11 know, and since the report, you've done a good job at
12 DVS in implementing some of the recommendations of
13 what you can do with the budget that you have. Would
14 you say that?

15 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yes.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. Alright, so
17 that was like-- I have a few questions on that, but I
18 won't ask them now. Is there anything else that you
19 would like the Council to know about DVS'
20 implementation of the report card recommendations
21 before we-- I let you go.

22 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to reiterate
23 this is like a dual strategy for us where we're
24 focusing on today and the future. And so when you
25 look at what we're doing, we're being mindful of the

2 current needs, but also being mindful of these
3 existential challenges are real as far as you see me,
4 there are three people you don't see. You see
5 Donee'. There three people you don't see. How do we
6 get at the identification, get at this marketing
7 issue? Get at-- we need to-- it's an Amazon HQ2
8 fight that we're in with other municipalities and
9 states to convince the veterans to live, learn, and
10 work here. So how do we win that? So, that dual
11 strategy, I'd say. Another I'd mention is just that
12 the meta strategy, if you will, is connect, mobilize,
13 empower. Connect: we learn who the veterans are.
14 Mobilize: the veterans learn who we are. Empower:
15 we serve them. And then last thing, I'd ask anyone
16 who's a part of this process who sees this to think
17 about is how can-- you know, how can you support
18 this, you know? If you're someone who's either in
19 government or if you're someone who's a stakeholder
20 or someone externally looking, okay, how I get in the
21 game as far as being able to help with any of these
22 synergies, being perhaps a partner on the referral.
23 So, being able to support in other ways. And so,
24 like I said, all of us owe something to these men and
25 women of the armed forces, so we just ask that this

2 is a team sport, that people be proactive, not
3 reactive in contributing to the solution.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright. I like your
5 testimony, what you said. You're not going to stop
6 it if you got to the national average of self-
7 identifying veterans. What is it, 34.3 percent?
8 We're 10 points, 10 percentage points behind that
9 national average which is alarming, and that should
10 be the number one goal of any administration, mayoral
11 administration, City Council administration is to try
12 to get more veterans to self-identify and put that
13 money into communicating with them, because I said,
14 on the back end, and what you had said, is that New
15 York City would be a better place. It actually
16 better-- our veterans would get more services from
17 the VA, definitely if they self-identified and if
18 they knew what was available. And we talked about
19 it. I talked about this so many times because my
20 field was communications in my previous life before
21 the Council, and I always thought government doesn't
22 communicate very well, certainly the-- I think you
23 agree the VA-- in fact, you said that in your
24 testimony, the VA doesn't communicate very well.
25 Their budget is huge, but it-- they don't put money

2 into communications like they should, but that also
3 is New York City is also to blame on that. We have
4 tons of services that we don't communicate well with
5 our constituents. So, I think, again, it's been a
6 pleasure working with you, Commissioner and your
7 staff. Like I said, I miss Jason Lochlan [sp?]--
8 who's-- we saw him on the street--

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing] Down
10 the street. His office--

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] We
12 couldn't get his attention today. We did see him go
13 by on Broadway, and again, he's a friend and I
14 consider you a friend because of all the great work
15 that you've done. I certainly support your efforts,
16 and I hope you stay on as Commissioner. That's a
17 little plug that I could say. I'm outgoing, but I
18 hope you stay and continue the fight. I want to
19 thank you all, for the staff, and DVS, and I would
20 say that the report card was inaccurate. I would
21 have given you and A+ because of the effort that
22 you've done, and I just see the schedule that your
23 staff and you are-- and all the things that you've
24 accomplished, and this, this is a good document.
25 Your testimony is a good document on the last few

2 years, certainly, and since the report card. And I
3 do agree that the report card-- you shouldn't take on
4 something like this to evaluate a very small agency.
5 I know why they picked DVS first, because you were
6 the smallest. So, this was a test. They haven't
7 done this, and they took the smallest, and I wasn't
8 surprised at that. I even said, I know why you're
9 picking DVS. But if you're going to do it, you have
10 to do it right. And if you're going to interview 21
11 stakeholders, there has to be a wide range of
12 stakeholders from different areas that you accurately
13 pointed out that weren't interviewed. And I know I
14 didn't know many that were interviewed, so I wouldn't
15 take that personally, and I wouldn't take it as a
16 knock on DVS. In fact, I think it's more of a knock
17 on this Council. I want to thank you, Commissioner.
18 Again, it's been a pleasure working with you, and
19 thanks again for your testimony.

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you for your
21 leadership, Mr. Chair.

22 EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: Thank you.

23 DEPUTY CHIEF ORLANDO: Thank you.

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. Yeah.

25 Alright. So, I'm going to now open the hearing for

2 public testimony. I remind members of the public
3 that this is a formal government proceeding and that
4 decorum shall be observed at all times. As such,
5 members of the public shall remain silent at all
6 times. The witness table is reserved for people who
7 wish to testify. No video recording or photography
8 is allowed from the witness table. Further, members
9 of the public may not present audio or video
10 recordings as testimony, but may submit transcripts
11 of such recordings to the Sergeant at Arms for
12 inclusion in the hearing record. If you wish to speak
13 at today's hearing, please fill out an appearance
14 card-- it'll look like this-- with the Sergeant at
15 Arms and wait to be recognized. When recognized, you
16 will have three minutes to speak on today's hearing
17 topic, an update-- the hearing topic is an update on
18 implementing recommendations from the City Council
19 Report Card Initiative. Other topics will not be
20 honored. So, we will hear all in-person testimony
21 first and then turn to testimony on Zoom. And how
22 many people we have on Zoom? None so far, okay. If
23 you a written statement or additional written
24 testimony you wish to submit for the record, please
25 provide a copy of that testimony to the Sergeant at

2 Arms. I'll now call the first panel. Dr. Irvinia
3 Moody, Timonthy Pena, and Eric A. Perez. Is that
4 Eric? Dr. Moody, you want-- okay. Do what? Oh, you
5 want to-- okay, you want to get your-- okay. So, Mr.
6 Perez, do you want to start?

7 ERIC PEREZ: Well, I wanted to say that
8 my topic really doesn't have anything to do with what
9 has transpired with DVS or the City Council. And I
10 would just I guess want to make a short statement
11 about a situation that concerns all veterans and all
12 citizens of the United States of America. So, I do
13 realize that this is not a topic that, you know, is
14 submissible. I did submit it via the testimony
15 email. My name is Eric Andrew Perez. I'm a service-
16 connected, disabled, honorably discharged Marine
17 Corps Veteran. I'm a former member or a resident of
18 Borden Avenue homeless shelter. So, I've been there.
19 I have firsthand knowledge of it. But I wanted to
20 speak to you guys a little bit today about my
21 experience with COVID-19 and the AstraZeneca trials
22 that happened within the Veterans Affairs
23 administration. So, 2020 I was an essential worker
24 at Fresh Direct. I participated in something called
25 the AZD122 COVID-19 trials at the Veterans Affairs

2 administration located at 423 East 23rd Street and
3 First Avenue. Subsequent to my participation, after
4 my first dose and second dose I developed blot clots,
5 severe blood clotting due to my participation in
6 AstraZeneca. Since then I have developed
7 neurological conditions, migraine headaches, fatty
8 liver disease, and basically I've had to fend for
9 myself within actually bringing federal litigation
10 against AstraZeneca and the Veterans Affairs
11 administration.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, this was a
13 sponsored VA program?

14 ERIC PEREZ: Correct, sir.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And how did they
16 recruit you?

17 ERIC PEREZ: So, basically I was referred
18 to by the team of my doctors. So, my primary care
19 physician within the VA.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And the doctor
21 recommended that you do this testing?

22 ERIC PEREZ: So, correct. The only way--

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Were
24 you compensated by it?

2 ERIC PEREZ: No. Well, I mean, we don't
3 really get compensated. I mean, it's kind of like
4 \$100, something like that, but in order for me to
5 participate or go back to work within Fresh Direct as
6 an essential worker, I was required to I guess have a
7 form of the COVID-19 vaccine, and since the VA was
8 actually providing my care at the time, they were
9 only providing the COVID-19 vaccine to I guess
10 veterans that were 65 and over. So, my best bet to
11 actually receive that vaccine was to participate in
12 this study.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And this is 2020 it
14 started?

15 ERIC PEREZ: Yes, 2020.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's the beginning
17 of the COVID, yeah.

18 ERIC PEREZ: Yes, sir. Since then,
19 AstraZeneca has actually not received any type of
20 approval for their COVID-19 product within America,
21 and it has subsequently pulled its COVID-19 vaccine
22 from the world market.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: How many veterans
24 were recruited, do you know? Were you with other
25 veterans?

2 ERIC PEREZ: From this facility, I have
3 no information on that. I have actually submitted
4 several Freedom of Information Act requests that have
5 been denied. So, the study overall according to the
6 NIH data which is actually public information, they
7 have about 32,000 participants worldwide. They have
8 78-- I believe it was 68 facilities within the United
9 States that were actually participating. The zip
10 codes that they actually provide line themselves up
11 with active duty military bases and Veterans Affairs
12 administration actual buildings.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah.

14 ERIC PEREZ: I've been denied on every
15 single facet of them. They basically just state that
16 they don't want to give me that information due to
17 the fact that it was going to be used for some sort
18 of a development of a future product.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, I'd like to
20 hear more about this. So, I'll give you my contact
21 information after the hearing and we could somehow--
22 I'd like to learn more about this, because I didn't
23 know, and this is something that we should look at,
24 how many veterans were affected by this and what were
25 some of the negative effects that-- I mean, they were

2 testing on veterans and, you know, I don't know the
3 VA got involved in this. We need to look at this.

4 So--

5 ERIC PEREZ: [interposing] Yes, sir.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright, thanks for
7 your testimony.

8 ERIC PEREZ: Thanks for having me.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Let's connect. My
10 Chief of Staff is in the back. Maybe you can connect
11 with him after your testimony.

12 ERIC PEREZ: Thank you.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You can sit right
14 there. Thank you. You ready now, or? Okay, go
15 ahead.

16 DR. IRVINIA MOODY: Thank you. Yep, I'm
17 Dr. Irvinia Moody, M.D. PHD, JD of MBA LLC [sic]. I
18 want to thank you all for first of all being here
19 today. I had a situation where I-- actually maybe
20 off the topic, but I'm active duty military veteran
21 as well as all honorable services, and also as a 9/11
22 first responder. I actually worked with NASA,
23 Tuskegee University, MIT, Harvard, and worked on the
24 first ever CAR T FDA break-through for cancer and
25 leukemia and all of that. What happened was I was in

2 a housing situation where I had a home invasion.
3 These were gangs that came into the building. I did
4 reach out to Attorney Lela [sic] James, and she and
5 -- they were aware that the building had been taken
6 over, my property. So, they got access to that
7 information. Everything that I worked for, done,
8 information, pertinent information. As a result of
9 that, I developed and did work and have my own real
10 estate and my buildings and things of that nature.
11 So, they got access to the buildings, and the police,
12 NYPD, told me that they're posing as me. I am
13 military and police trained at Segert [sic]. Matter
14 of fact, I spoke to one of the NYPD's yesterday who
15 also trained at Segert. As a result of that, I also
16 got mislabeled. One of the individuals who
17 mislabeled me at another facility which the hospital
18 closed down recently-- told me-- in other words, I
19 told her I worked at NASA. This is going on. She said
20 she documented it as these are gangs, and then I told
21 her NASA, so she said paranoid. So, because of that,
22 that allowed them to continue to steal money and she
23 got money off of the work. The FDA approved CAR T
24 that I worked on. So, I'm out continuing going to
25 the FBI, CIA, served my country and people are

2 looking at me like why are you outside the building
3 and they're inside living as you? Why didn't the
4 NYPD go inside, find out how they're posing--

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] What
6 borough was this?

7 DR. IRVINIA MOODY: This is Queens and
8 New York.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Have you gone to the
10 DA?

11 DR. IRVINIA MOODY: I've gone to everyone
12 I-- police reports and everything, I have. I have my
13 mail--

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing]
15 Alright, well, I'll get your information. We'll--

16 DR. IRVINIA MOODY: [interposing] Okay.

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We'll follow through
18 with the Queens DA whose--

19 DR. IRVINIA MOODY: [interposing] Okay,
20 and Manhattan.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: office is very good,
22 and we could put you in touch with their veterans
23 person, too.

24 DR. IRVINIA MOODY: Okay, and the
25 Manhattan DA as well, because what happened is-- and

2 I know that you-- I'm going on this. Is that I
3 actually was told by the FBI that-- and they also,
4 one of the gang members came on the train, knew when
5 I came on the train, and asked me am I going to come
6 pick up my mail. So, they've been stealing packages
7 and everything of that nature.

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, let's-- because
9 I don't want to get more information--

10 DR. IRVINIA MOODY: [interposing] Oh,
11 yeah, no I just wanted to give you--

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] No, I
13 don't want to have public-- this public without--

14 DR. IRVINIA MOODY: [interposing] Oh,
15 okay. Gotcha.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: protecting you
17 first, right?

18 DR. IRVINIA MOODY: Okay, got you. And
19 I'm also going say this.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright, thank you.

21 DR. IRVINIA MOODY: And I'm als going to
22 say this. I am also-- have my own products all
23 around the universe, all around the world. I am the
24 daughter of grand-- granddaughter of Dr. George
25 Washington Carver, the peanut man.

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Wow.

3 DR. IRVINIA MOODY: And my father Irvin
4 who did numerous paintings and all of that, but I
5 have my own products and all of that, and I don't-- I
6 have not connected with these people, but I'm
7 grateful for their services, but I've done my own
8 entrepreneurship and my work. So thank you so much.

9 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright, great.

10 Thank you. Thanks for your testimony. Timothy?

11 TIMOTHY PENA: First off, my name is
12 Timothy Pena. I'm the founder of Veterans Justice
13 Project, an advocacy organization dedicated to
14 ensuring dignity, safety, and lawful treatment for
15 veterans navigating homelessness and housing
16 transition in our city. I'm also a member of the New
17 York City Continuum of Care as a veteran with lived
18 experience. I wanted to-- well, let me do this
19 first. Today, I submit this testimony with urgency
20 and concern at the Borden Avenue Veterans Residence,
21 the only VA-funded grant and per-diem transitional
22 housing program in New York City for VA-eligible
23 veterans are living in-- VA-eligible veterans are
24 living in conditions that violate federal GPD policy,
25 and many cases, their basic rights. Borden Avenue

2 currently houses veterans in a co-mingled environment
3 with non-veteran residents experiencing active
4 addiction and severe mental illness under the city's
5 MICA, Mental Ill Chemically Addicted, framework.
6 This endangers veterans in our recovery, especially
7 those with PTSD or a history of substance abuse
8 disorder and undermines the federal intent of GPD as
9 a structured sober program for stabilization of
10 veterans in transition. Veterans who report
11 violence, drug use or unsafe conditions are often
12 punished, not protected. Many are removed from the
13 GPD program and therefore disconnected from HUD-VASH
14 permanent housing pipeline. Effectively, restarting
15 their homeless journey. The exclusion of women
16 veterans from Borden Avenue altogether further
17 illustrates how discriminatory and outdated this
18 model has become. There are no women programs in New
19 York City. There's no place for her to go. There are
20 currently no veterans on the New York City Council.
21 That's not something that we can do about. But this
22 makes it even more imperative that we have a City
23 Council who are pro-veteran, who show up and take an
24 active interest into what is happening in this room.
25 I ask this committee to hold further oversight

2 hearings on Department of Homeless Services who
3 oversees the grant per-diem program and Institute for
4 Community Living. I ask that we separate once and
5 for all the veterans who have earned these VA
6 homeless benefits from those who have not. We see
7 this all the time. Donations come in. donations
8 disappear. These veterans how my not even be
9 veterans. Borden Avenue is a dumping ground for
10 sexual predators, because they're far enough away
11 from schools. That's a place that they can put them.
12 They may even be veterans. They may not be veterans.
13 But I wanted to--

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] No,
15 no, you know, I've inquired because you made such--

16 TIMOTHY PENA: [interposing] We've talked
17 about this before.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But no, you made--
19 you made some comments in past, that not all the
20 people that are-- or the men at Borden were veterans,
21 which we couldn't find anybody that wasn't a veteran.
22 So, I mean, I don't know where I-- you know, we
23 asked the-- obviously, a not for profit that runs it.
24 We asked the Department of Homeless Services, and we
25 were told they were -- they were all veterans, but

2 I'd like to know if you have any proof, any evidence,
3 we would certainly look at that. As for-- I would--
4 I will recommend based on your-- you know, your
5 testimony today. I will recommend to my successor
6 whoever that is, and we won't know until January
7 who's assigned to this committee as Chair. I will
8 recommend that they do a hearing on Borden.

9 TIMOTHY PENA: Thank you.

10 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And then of course,
11 you would-- you know, if you testified it would be
12 great and solely, and if you were there, too. I'd
13 like-- we'd like certainly to hear from veterans who
14 were staying there. That's the best testimony we
15 could get on what should be-- on what improvements we
16 should make there. I don't believe there should be a
17 Borden Avenue shelter. I don't-- I think veterans
18 should go right into supportive or affordable
19 housing.

20 TIMOTHY PENA: The Samaritan Day Top has
21 a veterans program that's much more successful. It's
22 sober program. Unfortunately, it's a mental health
23 program as well. So, their dollars come--

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Yeah,
25 yeah.

2 TIMOTHY PENA: because they have a MICA--

3 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] No, I
4 visited some of their facilities, yeah.

5 TIMOTHY PENA: The GPD program is not a
6 MICA program.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

8 TIMOTHY PENA: You don't have to have a
9 mental health diagnosis to get access to the GPD
10 program and HUD VASH.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

12 TIMOTHY PENA: And that's what they're
13 telling veterans over at the VA, that you have to
14 have a-- you either have to have a drug issue or you
15 have to have mental health, because it's a MICA
16 shelter. Also, I just wanted to make a couple of
17 comments on DVS. You know, it's been 40 months since
18 I came to New York City and I walked through their
19 doors in August of 2022. I have seen such an
20 incredible growth from their services, their access
21 to the community. They care about this community.
22 They care about the veterans in the city. I think
23 that the things that they're doing-- I just came back
24 from one from Eric Bottcher's office where there

2 right now is a VFW representative for the first time
3 in three years taking--

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Yeah,
5 that's good to hear. So, the Commissioner is sitting
6 right behind you. I'm sure he's glad to hear this.

7 TIMOTHY PENA: He's not paying me, so. I
8 do want to point out one thing. The GPD program, DHS
9 and ICL are getting \$4.6 million in past-due funding
10 to treat us like crap. And ask Mr. Perez, he won't
11 disagree. I think that there is an opening there for
12 those funds from the VA to be-- to go to DVS and have
13 them set up through either someone like Day Top or
14 Catholic Charities a true veterans grant per-diem
15 program and let them take some of that funding,
16 provide the services that they're already providing
17 for us that we're not getting from these other
18 programs.

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, great. Thank
20 you. Thank you so much. Thanks to this panel for
21 your testimony. The next panel Christopher Leon
22 Johnson.

23 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Yep. Alright,
24 ready? Alright, thank you, Chair Holden. My name is
25 Christopher Leon Johnson. Thank you, Bob, for being

2 a great veterans Chair for the past about-- what was
3 it, eight years now? Thanks for being a great vet--
4 four years, okay. I thought you had eight years. But
5 thanks for being a great veterans Chair. We're going
6 to miss you in Council. I want to make it clear that
7 I support next year that Mr. Zohran Mamdani
8 reappoints this Mr.-- as a Chair-- the Commissioner
9 for Veterans. He did a great job for the past many
10 years. I have a big feeling that Mamdani is going to
11 try to replace him with probably a Assenia Mata [sp?] or
12 Caesar Vargas, because they helped him get into--
13 become mayor. I don't think that should be going
14 that route, because those-- I respect those two. I
15 love those two, but they just too progressive, and
16 what they going to do is they going to help out the
17 city shifting more money out of the Veterans
18 Committee and give it to the various other agencies
19 like Immigration, and that's going to be a disaster.
20 I want to keep it clear right now that this-- I think
21 that this is a committee where you guys can't do a
22 lot because the mayor's office don't respect the
23 veterans, and the City Council Speaker doesn't
24 respect the veterans at all. She hates the veterans.
25 I think she loves more of these corrupt homeless

2 nonprofits and immigration-based nonprofits more than
3 the veterans-based organizations. My thing is that
4 the way you got to fix this is by really having a
5 Speaker, a proper Speaker-- probably next year.
6 Hopefully next year it's Menin. Make it where that
7 she prioritize the veterans and make it where that
8 they get more money to their budget. This Speaker
9 right now failed the veterans. Of course, they going
10 to get a-- every year the City Council going to give
11 them bad report because they always want to find ways
12 to say okay, how we're going to-- how we're going to
13 make it where we don't give these people, the
14 Veterans Committee, the Veterans Agency, the money
15 they deserve to get is by burying them. Because we
16 got-- they got a problem with not give one agency the
17 money and give it to the immigration-based nonprofit
18 like the NYIC and the homeless-based nonprofits like
19 WIN. So, look, I know there's a lot that this
20 committee can do. Veterans Affairs is usually
21 federal, but at least thank you for the City Council
22 for having a Veterans Committee here in the city. At
23 least the veterans can actually speak here unlike
24 upstairs on the 18th floor and the 20th floor in the
25 State Assembly, State Senate where you have to be

2 invited to speak. But I mean, I know next year,
3 probably it might be your predecessor Phil Wong [sp?] as the Chair. Hopefully-- hope that make that
4 happen, but you got to work with the Speaker.
5 Hopefully it'll be a moderate Speaker, because you
6 never know what's going to happen next three to four
7 weeks. They [inaudible] Working Families Party who
8 is the main people that is opposed to really-- really
9 opposed to veteran affairs, and the DSA might find a
10 way to prevent Julie Menin becoming Speaker, and if
11 that wants to be a success and Hudson becomes
12 Speaker, we're going back another four years with
13 this. So, thank you so much.

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Great. Thank you,
16 Chris. Thanks for all your testimony over the years.

17 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Yeah. Yeah.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: It was a pleasure to
19 work with you and talk to you, and keep going in--
20 keep holding people accountable. Thank so much for
21 your--

22 CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: [interposing]
23 Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

24 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay. If there is
25 anyone else in the room who has not had the

2 opportunity to testify, but wishes to do so, please
3 raise your hand. You want to? Okay. Come on up,
4 Jason. Thank you. You got to fill out a card,
5 though. Jason's our former member of the DVS and a
6 good friend. So, a disclaimer.

7 JASON LOUGHREN: Yes, thank you, Chair.

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Go ahead.

9 JASON LOUGHREN: And thank you everyone
10 for being here today. I did not prepare any remarks
11 for this testimony today, but I just wanted to use
12 this time to thank Chair Holden for serving on this
13 committee for as long as he has and he can continue
14 to be the voice for the veteran community here in New
15 York. I know personally the challenges that Chair
16 Holden has had over the years to get any legislation
17 passed in the city to serve our community, and I know
18 that those challenges were consistent, but his
19 perseverance to continue to push through and continue
20 to put the veteran community on the forefront of the
21 dialogue with many different discussions that City
22 Council has to have about the many different cohorts
23 that make the melting pot of New York City what it
24 is, a priority in the city. And I just wanted to say

2 on behalf of the veteran community, thank you so much
3 for your years of service.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you for your
5 service and thank you for your efforts with DVS, and
6 I know you keep in touch with the Commissioner a lot,
7 and you guys are good friends, but it was a pleasure
8 to work with you when you were at DVS, and I hope
9 we'll see each other when I'm out of the Council,
10 that we'll still meet and I'll still attend some of
11 the meetings. I hope to see you and I hope to see
12 the Commissioner. I just want to say, this has been
13 an honor to be the Chairperson of this committee and
14 to work with such great individuals as Jason and
15 certainly the Commissioner and his staff. And I
16 worked with Council Member Vallone, too, on a number
17 of initiative when he was serving in the Council, and
18 then beyond and he was a great advocate, and it's
19 great that we're remembering some of his programs in
20 his honor. But again, I can't tell you how this was
21 the committee that I wanted, and I got to serve. I
22 don't know if we moved the needle. We didn't move
23 the needle as much as I would have liked, but we did
24 try. And we did get additional funding. We got
25 additional resources, but we haven't reached our

2 goal. And I think the Commissioner, though, and his
3 agency done the-- and certainly when you were there,
4 you've done, you know, what you could do and then
5 some. And it's just the attitude of DVS with this
6 Commissioner and with his staff, that I think have
7 defined the agency, and certainly we will get more in
8 the next Council, I'm sure of it, because of the
9 foundation we have laid in this council. So, I want
10 to thank everyone for-- and thank you, Jason, for
11 your testimony.

12 JASON LOUGHREN: Yes, thank you.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I did see you on
14 Broadway. We didn't get a chance. You were crossing
15 the street right in front of us. I didn't-- we
16 couldn't react fast enough.

17 JASON LOUGHREN: Well, I just want to say
18 that given that I have this wonderful opportunity to
19 be [inaudible] administrator. I will continue to
20 carry the torch that you and Commissioner Hendon have
21 carried for the veteran community for so long, and
22 it's an honor to have learned so much from both of
23 you, and--

2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] So,
3 we're expecting bigger and better things from you in
4 Washington, right?

5 JASON LOUGHREN: I hope so.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you all, and
7 again, last call for anybody else who wants to
8 testify? Nobody? Anybody on Zoom that hasn't been
9 heard? Okay. Thank you so much, everyone. This
10 hearing is adjourned.

11 [gavel]

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1 COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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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 December 31, 2025