

CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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HELD AT: 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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1
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

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

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

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

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

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

VA that exclusively houses veterans in New York City.

One page says DVS has no presence at Borden Avenue

Veterans Residence. Another page says the truth

which is that we maintain a daily presence at Borden

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

transparent about data. Another page points out that

DVS makes information available through the Open Data

Portal, Mayor's Management Report, and Local Law

reporting. I would also like to point the public to

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

data-related information reported for reporting and

outputs. One page says that DVS does not provide

descriptions of roles in the agency. A description

of each role in the agency along with explanations of

our methods of data collection, definition for

specific terms, summaries of our programs, and DVS'

overall performance information can be found in the

annual report that we submit in accordance with Local

Law 44 of 2019. This too can be found on

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

that our work "has not translated to consistent

improvement of services, communication, or outreach."

Meanwhile, the most recent Mayor's Management Report

shows increases in each of the following metrics when

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Specifically, there's a 10 percent preference for municipal employees and U.S. military veterans. The

VS home loan: A veteran who is eligible for [inaudible] in New York City-- in the New York City region, West Chester, Long Island and five boroughs needs to only provide one percent of the purchase price to purchase a house, condo or co-op. Sony May [sic] through participating lenders and in some cases the Hebrew Free Loan Society provides financing to the veteran household to cover the remaining balance.

This includes closing costs. In New York City, a household with one or two people is eligible for Sony May if their household income is \$194,400 or less. A household with three or more people is eligible for Sonny May if there household income is \$226,800 or less. nyc.gov/homesforveterans. It benefits the Vallone Veterans Initiative. A full-time Veterans of Foreign Wars veterans service officer works out of

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: Yes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And what does that look like?

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

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

1
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
25

1
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

1
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,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Right.

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

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, your agency, but--

COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing]
[inaudible]

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: but I'm talking about--

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

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

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: That's great.

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

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

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

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

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

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Can I add one other thing? I feel like the next fight, by the way, as far as if you look at what's ahead-- you know, what are we doing as far as our military spouses? What are we doing as far as our surviving spouses when it comes to access to city employment? So that's something you'll see. You know, I pray that we see more of it in the days ahead. So, beyond just about veterans, but also about those who are the spouses of vets and the surviving spouses.

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

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

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

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

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

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: Yes.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Which is really a game-changer.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Does Vet Connect track resolution time?

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR SMALLS: It does, yes.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: It does.

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

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

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Size the agency, by far.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Sorry?

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

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

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

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

1
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

1
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

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

19
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

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

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

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

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

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?
25

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

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And this is 2020 it started?

ERIC PEREZ: Yes, 2020.

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

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

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

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

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah.

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

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

1
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

a housing situation where I had a home invasion.

These were gangs that came into the building. I did

reach out to Attorney Lela [sic] James, and she and

a-- they were aware that the building had been taken

over, my property. So, they got access to that

information. Everything that I worked for, done,

information, pertinent information. As a result of

that, I developed and did work and have my own real

estate and my buildings and things of that nature.

So, they got access to the buildings, and the police,

NYPD, told me that they're posing as me. I am

military and police trained at Segert [sic]. Matter

of fact, I spoke to one of the NYPD's yesterday who

also trained at Segert. As a result of that, I also

got mislabeled. One of the individuals who

mislabeled me at another facility which the hospital

closed down recently-- told me-- in other words, I

told her I worked at NASA. This is going on. She said

she documented it as these are gangs, and then I told

her NASA, so she said paranoid. So, because of that,

that allowed them to continue to steal money and she

got money off of the work. The FDA approved CAR T

that I worked on. So, I'm out continuing going to

the FBI, CIA, served my country and people are

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

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

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.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Wow.

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

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright, great. Thank you. Thanks for your testimony. Timothy?

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

currently houses veterans in a co-mingled environment with non-veteran residents experiencing active addiction and severe mental illness under the city's MICA, Mental Ill Chemically Addicted, framework.

This endangers veterans in our recovery, especially those with PTSD or a history of substance abuse disorder and undermines the federal intent of GPD as a structured sober program for stabilization of veterans in transition. Veterans who report violence, drug use or unsafe conditions are often punished, not protected. Many are removed from the GPD program and therefore disconnected from HUD-VASH permanent housing pipeline. Effectively, restarting their homeless journey. The exclusion of women veterans from Borden Avenue altogether further illustrates how discriminatory and outdated this model has become. There are no women programs in New York City. There's no place for her to go. There are currently no veterans on the New York City Council. That's not something that we can do about. But this makes it even more imperative that we have a City Council who are pro-veteran, who show up and take an active interest into what is happening in this room. I ask this committee to hold further oversight

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

TIMOTHY PENA: Thank you.

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

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

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Yeah, yeah.

TIMOTHY PENA: because they have a MICA--

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

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

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

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

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1 invited to speak. But I mean, I know next year,
2 probably it might be your predecessor Phil Wong [sp?]
3 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.

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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

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

JASON LOUGHRAN: Yes, thank you, Chair.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Go ahead.

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

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

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

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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 LOUGHRAN: 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 LOUGHRAN: 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--

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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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

JASON LOUGHRAN: I hope so.

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

[gavel]

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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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