



**Testimony of James Hendon
Commissioner for the New York City
Department of Veterans' Services (DVS)
Committee on Veterans'
Topic: New York City's Homeless Veterans
February 19th, 2025, 1:00 PM**

Introduction

Good morning, Chair Holden, Committee members, and advocates. My name is James Hendon. I serve as Commissioner of the New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS). Thank you for holding this hearing on meeting the needs of New York City's Homeless Veterans. I am joined today by my colleagues Lamarr Wheeler, Senior Executive Director for Housing and Support Services, and Sonya Russel, Associate Commissioner for Adult Families, Veterans and Special Services for the New York City Department of Homeless Services.

Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to discuss DVS' efforts in partnership with our fellow city, state, and federal partners to address Veteran homelessness in the five boroughs. Following my testimony, we welcome any questions that Committee members may have.

Historical Success

Veteran homelessness is one of the most critical issues that DVS engages. It was a central focus before DVS was established as a department, dating back to when our agency initially served as the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs. In June 2014, former First Lady Michelle Obama announced the federal government's Mayor's Challenge to End Veteran Homelessness. The Mayor's Challenge was an effort that the City of New York immediately joined. Since accepting the challenge more than ten years ago, the City of New York – including entities like DVS and the Department of Social Services – has made remarkable progress in significantly reducing the population of Veterans and Veteran families who are housing insecure.

As highlighted in a report published by the New York State Comptroller, New York saw an 83% decline in the number of homeless Veterans from 2010 to 2022. The Comptroller's analysis found that 90% of the 83% reduction came from the work occurring here in New York City. The reduction in the City's Veteran homeless community is a remarkable achievement largely credited to increased federal funding, our successful collaborations with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), NYC Department of Social Services (DSS), NYC Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the US Department of Veterans' Affairs (The "VA").

DVS Veteran Housing & Support Services

Assisting Veterans who are experiencing homelessness is one of the foundational pillars of this agency. Since our Housing and Support Services (HSS) program was assembled in 2016, DVS has assisted more than 1,400 Veterans with their moves into permanent or supportive housing. We have staff who are specifically dedicated to HSS, known as Veteran Housing Coordinators. DVS' Veteran Housing Coordinators serve as high-touch navigators, ensuring that Veterans have a trusted, informed individual standing by their side as they traverse the housing process. Coordinators make sure that Veterans have everything they need including, but not limited to:

- Providing support to help Veterans assess and prepare for viable housing options;
- Engaging on behalf of Veterans with landlords and management companies;
- Transporting Veterans to and from apartment viewings;
- Housing application assistance;
- Broker / landlord introductions;
- Unit inspection assistance;
- Facilitating "One Shot Deal" requests;
- Connecting recently-housed Veterans with furniture; and
- Aftercare and eviction prevention support.

Our goals are to help Veterans understand the benefits that they are eligible for, connect them to desired benefits, identify a housing opportunity that is an appropriate fit, and ensure that those whom we assist do not revert backwards in their housing journey.

Our team leverages existing subsidy programs and community resources to match Veterans to the right level of care and support that they need. At the federal level, DVS leverages programs such as the federally funded Housing and Urban Development – VA Supportive Housing Program (HUD-VASH) and the Supportive Services for Veterans Families Program (SSVF). At the state level, we promote the Veterans Emergency Housing Assistance Fund (VEHAF). Specific to New York City, DVS embraces local subsidies like Special One-Time Assistance (SOTA), City Fighting Homelessness and Eviction Prevention Support (CityFHEPS), and various forms of supportive housing to provide our constituency with an array of dwelling options.

One of the most impactful partnerships administered in New York City is "HUD-VASH Collaborative Case Management" or "HUD-VASH CCM" (formerly known as "HUD-VASH Continuum"). This subsidy program enables Veterans who are not eligible for VA Healthcare – a prerequisite for HUD-VASH – to receive a special HUD-VASH voucher so long as DVS, not the VA, provides social services and case management support. DVS estimates that, in a given year, approximately 40% of all homeless Veterans are not eligible for VA Healthcare. As a result, the best pathway available to them often is to receive a HUD-VASH CCM voucher.

DVS first piloted the HUD-VASH CCM program with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) in 2017. NYCHA, on behalf of HUD, provides the Housing Choice Section 8

Voucher tied to the program. DVS – acting in place of the VA – delivers pre-moveout, transitional, and aftercare / eviction prevention services. DVS’ efforts in support of a federal program delivering services that the VA will not provide amounts to a federal unfunded mandate. Since HUD-VASH CCM started eight years ago, DVS has helped more than 300 Veterans take advantage of this subsidy.

Our Veteran Housing Coordinators deliver thoughtful and comprehensive case management to those whom we assist during each step that they take. Beyond the coordination that occurs from introduction through move-out (from shelter where applicable), all Veterans housed by DVS have access to aftercare follow-up. Aftercare ensures that Veterans are connected to key services at all times with a special emphasis on periods of transition and recovery.

Aftercare services include Critical Time Interventions, during which DVS checks in on those whom we have housed. Critical Time Interventions are performed during the following periods after move-out: 6 months, 11 months, 18 months, 24 months, and 36 months. A CTI may result in internal referrals to DVS and / or external referrals to community partners who provide mental health, employment, and other enabling resources. In coordination with DHS, DVS (when needed) also works with SSVF-funded entities to place Veterans into local, Veteran specific supportive housing sites. These organizations include HELP USA, the Jericho Project, Services for the Underserved, and Volunteers of America.

Jurisdictional Differences in Homeless Services for Veterans

It is critical to understand the jurisdictional differences between DVS, DSS, and the agencies within DSS—the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS) and the Human Resources Administration (HRA)—as they pertain to addressing Veteran homelessness.

DHS, under DSS, manages the city’s overall homeless shelter network, which includes more than 450 shelters and transitional housing facilities for those experiencing housing insecurity. The DHS portfolio includes emergency shelter intake, case management, and rehousing initiatives for the general population. Conversely, DVS does not directly operate homeless shelters. Rather, DVS serves as the primary agency for coordinating services tailored specifically to Veterans – with an emphasis on those who are not eligible for VA healthcare. DHS – in partnership with the VA – takes the lead with most Veterans who are eligible for VA healthcare. We at DVS stand on the last line of defense for our brothers and sisters when many other programs, benefits, and organizations are not available.

A notable distinction is the Borden Avenue Veterans Residence, the only dedicated homeless shelter for Veterans in New York City. The Borden Avenue Residence provides Veteran-specific supportive services, such as benefits navigation, peer mentorship, and pathways to permanent supportive housing that are tailored to the unique needs of former US Military service members. Out of the 225 beds in Borden – all of which are enclosed in their own private pods thanks to leadership from the Veterans Committee and DHS – 154 beds are subsidized by the VA, while 71 beds are subsidized by the City.

While all other homeless shelters in the city are managed by DHS, DVS plays a crucial role in ensuring that Veterans in these facilities receive the specialized care and housing services that they need. DVS works alongside DSS and DHS to connect Veterans experiencing homelessness with available housing subsidies, supportive housing programs, and VA resources.

Additionally, HRA, another division within DSS, administers key benefits programs such as public assistance, rental assistance, and healthcare support. DVS bridges the gap between our clients and DSS' offerings by ensuring that Veterans can navigate these resources while also recommending targeted actions and policies that address their unique circumstances.

In summary, while DHS and HRA oversee the city's broader homeless services and benefit programs, DVS ensures that Veterans receive the tailored support they deserve.

Larger Trends Impacting the Homeless Veteran Population

As we continue our efforts to address Veteran homelessness, it is critical to acknowledge the larger trends influencing the homeless Veteran population in New York City. Several key factors contribute to the ongoing challenges we face, including the migration of out-of-state Veterans seeking support in New York City, the introduction of new federal tools like the Status Query and Response Exchange System (SQUARES), and evolving housing and economic conditions.

Migration of Out-of-State Veterans Seeking NYC's Social Safety Net

New York City has long been recognized for its robust social safety net and Veteran-specific support services, making it an attractive destination for Veterans experiencing homelessness from across the nation. Unlike many other states, New York City offers a more comprehensive range of benefits, including rental assistance, healthcare access, food security programs, and legal services, many of which are accessible regardless of prior residency. Additionally, the availability of Veteran-specific housing programs, such as HUD-VASH and CityFHEPS, combined with strong local partnerships between city agencies and Veteran service organizations, has made the city a national leader in Veteran homelessness reduction efforts.

However, this reputation also presents unique challenges, as we have seen a growing trend of Veterans from out of state arriving in New York City specifically to seek these resources. Many of these individuals are ineligible for federal VA benefits due to discharge status, length of service, or other criteria, making them more reliant on city and state-level assistance programs. This influx of new Veterans places additional strain on our homeless shelter system, case management resources, and housing subsidies, underscoring the need for increased funding and interagency coordination to ensure that all Veterans—regardless of where they come from—receive the support they need to achieve housing stability. It is important to note that New York City proudly has the most liberal definition of a Veteran in the country. A person who has served in the armed forces is a Veteran in the eyes of the City of New York regardless of their length of service, component of service (Active Duty, Guard, or Reserve), and character of discharge. Putting this all together: the DVS Housing Support Services team estimates that, each year, roughly 35% of the Veterans we serve did not live in New York City one year prior to becoming homeless. A sizeable population elected to move here after housing insecurity was on

the horizon. To repeat something that was already mentioned: 40% of all homeless Veterans in New York City are not eligible for VA healthcare.

Implementation of the Status Query and Response Exchange System (SQUARES) in NYC's Homeless Intake Process

One of the most significant advancements in Veteran homelessness intervention has been the integration of the VA's Status Query and Response Exchange System (SQUARES) into the workflows of DHS. SQUARES is a web-based application that allows VA employees and external organizations—including homeless service providers, law enforcement agencies, and local, state, and federal agencies—to screen a list of clients in order to identify those clients who are Veterans. SQUARES also relays identified Veterans' eligibility for VA healthcare.

Through SQUARES, DHS intake centers can now quickly and accurately identify whether a homeless individual is a Veteran, enabling faster connections to VA benefits, healthcare, and housing support programs. The system works by allowing users to submit identity attributes—such as name, date of birth, Social Security number, and gender—and receive real-time information regarding the individual's VA eligibility. This streamlined process ensures that Veterans are not mistakenly classified as non-Veterans, which, in the past, led to delays in accessing critical resources.

The introduction of SQUARES into DHS workflows represents a major step forward in ensuring that every Veteran who interacts with New York City's shelter system is properly identified and connected to available federal and local resources. However, ongoing training and system improvements are necessary to maximize its effectiveness, particularly in cases where Veterans are ineligible for VA services and must rely on city and state programs.

As we look to the future, it is crucial that we continue refining our intake and identification processes, expand our capacity to serve out-of-state Veterans, and champion sustained funding from all sources to meet the growing demand for Veteran-specific homelessness support. By addressing these larger trends with strategic planning and interagency collaboration, we can build upon our successes and ensure that New York City remains a leader in providing housing stability and care for all Veterans in need.

Paths to Future Success

The number of Veterans in New York City's shelter system has declined by more than 85% over the past thirteen years – from 4,677 in 2011 to 624 in 2024 (three of whom were street homeless according to the 2024 Point in Time Count). That being said, reaching a goal of functional zero – that is, 400 or fewer Veterans in the shelter system – has been elusive. The combination of housing insecure Veterans from across America coming to New York City coupled with the fact that what remains of what was almost five thousand homeless Veterans more than a decade ago is a group that has disproportionately complex cases makes the work vital. We will reach and maintain a count lower than 400 in the future. It will be hard.

This is an all hands on deck situation. Three suggestions for how the City Council can help us get there:

- 1- **Discretionary Funding.** Provide discretionary funding for nonprofits that do work with Veterans who are justice-involved. I am speaking of those in Veterans Treatment Court (specifically, mentorship organizations for VTC participants), groups that visit Veterans who are detained at the Veterans wing at Rikers Correctional Facility, nonprofits that serve Veterans who are on parole, and groups that work with NYC Veterans who were recently released from incarceration. The nexus between those who are justice-involved and those experiencing housing insecurity is real. We pray that the City Council can help buoy those organizations that are committed to providing this assistance.
- 2- **Local Law 37 Questions.** Ask the Local Law 37 of 2024 questions on your constituent intake forms. These questions are voluntary. They are (paraphrasing):
 - a. *Have you or any member of your household served in the armed forces, national guard, or reserve of the United States?*
 - b. *Do you consent to the NYC Department of Veterans' Services contacting you regarding services and resources for Veterans?*

In a city where only 24.1% of all Veterans self-identify, we cannot help Veterans combat housing insecurity when we do not know who they are. Further, a critical aspect of this work is reaching a Veteran and Veteran family to prevent them from becoming housing insecure in the first place. In addition to including these questions on your intake forms, I humbly beg you to ask other social service entities in your networks to do the same thing. DVS is engaging social service entities about this as well. Success is if all groups that provide social services of any nature – elected officials, agencies, community benefit organizations, etcetera – ask these questions.

- 3- **Use VA SQUARES.** SQUARES – which, once again, stands for Status Query and Response Exchange System (it can be found online at www.va.gov/homeless/squares) – is a VA web application that allows public and nonprofit social services providers to screen all adult clients for Veteran status and VA healthcare eligibility. After being granted access, an organization can either input a client's information individually or bulk upload information from an excel file. The VA tool, which captures no information (it is a pass-through) then relays which clients on the list are Veterans and whether they are eligible for VA healthcare. Once you learn whether that client is a Veteran, it is to your discretion how you engage that individual. Over the past 2 ½ years, we have worked with DHS as they have rolled out using SQUARES. We have learned that, for every shelter client who tells DHS that they are a Veteran, one does not. This is a contributory reason to the uptick in the Veteran Point in Time Count from 2023 (567 Veterans) to 2024 (624 Veterans) as our efforts slowly advance from crawl to walk to run. The uptick is not something I am happy about; we don't want any homeless Veterans in

New York City, America, or the world. That said, I am happy (along with our DHS colleagues) to have a stronger handle on exactly who our homeless Veteran population is. We are the first major city in America to do this – screening all adult shelter clients for Veteran status. I give eternal credit to DHS Assistant Commissioner Sonya Russell, DHS Administrator Joslyn Carter, and DSS Commissioner Molly Wasow Park for making this decision. I encourage you and all social service providers to do the same. Who knows how many Veteran and Military families you have already served in the past? You just didn't know it. Once you do know, you would be surprised at how many of our brothers and sisters come into the light when you simply talk to them and address it. Once again, the website for VA SQUARES is www.va.gov/homeless/squares. DVS is happy to advise any City Council member, government agency, or nonprofit social services provider looking to leverage this asset.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the commitment by New York City to combat Veteran homelessness through collaborative efforts with local, state, and federal resources is essential for providing stable housing, supportive services, and ensuring the well-being of Veterans who have served the nation. We recognize that the path to achieving this success lies in fostering effective communication and synergy amongst all stakeholders – city, state, and federal / public, private, and nonprofit. Furthermore, by working collaboratively and transparently, we can ensure that our city thrives, prospers, and provides a brighter future for all who call it home, especially our Veterans and their families.

Together, we can overcome challenges, seize opportunities, and build a stronger, more resilient, and inclusive New York City that benefits every member of our diverse and vibrant ecosystem. I urge you all to please reach out to me or our Senior Advisor of Intergovernmental Affairs, Jason Loughran. Please view us as a tool to help navigate your legislative ideas and act as an optimizer to your historic and future success.

As an aside: I would like to remind all who hear these remarks that the deadline to apply for City Council discretionary funding is today, February 19th at 5 pm. Please visit www.nyc.gov/vetcouncilfundig to learn more. Separately, the deadline to apply to join one's community board for those who live in Manhattan is February 28th. The deadline for those who live in the Bronx is March 9th. There is no deadline for Staten Island residents; applications to join Richmond County community boards are rolling. The deadline to apply to join community boards in Queens and Brooklyn this year has already passed. It was on February 14th. Please visit www.nyc.gov/vetcommunityboards to learn more.

Lastly, the NYC Department of Veterans' Services can be reached via telephone at (212) 416-5250, email at connect@Veterans.nyc.gov, online at www.nyc.gov/vets, and through social media using the handle [@nycVeterans](https://twitter.com/nycVeterans).

Thank you.

Submitted Testimony of Bronx Borough President Vanessa L. Gibson

New York City Council Committee on Veterans

February 19, 2025

Good afternoon and thank you to Chair Holden and the members of the Committee on Veterans for convening this important hearing today. The issues affecting our veterans, particularly our homeless veterans, remain crucial for us to confront as we move forward into these unprecedented times.

Over the past decade, New York has made great strides when it comes to reducing the number of veterans who do not have permanent housing. Both the state and city governments have made significant investments into helping those who served get the housing that they deserve. Between 2010 and 2022, the state saw the number of homeless veterans decline by 83%, with that number reaching a 90% decline in New York City. This is great progress, but there is still more work to be done.

There are ample opportunities for us to provide housing benefits and other possible solutions for veterans who are struggling with their housing situations. We need more developers to include veterans set-asides in their developments, and I have pushed for veterans housing in new developments in The Bronx. We also need more pathways to home ownership, including in our many co-ops across the city, both those regulated by the state and city and those that are privately owned and managed.

But none of this will be possible without hearing directly from those who are most affected. We must do more to ensure that the voices of veterans are heard at all levels of our local government. As Borough President, I am responsible for appointing the members of The Bronx's 12 community boards. Some of these boards have begun to form committees dedicated to serving the needs of our veterans, including Bronx boards 5, 7, 8, and 9. I fully support any board that creates one of these committees, and any support that the city government could give our community boards to help them create these committees would be of great benefit.

I am also cognizant of the changes that are coming from Washington. More than almost any group in our country, veterans are uniquely reliant on services provided through the federal government. Last week, we saw the Department of Veterans Affairs cut over 1,000 employees, including some right here in The Bronx. While they claim that this will not affect benefits or services, we cannot truly know

what the effects of this cut will be as of yet. As representatives of our city, we must continue to demand accountability and push for there to be no reduction in veterans benefits. We must also demand that our veterans have their data and privacy protected from invasion. It is unacceptable that any veteran – or any American – should have their data accessed and potentially revealed by incompetent ideological actors.

As the Borough President for the borough that hosts the James J. Peters VA Medical Center, where thousands of New York's veterans get their healthcare every year, I am particularly concerned about the effect that these actions will have on our residents. I am committed to fighting for our veterans to keep the benefits and rights that they earned through their sacrifice.

Thank you again for the work that this committee is doing to ensure that our veterans are safe, secure, and thriving. In these pivotal moments, it is essential that we continue to do this important work and fight for our veterans.



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**Testimony of Samaritan Daytop Village
New York City Council Committee on Veterans
February 19, 2025**

Good morning, Chair Holden and esteemed members of the Veterans Committee. My name is Deirdre Rice-Reese, and I am honored to speak on behalf of Samaritan Daytop Village.

I want to commend this Committee for its commitment to addressing the full range of challenges faced by homeless veterans. Your focus on housing, wraparound supports, and mental health resources is essential to ensuring long-term stability for those who have served our country.

Despite tremendous progress in reducing veteran homelessness over the past decade, New York City saw one of the highest single-year increases in veteran homelessness in 2024. This signals an urgent need to address not just housing, but also the root causes of instability, including mental health challenges, substance use disorders, and economic hardship.

At Samaritan Daytop Village, we see firsthand how these barriers impact veterans every day. Our veteran-specific programs provide:

- Residential treatment for veterans struggling with PTSD, addiction, and trauma, including the first-ever program in New York exclusively for female veterans.
- Job training and employment readiness, including resume writing, interview techniques, and internships.
- Basic needs assistance, including clothing, shoes, and digital access to ensure veterans can successfully engage in job searches and remote services.
- Advocacy for discharge upgrades, as many veterans with less-than-honorable discharges are locked out of VA benefits, despite having service-related injuries or mental health conditions. Opening this channel changes lives—it restores access to housing, health care, and stability.

As an Air Force veteran and someone in long-term recovery for over 30 years, I can personally attest to the life-changing impact of veteran-specific services. The needs of veterans are distinct from those of civilians, and our approach to care must reflect that.

While serving is a privilege, it is also a sacrifice that deserves recognition—not just in words, but in sustained investment. By building a culture of recovery, supporting veterans' pride and service, and expanding resources, we can continue to transform lives.

Thank you for your time, your leadership, and your commitment to New York City's veterans. Samaritan Daytop Village stands ready to partner with you in this mission.

Businesses Shut Down by Police to Protect the Competition

Imagine living in a country where your business can be shut down by your competition with the physical brute force of the local police department.

If you thought, “No way, Not in this country!” You would be wrong. I am describing something that happens routinely right here everyday in the streets of this city.

Making this scenario even more abusive is that the businesses being targeted to be shut down are owned exclusively by service-disabled veterans.

So why would the NYPD shut down veteran-owned businesses?

The short answer is money. The NYPD are taking directions from the B.I.D. organizations.

The BID's are authorized by the Department of Transportation to rent sidewalk space to vendors and to kiosks and street fares. They collect millions a year in rent for public space which is free to a service-disabled veteran vendor.

I am service-disabled veteran. I have been operating as a food vendor since 2008. Vending provides very unique opportunities for veterans in transition or veterans in crisis.

In 2010 I founded a non-profit organization called Put Veterans First, Ltd. Our mission is to help veterans start their own small business as street vendors. Under New York State law disabled

veterans have the right to vend free from any city placement restrictions.

This is a right granted to veterans in NYS GBL §35. This NYS statute was clarified by the NYS Supreme Court in *Kaswan v. Aponte*, 142 Misc. 2d 298, and the Supreme Court judgement was unanimously upheld by the Appellate Court, 160 AD 2d 342.

Under pressure from the BID's and the brick-and-mortar stores, the NYPD and the city agencies harass veterans out of business with illegal summonses.

The city refuses to acknowledge the fact that there is no legal way to move a vendor who is a veteran with a service-related injury.

In fact, any officer that issues a summons for a placement restriction to a service-disabled veteran, does so, in contempt of a court order.

This January 16, 2025 my cart food cart was illegally seized by the Department of Sanitation on orders from the Times Square Alliance. They are the BID that controls all the business in Times Square.

The DSNY Lieutenant issued me a summons for a placement restriction. I explained to him that Under State Law I am fully authorized operate on streets that are restricted by city regulations. The Lt. responded that it's his job to enforce city rules and that State Laws don't apply in the city.

Unbelievable. Simply unbelievable.

I am still mortified by this encounter. Not so much by the summons and the illegal seizure or by being put out of work. But, by the fact that the DSNY Lt. did not know that in NY State the city regulations are superseded NYS law.

Under the Preemption Doctrine in Article IX of the NYS Constitution, a local law is null and void and unenforceable when it conflicts with a state law - Especially in cases where the NYS statute and a judge's court order say exactly that.

The Preemption Doctrine is well settled law. And any city council member that does not know about the supremacy of state law over city regulations is either negligent or ignorant.

And remember - ignorance of the law is no excuse not even for councilmembers.

I recommend you all read Kaswan, read GBL 35 or remain ignorant.

n.b. The city is violating our state granted rights and stripping away public accommodation which is protected under § 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the ADA and NYS Executive order § 296. To help address this long-running injustice by the city against its Veterans please contact Armando Crescenzi. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 126 has established a Homeless Veterans Essential Needs Shop at the VA hospital on 23rd Street in Manhattan. We have stocked the room with purchased and donated new clothing. Our inventory consists of warm thermal undergarments, coats, hats, scarves, and gloves. We also provide sundry items, soap, sanitary hand lotion, and first aid items.

The shop is run under a voucher system, where hospital medical staff and counselors provide a voucher to the homeless veteran for the clothing items and sundries they truly need.

The homeless veteran presents the voucher at the Essentials Needs Shop where he or she is fitted with the right-sized clothing and sundries. While at the shop the veteran is given referrals to city and private organizations that would assist them in securing permanent housing, employment, and food. Hospital resources for continued medical and mental health care are also introduced to the veteran.

Our VVA chapter has three VA hospital-trained and certified volunteers who oversee the project.

Over the past few months, this project has helped over one hundred homeless veterans.

The Manhattan VA hospital is very pleased and excited about how well this project helped our homeless veterans and wants to expand the project to other New York City Veterans Hospitals and Veterans Centers in all the boroughs.

We are looking forward to working with the City Council Veterans Committee to expand this project and provide further assistance to our homeless veterans so they can transition from their troubled military past to a new healthy, happy, and productive life.

Testimony before the New York City Council
Regarding Mitchell-Lama Housing

February 19, 2025

Honorable Chair Holden and Esteemed Members of the City Council,

My name is Mike Munoz, I am a Post 9/11 army combat veteran (Iraq), and currently serve as the Post Commander for New York's newest American Legion Post, Post 917. I am a resident of the Mitchell-Lama property Clinton Towers, located in Hell's Kitchen/Clinton, New York. I am here today to provide testimony regarding the urgent need to protect, expand, and hold accountable the veterans preference list for Mitchell-Lama Housing in our city.

I first found out about Mitchell-Lama 10 years ago. In 2016 I applied to Clinton Towers, and was placed on the veterans wait list. While I waited my turn for an apartment, I lived through years of hardship and housing insecurity. In 2022, I finally received notice that it was my turn to apply for an apartment. The apartment changed my life, and my quality of life has been much better since moving into Clinton Towers.

While I do feel lucky and privileged to live in a Mitchell-Lama apartment, I know that some policy changes were enacted. 1. Veterans must now get through a lottery, and win before veterans preference is enacted. 2. Buildings like Clinton Towers recently closed all lists, even though all veterans have been called.

As an advocate for veterans, I assist members of my post, and members of my veteran community with applying for Mitchell-Lama housing.

I ask today to pass a regulation that ensures that veterans lists stay open so that veterans in need of affordable housing can continue to apply.

I urge the Council to act swiftly to safeguard this vital housing resource for veterans and the community. Thank you for your time and consideration.

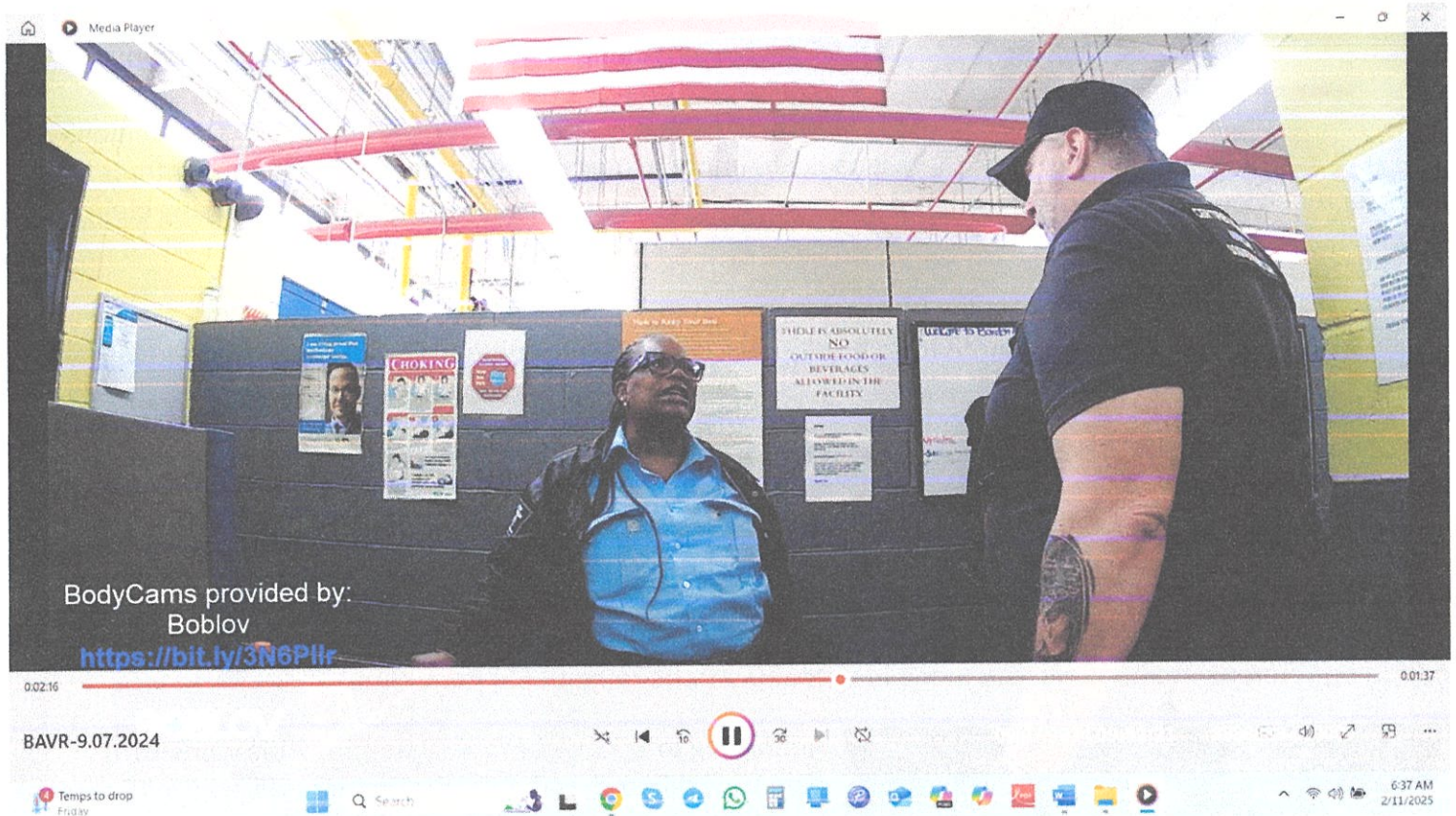
Sincerely,
Michael Munoz

Commander, American Legion Post 917

Veterans For Sale: Exploiting Homeless Veterans

Timothy Pena • February 18, 2025

Veterans Affairs Shelter Borden Avenue Shuts Out Donors, Opens Door to Disability Claims Predators



Any community engagement at Borden Avenue Veteran's Residence is relegated to outside on the sidewalk which also doubles as parking for ICL staff. NYC Council Member and Chairman of Veterans Services Robert Holden says he was forced to sign an NDA before allowed to enter Borden Ave to distribute donated coats, scarves, and gloves.

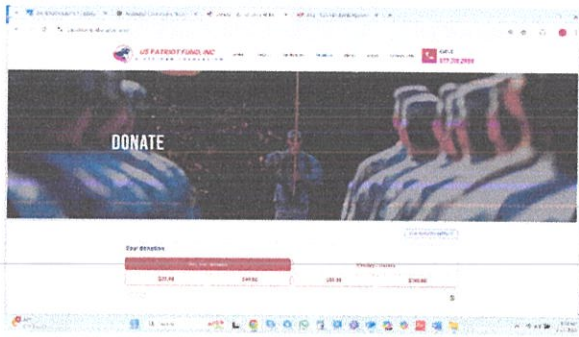
Veterans Affairs Policies on Solicitation



Veteran Affairs policies on solicitation focus on regulating how veterans' organizations, businesses, and individuals seek donations, services, or other forms of support. These policies are designed to protect veterans from fraud and ensure that any fundraising or solicitations align with the VA's mission to support veterans and their families. The VA requires that any solicitation efforts involving the use of veterans' images, names, or other identifying information must have prior written approval from the department.

Additionally, the VA enforces restrictions on aggressive or misleading solicitation tactics, such as high-pressure sales or false claims about the benefits provided to veterans. These safeguards aim to maintain the integrity of fundraising efforts and ensure that veterans' interests are prioritized. Veterans Affairs also emphasizes the importance of educating veterans on their rights and available resources to avoid exploitation, including requiring Veterans Affairs accredited veterans agencies and service officers. Overall, VA solicitation policies serve to protect both veterans and donors, ensuring that the funds raised are effectively used to support veterans' well-being and that solicitation practices are ethical and lawful.

The GUARD VA Benefits Act (H.R. 1139)

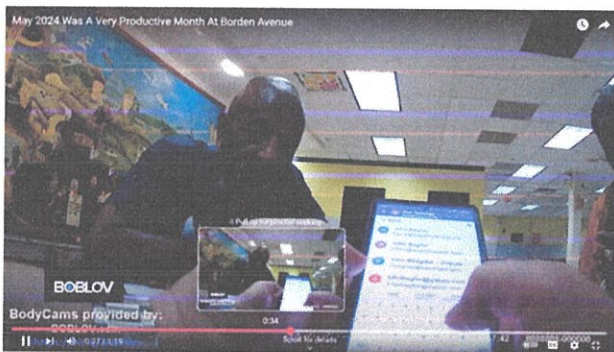


The [Governing Unaccredited Representatives Defrauding VA Benefits Act, or the GUARD VA Benefits Act](#) (H.R. 1139), was introduced in the 118th Congress on February 21, 2023, by Representative Chris Pappas, along with bipartisan co-sponsors. The bill aims to protect veterans from predatory practices by reinstating criminal penalties for unaccredited individuals who charge unauthorized fees for assisting with Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) benefit claims. Specifically, it seeks to impose fines on individuals who solicit, contract for, charge, or receive unauthorized fees related to the preparation, presentation, or prosecution of any claim for VA benefits.

The GUARD Act aims to protect veterans from predatory unaccredited individuals not just from direct fees but also from individuals that also profit from fundraising by exploiting vulnerable veterans for financial gain.

US Patriot Fund and SOS Veteran Assistance

Donations for veterans in the [Veterans Affairs Grant & Per Diem \(GPD\)](#) transitional program are a necessary component to a successful exit into sustainable housing and the community. As with most transitional programs, the community is encouraged to donate in the form of direct financial donations, clothing, hygiene, food, and resources often found on their websites. Neither The [Institute for Community Living \(ICL\)](#) nor the [Department of Homeless Services \(DHS\)](#) have such opportunities for donations, barely mentioning veterans at all, much less those in Veterans Affairs transitional programs.



According to [SOS Veteran Assistance](#), “This website, its owners, affiliates, and partners are not affiliated with any Local, State, or Federal Government agency and its marketing materials, and/or strategies are not affiliated with or approved by the U.S. Government. This website assists Veterans in applying for and obtaining Veterans benefits by pre-qualifying Veterans and connecting them to a service provider who may be able to provide supporting medical evidence to substantiate their Veteran

disability benefits claims.”

Owner and business partner of [US Patriot Fund](#) John Baglivi is a regular at Borden Avenue promising claims assistance, collecting veteran’s information in violation of HIPAA regulations, and then posting the video on YouTube. What makes this more disturbing is their lack of respect for Veterans Affairs, John’s business partner Louie Frias wrote in a recent blog “Yet ANOTHER Reason to Loathe the VA”:

“Another thing...STOP LOOKING AT THE eBENEFITS or MyHealthEvet sites! This VA nonsense is designed to FAIL THE VETERAN and instances such as this one, are PROOF of it. We, on the other hand, prefer to bitch slap VA at all levels because we have NOTHING TO LOSE when fighting for our Veterans,”

While these two companies are operating inside a Veterans Affairs federally-funded programs sowing distrust and exploiting veterans, they aren’t permitted to file claims for disability. Only accredited Veteran Service Officers are allowed to file disability claims with Veterans Affairs which protects both the veteran as much as it is to protect the claims process from fraud. Allowing unaccredited organizations to have direct



access to vulnerable veterans sets the dangerous and unlawful practice of profiting from veterans in VA Grant and Per Diem program.

NYC Department of Investigation Report / Department of Homeless Services

According to the [NYC Department of Investigation's 2024](#) report, systemic issues plague the shelter network, which is largely

managed by nonprofit providers under contract with DHS. The investigation revealed several disturbing patterns of corruption and mismanagement:

- **Conflicts of Interest:** Executives and insiders benefiting from non-transparent business dealings linked to shelter operations.
- **Excessive Executive Compensation:** Multiple shelter executives are earning over \$500,000 annually from public funds, with little oversight.
- **Nepotism:** The hiring of family members in violation of city contracts, raising concerns over favoritism and accountability.
- **Lack of Competitive Bidding:** Numerous instances where shelters bypassed city procurement rules, allowing for questionable deals and partnerships.

Conflicts of interest top the list as it relates to veterans experiencing homelessness. In addition to denying access to resources and services that promote a successful entrance into the community, DHS and ICL are allowing predatory organizations such as US Patriot Fund and SOS direct contact with vulnerable veterans.

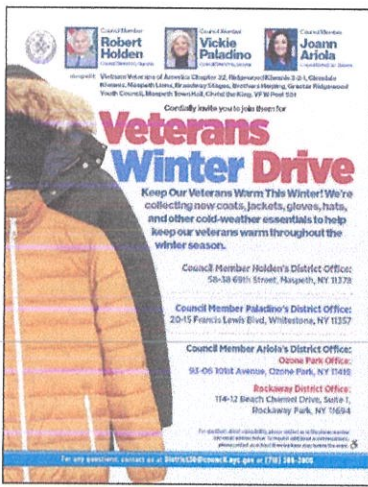
Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General / Grant & Per Diem Program

These issues, coupled with a lack of proper oversight from the city, have resulted in veterans being left vulnerable in the very programs designed to protect them. A recent investigation by the VA's Office of Inspector General revealed that 20% of veterans in GPD programs are not accounted for, while their cases are often incorrectly marked as successful transitions.

The VAOIG review team, "[Additional Controls Are Needed to Improve the Reliability of Grant and Per Diem Program Data](#)" estimated that HOMES outcome data were unreliable for about 888 (21 percent) of the 4,151 veterans recorded as having exited the program for permanent housing. In these cases, HOMES data did not match VA medical records, did not match the grantee's files, or lacked supporting documentation. Additionally, HOMES data did not accurately capture all negative exits—case outcomes where veterans are discharged from the GPD program under negative circumstances.

Donors Locked Out of Borden Avenue

The Borden Avenue shelter, meant to provide a safe space for veterans transitioning from homelessness, has instead become a hotbed for violence, drug use, and gross neglect. For many veterans like Timothy Pena, who relocated to New York City seeking a fresh start and mental health support, the experience has been nothing short of a nightmare. Upon entering the shelter, Pena and others found themselves subjected to substandard conditions, including inedible food, negligent security, and a lack of adequate community engagement. To make matters worse, the presence of high-risk offenders and bureaucratic delays have left veterans feeling abandoned and unsafe. Donations meant for veterans have been instead going to staff.



During a donation event in November 2024, Blackstone Foundation and Homes for Veterans supplied thousands of dollars in donations. Instead of being invited inside, Borden Ave staff forced them to hold the event in the pouring rain.

Another recent coat drive held by NYC Council Member and Chairman of Veteran Services Robert Holden Council Members Vicki Paladino and Joann Ariola, Holden was required to sign an NDA before entering Borden Avenue. One of the sponsors, Vietnam Veterans of America #32 refused to sign and were asked to leave which they did.

As in most donations that come into Borden Ave, veterans report that very little of the overall donations actually went to the veterans, with staff taking a major

portion for themselves. One glaring example of donation fraud was thousands of dollars of turkeys and other goods donated by Community for a Cause, "Community for a Cause raising funds for Borden Avenue Veterans Residence in Long Island City this holiday season" for years 2022 and 2023. The kitchen at Borden Avenue is used as a culinary school for Project Renewal and there's no staff to cook food coming in with donations. Instead of a home-cooked Thanksgiving Dinner as is done in GPD programs around the country, veterans at Borden Ave were instead served pre-prepared black 'trays' provided to most other shelters.



Upcoming City Council Oversight Hearing

After years of complaints, overdoses, and deaths at Borden Avenue, Councilman Holden has called for an oversight hearing with Department of Homeless Services. It is fair to say not much is to be expected. DHS Commissioner Molly Wasum Parks has made a practice of blaming contracted vendors for everything from incalculable food to processing of housing vouchers. In return, ICL CEO Jody Rudin and her staff place the blame on DHS. Veterans Affairs knows about these issues and has remained silent while VA Homeless Director Karen Fuller forces the termination of veterans experiencing homelessness from the Veterans Task Force and ignores dozens of complaints from homeless veterans.

Veterans Need Your Help

Please consider taking time from your busy schedule to attend the upcoming hearing on DHS Oversight:

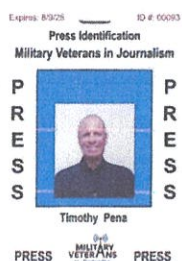
Topic: Addressing the Needs of Homeless Veterans

Where: 250 Broadway, Committee Room 14th Floor

When: February 19, 2025 / 1300 hours (1pm)

Register to Testify: <https://council.nyc.gov/testify/>

[Veterans For Sale Printable PDF \(4 pages\)](#)



Timothy Pena is a service-connected disabled Navy veteran for PTSD and has written about his experiences with mental health, homelessness, and the judicial system. Suffering mental illness, he initially visited NYC to collaborate on a documentary for veteran suicide but decided to stay after realizing he would rather be homeless in NYC than dead in Phoenix. He has been writing stories and blogs about his journey from "homeless to homeness" in the NYC Dept of Homeless Services system and possible corruption within DHS and Veterans Affairs Grant & Per Diem Transitional Program.

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: JAMES HENDON, COMMISSIONER

Address: _____

I represent: DVS

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Associate Commissioner Sanyia Russel

Address: _____

I represent: DSS

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: LAMAR WHEELER

Address: _____

I represent: DVS

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: JOE BELLO

Address: VET HOMELESSNESS

I represent: _____

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 2/19/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: SONYA RUSSELL, Associate Commisr.

Address: Dept. Homeless Services

I represent: _____

Address: 33 Beaman Street

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Commissioner James Hendon

Address: _____

I represent: DVS

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Senior Exec Dir. for Housing Support Lamar
wheeler

Address: _____

I represent: DVS

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☒ in favor ☒ in opposition

Date: Feb. 19, 2024

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Armando Crescenzi

Address: _____

I represent: Put Veterans First, Ltd

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 2/19/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: FRANCESCA D. PAOLA

Address: _____

I represent: Ames for Veterans

Address: _____

Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Tim Pena

Address: _____

I represent: Veterans Justice Project

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: Feb. 19

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Melissa delValle OPT 12

Address: _____

I represent: Self

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: Feb 19, 2025

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Sharon Brown

Address: _____

I represent: Rose of Sharon Enterprises

Address: 43 Madison Street

Bklyn NY 11238
Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Alex Sklar

Address: _____

I represent: Self

Address: Dallas TX 75249

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 2/19/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Raul Rivera

Address: _____

I represent: _____

Address: _____

**THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☒ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: 2/19/25

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Christopher Leon Johnson

Address: _____

I represent: Self

Address: _____