

CITY COUNCIL  
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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April 2, 2024  
Start: 10:06 a.m.  
Recess: 12:10 p.m.

HELD AT: Committee Room - City Hall

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

COUNCIL MEMBERS:  
Joann Ariola  
Kristy Marmorato  
Sandy Nurse  
Vickie Paladino

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

James Hendon  
Department of Veteran Services Commissioner

Cassandra Alvarez  
Department of Veteran Services Chief of Staff

Ashton Stewart  
Veteran Liaison at MJHS

Peter Kempner  
Volunteers of Legal Services

Timothy Pena  
The Forgotten Veteran

Armando Crescenzi  
Put Veterans First

Gene DeFrancis  
American Legion Bronx County

Ricardo Garcia  
American Legion

Gus Stavroulakis

Anne Gentry Torell  
NYU Langone Health

Sergio Villaverde

Ryan Graham



1  
2 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Good morning and  
3 welcome to the New York City Council Committee on  
4 Veterans. At this time, please place your phone on  
5 vibrate or silent mode. If you want to submit  
6 testimony, send it to [testimony@council.nyc.gov](mailto:testimony@council.nyc.gov).  
7 Once again, that's [testimony@ocouncil.nyc.gov](mailto:testimony@ocouncil.nyc.gov). At any  
8 time during this hearing, do not approach the dais.  
9 Thank you for your cooperation. Chair Holden, we are  
10 ready to begin.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [gavel] Good  
12 morning. I am Council Member Robert Holden and Chair  
13 of the Committee on Veterans. Welcome to our  
14 oversight hearing on Cold War veterans, Resolution  
15 number-- again, additionally today, the Committee  
16 will hear three Resolutions, Resolution 10 which I  
17 have sponsored to recognize July 27<sup>th</sup> annually as  
18 Korean War Veterans Armistice Day in the City of New  
19 York to honor the courage and sacrifice of those who  
20 served. Resolution 157 sponsored by my colleague  
21 Council Member Julie Menin who's here today to-- the  
22 resolution is to recognize June 6<sup>th</sup> annually as D-Day  
23 Remembrance Day in the City of New York in honor of  
24 the courage and sacrifice of the allied soldiers on  
25 the Normandy beaches in France which was the defining

1  
2 moment in World War II. So, you know, it's certainly  
3 appropriate and long over-due. And Resolution 279  
4 sponsored by Council Member Vickie Paladino and  
5 myself to call on the United States Congress to pass  
6 and the President to sign legislation declaring April  
7 26<sup>th</sup> annually as Korean War Veterans and Korean  
8 Defense Veterans Recognition Day to celebrate the  
9 bravery and honor the sacrifices of those who served.  
10 I'll now call on my colleague Council Member Menin to  
11 make a brief statement about her resolution.

12 COUNCIL MEMBER MENIN: Thank you so much  
13 Chair Holden, and it's an honor to be here, and as a  
14 daughter of a veteran, it means a lot to me to be  
15 here in front of your committee. So, this summer  
16 will, as the Chair mentioned, mark the 80<sup>th</sup>  
17 Anniversary of D-Day. Soldiers stormed the beaches  
18 of Normandy for one of the largest military  
19 operations in history. Nearly 160,000 allied  
20 soldiers were involved in that fateful day that was  
21 monumental in ending World War II a year later. That  
22 is why I'm honored to introduce a resolution,  
23 Resolution 157, to recognize June 6<sup>th</sup> as D-Day  
24 Remembrance Day. It is incredibly fitting to have  
25 this resolution heard with the support of the Chair

1 as the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this event is this year.

2 As former President Barack Obama said in 2014,

3 "Victory on D-Day dealt a significant blow to an

4 ideology fueled by hatred." There are still some

5 veterans of World War II that are living in the

6 United States and here in New York City. In fact, the

7 National World War II Museum estimated that there are

8 around 6,869, to be exact, living World War II

9 veterans in New York. I can think of no better way

10 to honor their legacy, their courage and their

11 ultimate sacrifice than having the City recognize

12 such a critical day. I want to thank the bill's

13 drafter Regina Paul and from my team Jonathan

14 Szott, and Legislative Director Brandon Jordan.

15 Thank you so much, Chair, for allowing me to speak.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Council

17 Member Menin. And finally-- by the way, Vickie

18 Paladino, Council Member Vickie Paladino is on her

19 way, so we'll let her read a statement when she-- on

20 her resolution when she arrives. Finally, let me say

21 a few words about two resolutions honoring Korean War

22 veterans and Korean defense veterans. I believe that

23 these resolutions are a step in ensuring that all

1  
2 veterans regardless of when or where they served  
3 receive the recognition they certainly deserve.  
4 These resolutions call for honoring those who have  
5 served in Korea, both during the Korean War and since  
6 then to keep the fragile peace in that area of the  
7 world. I believe that they should be honored. I  
8 think everyone would agree, both nationally and of  
9 course, New York City should have a day of  
10 recognition. Since 1991 in New York City we've had  
11 our own Korean War Veterans Memorial. It's a  
12 beautiful site in the Battery. It's one of the  
13 better memorials and monuments. So that monument  
14 displays a 15-foot black granite slab with a cut-out  
15 in the shape of a soldier, one that you can look  
16 right through and see the statue of liberty. It's  
17 really a moving-- if you look at that. If you go  
18 down, it's worth a trip just to see that part of it.  
19 It's a reminder of the price of liberty-- the price  
20 of liberty is often the fallen and our missing  
21 soldiers paying the price. So may we remember them  
22 today and every day. And now in today's hearing,  
23 which will be focused on the needs of veterans who  
24 served in the Cold War era, a group whose sacrifices  
25 and contributions often go unrecognized. The Cold

1  
2 War era, specifically the period following the end of  
3 the Vietnam War may not have seen the intensity or  
4 direct conflict that some war time periods have, but  
5 it's undeniable that it's shaped the course of  
6 history and demanded sacrifices of the men and women  
7 who answered the call to serve. Our veterans who  
8 proudly wore the uniform during the Cold War era are  
9 a testament to resilience and selflessness. They  
10 stood ready to protect us during a time of global  
11 tension, and it's often-- you know, we have a lot of  
12 that, again those are-- they're put on the front  
13 lines, and it's our duty to recognize that commitment  
14 by ensuring their wellbeing and addressing specific  
15 needs they have now. And certainly, there's many that  
16 we need to obviously catch up on, but there's so many  
17 things we can do that we're not doing. So at this  
18 time, I'd like to acknowledge my colleague Kristy  
19 Marmorato who is again one of the certainly loyal  
20 members of this committee, and like I said Vickie  
21 Paladino's on her way. So I'd also like to thank the  
22 Committee Staff who worked to prepare this hearing,  
23 Regina Paul to my right, our Policy Analyst, who's  
24 invaluable, by the way, does a lot of work. I want  
25 to thank her-- always has great ideas. And who also

1  
2 wrote three resolutions we are hearing today. And  
3 then Ross Goldstein, our Financial Analyst. And  
4 finally, my staff member who's under the weather,  
5 Daniel Kurnyza. He's the Chief of Staff of my  
6 office. And I would like to now turn it over to  
7 Regina to administer the oath to the witness,  
8 Commissioner Hendon from the Administration.

9 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: We have Commissioner  
10 James Hendon and Cassandra Alvarez for the  
11 Administration. Would you please raise your right  
12 hands? Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole  
13 truth and nothing but the truth in your testimony  
14 before this committee and to respond honestly to  
15 Council Member's questions?

16 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I do.

17 CHIEF OF STAFF ALVAREZ: I do.

18 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. As a  
19 reminder for all of our witnesses, please state your  
20 name prior to the testimony for the record.

21 COMMISSIONER HENDON: My name is James  
22 Hendon. I serve as Commissioner of the New York City  
23 Department of Veteran Services, just for the record.  
24 Good morning, chair Holden, Committee Members,  
25 veterans and Armed Forces members in attendance,

1 their loved ones and advocates. My name is James  
2 Hendon. I serve as Commissioner for the New York City  
3 Department of Veteran Services. I'm joined today by  
4 my colleague Cassandra Alvarez, DVS' Chief of Staff.  
5 Thank you for providing us with the opportunity to  
6 discuss peace time era veterans and the work that we  
7 have done and are doing in support of New York City's  
8 peace time era veteran community, almost all of whom  
9 living today served during the Cold War. Following  
10 my testimony, we welcome any questions that committee  
11 members may have. The Cold War, spanning from the  
12 end of World War II in 1945 to the dissolution of the  
13 Soviet Union in 1991 was a time of heightened global  
14 tension amid an arms race that put service men and  
15 women in unique positions of risk. While punctuated  
16 by direct periods of conflict, from the Korean War to  
17 the Vietnam War to Operations Desert Shield and  
18 Desert Storm, roughly 26 out of the Cold War's 46  
19 years consisted of traditional force-on-force  
20 confrontation. They were extended periods of time,  
21 cumulatively 20 years that did not include the  
22 conventional kinetic actions typically associated  
23 with times of war. Veterans serving during these  
24 occasions operated under the constant threat of  
25

1 nuclear war, engaged in espionage, and participated  
2 in proxy operations that have left lasting impact on  
3 their physical and mental health. Despite these  
4 sacrifices, peace time era veterans face several  
5 challenges recognizing and receiving benefits. Unlike  
6 their counterparts from other combat eras, many peace  
7 time era veterans do not qualify for certain benefits  
8 due to the non-combat nature of their service. That  
9 being said, for our peace time era veterans, DVS has  
10 gone beyond traditional support to create initiatives  
11 that honor their unique positions in our nation's  
12 military history. We acknowledge their service in  
13 guarding our nation during times of global  
14 uncertainty, and have taken steps to ensure that they  
15 receive the respect and opportunities they deserve.  
16 This includes facilitating their integration into the  
17 City's rich array of resources. DVS has demonstrated  
18 this commitment through offering comprehensive  
19 services, establishing strategic partnerships, and  
20 conducting targeted outreach and engagement. Some  
21 notable programs, partnerships and outreach that  
22 serve peacetime era veterans within the agency  
23 include but are not limited to: civil service  
24 veterans' expansions. Working in partnership with  
25

1 the New York City Department of Citywide  
2 Administrative Services, DVS helped to expand New  
3 York City's veteran and disabled veteran credit to  
4 include veterans who served during both peacetime and  
5 conflict. Get Covered NYC Vet: Get Covered NYC Vet  
6 helps veteran and military families of all era's  
7 access VA healthcare and/or the New York State of  
8 Health where applicable. HUD VASH Collaborative Case  
9 Management: Working with our partners at the VA,  
10 NYCHA and HPD, DVS executes the Veterans Affairs  
11 Supportive Housing Collaborative Case Management  
12 Program or VASH CCM. Collaborative Case Management,  
13 formerly known as VASH Continuum, is a form of VASH,  
14 a Section 8 style voucher for our veterans, specific  
15 to veterans who are not eligible for VA healthcare.  
16 DVS provides case management for these veterans  
17 notably including any peacetime era veterans who due  
18 to the nature of their service may not be eligible  
19 for the traditional HUD VASH Program.

21 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Excuse me,  
22 Commissioner. Could we just hold for one minute?  
23 We're having a little trouble with the QR code. We  
24 just need to get that working and then we'll pick up  
25 with you again. Commissioner, please resume.

2                   COMMISSIONER HENDON:  Veteran Resource  
3 Centers:  DVS positions-- sorry, I'll-- I'm going to  
4 go from my HUD VASH.  I'm so sorry.  HUD VASH  
5 Collaborative Case Management:  Working with our  
6 partners at the VA, NYCHA, and HPD, DVS execute the  
7 Veteran Affairs Supportive Housing Collaborative Case  
8 Management Program, or VASH CCM.  Collaborative Case  
9 Management, formerly known as VASH Continuum, is a  
10 form of VASH, a Section 8 style voucher for veterans,  
11 specific to veterans who are not eligible for VA  
12 healthcare.  DVS provides case management to these  
13 veterans, notably including any peacetime era  
14 veterans who due to the nature of their service may  
15 not be eligible for the traditional HUD VASH program.  
16 Veteran Resource Centers:  DVS positions Veteran  
17 Benefit Advisors in each of the five boroughs to  
18 ensure that veterans of all eras, including peacetime  
19 era veterans, have access to our agency's support and  
20 services.  Indigent burials:  Through our working  
21 relationship with the Office of the Chief Medical  
22 Examiner, DVS ensures that no eligible veteran is  
23 without an honorary burial in a VA national Cemetery  
24 regardless of the veteran's personal financial  
25 disposition or era of service.  Claim Support:

1 Accredited DVS staff members process VA claims for  
2 New York City veterans and their families, focusing  
3 on areas such as disability compensation, dependent  
4 indemnity compensation, non-service connected  
5 pension, survivors pension, and education benefits.  
6 We provide this offering to all veterans including  
7 those who served during a peacetime era. I'll speak  
8 now about enhanced recognition through home ownership  
9 support. Turning to the tangible metrics of our  
10 commitment to veterans in New York, the property tax  
11 exemptions that currently exist for veterans  
12 highlight our city's substantial investment in the  
13 wellbeing of those who served. Per the New York City  
14 Department of Finance's annual report on tax  
15 expenditures for FY24, 31,264 veteran property owners  
16 utilized the veteran property tax exemption, 2,918 in  
17 Manhattan, 2,481 in the Bronx, 6,330 in Brooklyn,  
18 12,396 in Queens, and 7,139 in Staten Island. The  
19 total value of the exemption is \$36.1 million  
20 dollars, suggesting an average annual benefit of  
21 \$1,155 per veteran. WE acknowledge that  
22 homeownership is not just about having a roof over  
23 one's head, it's about stability, equity, and the  
24 promise of the American dream. Thus, the State of  
25

1 New York and City of New York dedicated resources and  
2 enacted exemptions that ease the financial burden on  
3 our veterans, enabling them to secure and maintain a  
4 place they call home. During the mayoralty of Michael  
5 Bloomberg and City Council Speakership of Christine  
6 Quinn more than 10 years ago, the Speaker and City  
7 Council pledged to honor two out of the three state-  
8 authorized exemptions for those who've served. The  
9 first exemption, the alternative veterans' exemption  
10 is available to eligible veterans of foreign wars,  
11 those who have earned exhibitionary medals, veterans  
12 with honorable discharges, spouses, widows, and  
13 widowers of veterans, and gold star parents. The  
14 second is the eligible funds exemption. The eligible  
15 funds exemption is available for veterans who  
16 purchased homes using legible funds such as pensions,  
17 bonuses, insurance, and mustering out of pay. The  
18 third exemption, which was not adopted by the City of  
19 New York at the time, is the Cold War veterans'  
20 exemption. The Cold War veterans' exemption  
21 explicitly affords a property tax exemption to  
22 veterans who served during the Cold War from  
23 September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1945 through December 26<sup>th</sup>, 1991. The  
24 State authorizes New York's tax jurisdictions to  
25

1 offer all three exemption if the jurisdiction so  
2 chooses. New York City currently has chosen two out  
3 of the three. That said, a veteran cannot  
4 simultaneously utilize the alternative veterans  
5 exemption and the Cold War veterans exemption. Once  
6 a tax jurisdiction offers it, it's either one or the  
7 other. To address the concern raised by the City  
8 Council in the present regarding the question what  
9 would it cost for the City to employ the Cold War  
10 veterans' property tax exemption in 2024? This  
11 question does not have a direct answer for reasons  
12 that we will describe. At its heart are two  
13 challenges. One, a majority of veterans in New York  
14 City do not self-identify. 75.8 percent of veterans  
15 in this city don't self-identify according to the VA  
16 as of FY22. And two, the Federal Government excludes  
17 a large number of veterans in the population numbers  
18 that it tracks. This is true for both the VA and the  
19 census bureau. Regarding the Department of Veterans  
20 Affairs. The VA excludes veterans who are not  
21 eligible for VA healthcare in its population counts.  
22 Among other things, a person who enlisted after  
23 September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1980 needs at least two years of  
24 active service in the military to be eligible for VA  
25

1 healthcare. Also, a person is not automatically  
2 eligible for VA healthcare if they have a discharge  
3 that is lower than a general discharge under  
4 honorable conditions. These people are not accounted  
5 for the VA's data. Meanwhile, the Census Bureau only  
6 conveys the number of veterans who served on active  
7 duty status at some point and no longer serve. Many  
8 guardsmen and reservists are not included within that  
9 group. Speaking for myself, I'm a US Army Reservist  
10 who served in the military for more than 20 years. I  
11 am not counted as a veteran per the Census Bureau's  
12 metrics. It's because I'm still serving. I will be  
13 counted as a veteran once I retire from the Army  
14 because I have active duty service time. If I did  
15 not have active duty service time, if I spent my  
16 entire career as a guardsman or reservist who was  
17 never placed on federal active duty orders, then I  
18 would never be counted by the Census Bureau. Many  
19 veterans are excluded from what the Census Bureau and  
20 VA track when it comes to active versus non-active  
21 service. Many of those folks who were excluded are  
22 National Guardsmen and Reservist. To put things in  
23 perspective, nationwide approximately 1.3 million  
24 people serve on active duty status in the US Armed  
25

1 Forces right now. Another 770,000 are National  
2 Guardsmen and Reservists. These numbers were  
3 significantly higher during the Cold War. In 1985  
4 there were 2.2 million service members on active  
5 duty, and 1.1 million in the Reserve and National  
6 Guard. The number of veterans in New York City  
7 according to the Census Bureau is 2022 ACS Five-Year  
8 Estimate, which was recently released, is 135,138 of  
9 whom 106,952 served during periods of conflict, World  
10 War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf WAR onwards, into  
11 what we now know is the Global War on Terror. The  
12 remaining 28,186 prior service members are peacetime  
13 era veterans. It is important to remember the Census  
14 Bureau does not breakout veterans by era; however, it  
15 includes-- the Census Bureau does break out veterans  
16 by era. However, it only includes those who served on  
17 active duty status at some point in their careers and  
18 who no longer serve. Many veterans on the Guard and  
19 Reserve who never served on active duty are not  
20 included in the Census Bureau's data. The NYC  
21 Department of Veterans Services estimates that at  
22 least 203,357 veterans live in New York City. Our  
23 numbers derived from VA data. The VA's Gross  
24 Domestic Expenditure Report for 2022 through which we  
25

1 know the number of past service members eligible for  
2 VA healthcare in New York City. It's 159,132.  
3 Beyond this, we estimate that 31,104 veterans are not  
4 eligible for VA healthcare. This is informed by  
5 multiplying national discharge averages by known VA  
6 information. Separately, from the Defense  
7 Department, we know that 13,121 active duty  
8 personnel, Guardsmen and Reservists currently reside  
9 in the five boroughs. Our three numbers combined,  
10 159,132, 31,104, 13,121 give us a known veterans  
11 population of 203,357. Even our numbers, because  
12 they're informed by federal entities exclude a  
13 significant number of Guardsmen and Reservists who  
14 because they never served on federal active duty  
15 orders are not eligible for VA healthcare. DVS  
16 estimates that at least 30,000 New York City  
17 veterans, many of whom are former Guardsmen and  
18 Reservists who served during periods of peace are  
19 amongst those excluded but equally important group.  
20 Another piece of information that we believe may be  
21 valuable to this conversation. According to the 2022  
22 ACS Five-Year Estimate, approximately 33 percent of  
23 all housing units in New York City are owner-  
24 occupied, one million owner-occupied units out of 3.2

1 million total units. A 2020 Urban Institute Study  
2 holds [sic] that nationwide the veteran homeownership  
3 rate is 14 percentage points higher than the rate for  
4 the total population. This suggests a homeownership  
5 rate of 47 percent for veterans throughout the City  
6 of New York, 33 percent plus 14 percent. Using ACS  
7 data, which holds once again 28,186 peacetime era  
8 veterans in New York City, simultaneously excluding  
9 those Guardsmen and Reservists I mentioned, one can  
10 assume just looking at the ACS veteran data, at least  
11 13,247 veterans or 47 percent of our peacetime era  
12 veterans in this city are homeowners. Staying with  
13 the American Community Survey, given that 106,952  
14 combat veterans are in New York City. Once again,  
15 based on this five-year estimate which we do not  
16 believe is fully-inclusive, and assuming a  
17 homeownership rate of 47 percent, we can conclude  
18 that at least 50,267 combat era veterans in New York  
19 City are homeowners. Given what we know from the tax  
20 report, 31,264 New York City veterans used a veterans  
21 property tax exemption in FY24, knowing that there  
22 are at least 50,267 combat era veterans who own homes  
23 in the five boroughs, the utilization rate of the  
24 existing property tax exemptions in New York City for  
25

1 veterans. Amongst those eligible it, amongst combat  
2 veterans who own homes is 62 percent. So, 62 percent  
3 of all veterans who are homeowners-- who are combat  
4 veterans are homeowners use one of the existing  
5 veteran property tax exemptions. Should we apply  
6 this same utilization rate, 62 percent to the minimum  
7 number of peacetime era veterans in the City who own  
8 homes, 13,247, then one could estimate that at least  
9 8,213 peacetime era veterans in New York City would  
10 avail themselves of a Cold War property tax exemption  
11 if allowed. So, once again, we believe that 808,213  
12 peacetime era veterans who own homes would avail  
13 themselves of a Cold War property tax exemption if  
14 allowed. In total, that 8,213 veterans multiplied by  
15 the average annual benefit of the existing property  
16 tax exemption for veterans, it's \$1,155, equals \$9.5  
17 million dollars. So we believe that 8,213 veterans  
18 who are peacetime era own homes would use an  
19 exemption if allowed. The average annual benefit is  
20 \$1,155 per veterans for the combat vets who use it.  
21 It come out to \$9.5 million dollars. Given all of  
22 the assumptions made, using publicly available data  
23 to reach an estimated number and recognizing gaps in  
24 our core facts regarding the number of New York  
25

1  
2 City's peacetime era National Guardsmen and  
3 Reservists, we urge further review of the budget  
4 impacts of enacting New York State's Cold War veteran  
5 property tax exemption in the City of New York. In  
6 conclusion, we pray that this testimony has provided  
7 you with a firm understanding of our agency's efforts  
8 to support peacetime era veterans and their families.  
9 Additionally, we hope that our analysis may undergo  
10 future deliberations on the costs to implore New York  
11 State's Cold War veteran property tax exemption. We  
12 recognize how important this is to our peacetime era  
13 veterans. Beyond just speaking of veteran property  
14 tax exemption is a key factor to this and all of our  
15 actions and conversations is taking steps to remove  
16 walls from within New York City military and veteran  
17 community. In the city with the most permissive  
18 definition of veteran in the nation and perhaps the  
19 world, we do not want our brother and sisters to feel  
20 as though we are treating them differently based on  
21 their length of service, their character of service,  
22 their type of service, along with when and where they  
23 served. Lastly, we welcome continued collaboration  
24 as we work together to connect and mobilize and  
25 empower New York City's veteran community. I urge

1  
2 you all to please contact me, our Chief of Staff,  
3 Cassandra Alvarez, or our Senior Advisor of  
4 Intergovernmental Affairs, Jason Loughran, with  
5 follow-up questions or thoughts. Thank you.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you,  
7 Commissioner. We've been joined by Council Member  
8 Ariola. Those numbers that you just read, again, it  
9 might cost us \$10 million for property-- that's your  
10 estimate that-- which is very valuable at this point.  
11 It's not a lot of money. But would you say that  
12 since many veterans don't self-identify, if we  
13 offered the property tax exemption, that would  
14 actually bring more veterans to self-identify? I  
15 mean, there would-- there's an advantage to that.  
16 There's-- not only would they get the exemption, but  
17 they could get other services, too, that we don't  
18 know. We don't know they exist, in fact, right?

19 COMMISSIONER HENDON: You're right, and  
20 to call these numbers out, it's 24.2 percent of our  
21 veterans self-identify. We're seeing-- of the combat  
22 era veterans who own homes, 62 percent are using that  
23 veteran property tax exemption. So you have to  
24 assume that if this were expanded to the peacetime  
25 era veterans for the Cold War exemption that you

1 would see more identify. This dovetails right back  
2 to Intro 1237 which the Council passed, which I  
3 believe is about to be done aging soon, where now  
4 having the question on all the paperwork, too: "Have  
5 you served?"

6  
7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right.

8 COMMISSIONER HENDON: This is something  
9 else [inaudible] but you're absolutely correct as far  
10 as the implications of having this for the peacetime  
11 era veterans, Mr. Chair.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: SO, you agree that C  
13 Cold War veterans who served between the end of the  
14 Vietnam War and the beginning of the Persian Gulf War  
15 deserve more benefits than they are currently getting  
16 from the federal, state and our local governments?

17 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think it should  
18 be-- I don't think of it as more, I think of it as  
19 equal benefits. And a key thing I'd love for you to  
20 take away from this today is a long time--

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] More  
22 than-- more than they're getting now.

23 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Equal, yep. Equal,  
24 yep.

25 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah.

1  
2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Correct, Mr. Chair.

3 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Equal, everybody  
4 should get the same.

5 COMMISSIONER HENDON: In other words, we  
6 don't want to-- we've got so many people not  
7 identifying because they feel like, oh, I'm not  
8 really a veteran. I didn't serve in combat, or I  
9 didn't deploy, or I was in the Guard, I was in  
10 Reserve. And I just want us to attack that in all  
11 ways, shapes, and forms. If you took the oath, we  
12 want to do right by you, Mr. Chair.

13 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right. Thank you  
14 for that. And again, this is-- you know, we've had  
15 some discussions on this, certainly at our hearings  
16 before. What particular outreach did DVS do to Cold  
17 War veterans of this peacetime era?

18 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'm going to pass  
19 it to Cass to answer, but I've got to underscore,  
20 we're trying our best to make our folks feels like  
21 you're no different from your brothers who did  
22 deploy. For us it's you took the oath, we put hands  
23 on you, we love you. So, I just want to say that,  
24 but I'm going to defer to Cass on the [inaudible].

25

1  
2 CHIEF OF STAFF ALVAREZ: Thank you,  
3 Commissioner, and good morning Chair Holden and  
4 members of the committee. We're very fortunate to  
5 have two veterans on our communications team. So  
6 they engage the community with a sense of cultural  
7 competency and perspective of those who serve which  
8 we appreciate. And so we have a few key pillars that  
9 we structure our communications around. Number one  
10 is our weekly newsletter. It's sent out via email.  
11 We've got about 10,000 subscribers on that newsletter  
12 list right now. That's a content-rich communication.  
13 It changes weekly. It's got information about various  
14 benefits and events happening throughout the City. We  
15 also try to ramp up our presence at community events,  
16 because we know some of our Cold War veterans and  
17 certainly older generations, maybe they're not all  
18 digitally connected. So we try to have an on-the-  
19 ground presence and do outreach at public engagement  
20 events which is another reason why we've added that  
21 metric to the agencies Mayor's Management Report.  
22 It's a public engagement metric that we're not  
23 reporting on. And then we also have a campaign going  
24 called Vision Vet Check. It's a program that we  
25 started actually during the pandemic, but we re-

1  
2 launched it again last year, and that is a phone call  
3 campaign where we leverage volunteers to make  
4 wellness check calls to our veterans across the City,  
5 and of course, Cold War veterans are included in that  
6 group. So that's some phone contact that we try to  
7 make every week, and then we've also used text  
8 messaging. That's something that we just introduced  
9 last year all through the agency. That's text  
10 messaging vets about the events that we have going  
11 on. We text them about our quarterly engagement  
12 sessions which we just started hosting last quarter  
13 of this year. And then in the beginning of this  
14 year, we also rolled out letters to the Community  
15 Boards, the Council Members, and to the Senior Center  
16 directors to just disseminate information about DVS,  
17 basic information about the agency so that folks know  
18 that we exist. They have our basic website  
19 information, phone number, etcetera. So that's been  
20 a useful tool for us. So that those are the  
21 different sort of ways that we engage the community.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright. Any  
23 additional needs that in order to get some more  
24 feedback, our-- first of all, are you getting  
25

1  
2 feedback. Are you getting a good amount of feedback  
3 from veterans?

4 CHIEF OF STAFF ALVAREZ: Yeah.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And what about-- do  
6 you keep records of Cold War veterans that are giving  
7 you feedback or at least contacting you? Do you  
8 have-- do you separate them?

9 CHIEF OF STAFF ALVAREZ: So, we actually  
10 launched a community survey earlier this year, and  
11 that certainly is collecting responses from Cold War  
12 veterans. We did a survey back in 2021, as well,  
13 that also included them as a response demographic. We  
14 collect responses from all veterans. You know, we get  
15 contact through the connect inbox on our website. So  
16 we don't necessarily triage by the combat era,  
17 because as the Commissioner said, we engage equally,  
18 but certainly we're always open to feedback and we  
19 collect that and respond.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, do you get-- are  
21 you aware of any veteran's organizations that already  
22 support Cold War veterans? I would think they would,  
23 but do you get a lot of feedback from veteran  
24 organizations about Cold War? Is that like a major  
25 topic with them?

1  
2                   COMMISSIONER HENDON: Not really. I mean,  
3 the-- nationally, there's a group called American  
4 Cold War Veterans, but they don't have a footprint  
5 here in New York City as far as a national group that  
6 we know that does focus on this segment. Beyond that  
7 it's-- you know, we see our Cold War veterans as  
8 members of our American Legion Post, as members of  
9 our Catholic War Veterans Post, our Jewish War  
10 Veterans Post. Even for Vietnam Veterans of America,  
11 it's that you have to have served during the Vietnam  
12 Era, not that you have to have deployed to Vietnam,  
13 Laos or Cambodia. So, we see these thing layered  
14 within the existing legacy VSOs, Mr. Chair.

15                   CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, how could our  
16 City Council better support the provision and  
17 services to the Cold War veterans? What would you  
18 suggest? That's a trick question.

19                   COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to-- if you  
20 don't mind, I want to just take it 30,000 feet and  
21 then drill down. I think that it's key to know as  
22 policymakers, too, that the original sin here was the  
23 Federal Government's decision to divide the groups,  
24 to really separate the peacetime era versus the  
25 wartime era as a way to cut cost, as a way to save

1  
2 money. You know, there was that decision made back  
3 in the 1980s where you have to have at least two  
4 years of active federal service to even be eligible  
5 for VA healthcare, which is the turnkey for so many  
6 other things, and I think we've seen that kind of  
7 metastasize in other ways where state and local level  
8 folks started making these decisions to surgically,  
9 you know, set things up where we want to-- I only  
10 have so much money. I'm going to give this group of  
11 veterans a benefit versus this group.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right, right.

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And I just-- you  
14 know, I think that the--

15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] We know  
16 the motives of to save money, obviously. But the  
17 City can compensate somewhat with legislation that--  
18 we've introduced, actually in the last Council, and  
19 I'd like your opinion on the bill, even though it's  
20 about to be reintroduced. It was Council Member  
21 Borelli's bill. It was introduced in the last  
22 session, and like I said it's about to be  
23 reintroduced which would amend the administrative  
24 code to establish in New York City the real property  
25 tax exemption for Cold War veterans that is allowed

1  
2 by the State of New York. The State of New York says  
3 we could do it. We elected not to, and I think we  
4 need to fix this. So, I know that you support it,  
5 because we've had conversations. I hope I didn't--  
6 you know, but I think-- I don't want to speak for  
7 you, but I think-- it was your priority. It was my  
8 priority when I became the Veterans Chair, because  
9 it's the right thing to do. So, I think New York  
10 City needs to catch up. We'll certainly talk to  
11 leadership, but I think that needs to be, you know,  
12 really put on the fast-track as a bill. So, anyway.

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Mr. Chair, just to  
14 double-down where you are. As a veteran I can't sit  
15 here and not support this. As far as doing right by  
16 our people.

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Of course not.

18 COMMISSIONER HENDON: And it gets-- to me,  
19 it gets at the heart of self-identification. You  
20 know, like when you remove these walls where people  
21 thing I am a veteran, oh I'm not a veteran, etcetera.  
22 And you took the oath, we need to do right by you.  
23 So as a veteran, I'm wholeheartedly in favor of it.  
24 On the administrative side with my government hat,  
25 what's tough is that my mandate is to focus on

1  
2 insisting informing the military community and  
3 veteran community in areas laid out already where we  
4 talk about healthcare, housing, benefits, culture,  
5 education, employment. This piece as far as I don't  
6 have the authority to weigh in in that capacity.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I get that. That's  
8 why--

9 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing] But as  
10 a veteran, I want to be very clear, absolutely. This  
11 is--

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Right,  
13 I know there--

14 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing] This  
15 is critical.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Again, there's that--  
17 - you can't speak for the Administration. The bill  
18 hasn't' been reintroduced yet. I expected that, but  
19 that's why I was speaking to the veteran inside of  
20 you, and I should have qualified that. But like the  
21 off-shoot, there's so many other-- like I mentioned  
22 before about the benefits. Not only if, you know,  
23 they could self-identify and get more benefits. But  
24 let me just go back to outreach again, because I had--  
25 - you know, we talked about this a little bit more,

1  
2 but I'd like specifics if you could-- you know, in  
3 addition to what you're already doing in outreach,  
4 what about piggy-backing on other communications with  
5 the City of New York? Like, you know, if-- they're  
6 communicating almost every month. I get a few things  
7 from the City of New York. Couldn't we put it in an  
8 envelope with something about veteran's benefits? If  
9 you haven't self-identified, maybe it's a good time  
10 because this-- you might qualify for this, this,  
11 this, and this. I mean, could that be-- are you  
12 doing anything on that?

13 CHIEF OF STAFF ALVAREZ: So, I think that  
14 we've done that a couple of ways, and we're certainly  
15 exploring fathering that idea. One of the things  
16 that we've done, as I mentioned before, is that we  
17 shared our flyer and our information with the Senior  
18 Center directors. So, we're not necessarily piggy-  
19 backing off of a direct mailing in that sense, but  
20 we're piggy-backing off of a standing system that  
21 DFTA already has in place to engage their Senior  
22 Center directors. I think they bring them together  
23 quarterly. So the Commissioner's been presenting at  
24 those meetings, and then afterwards, we're  
25 disseminating our flyer and all of our information

1  
2 out to those center directors so that they can hand  
3 that over to their members. So, that's one idea. I  
4 know that you're mentioning like getting into other  
5 mailings like with the Department of Finance. I  
6 think that's something that we can certainly explore.  
7 We've toyed with that idea before. I think, you  
8 know, if there's movement on property taxes,  
9 certainly we--

10 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing] And  
11 another one that Cass was directing to is reaching  
12 out to all who had identified as veterans who were in  
13 Passport, you know, working with the Mayor's Office  
14 of Contract Services. So we've done those types of  
15 partnerships. And something that we are excited  
16 about, too, is working more closely with our elected  
17 officials such as yourself as far as making sure that  
18 any content that we could include within existing  
19 mailers that you have, that that could be an  
20 amplifier of us. So, that's another piece, Mr.  
21 Chair.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, let's look at  
23 creative ways, because I'm always thinking about  
24 communications. That was my field, so that's why I  
25 mentioned everything available in the neighborhoods,

1  
2 bus shelters, ads that the city can do, or even free  
3 stuff like billboards that are in between the  
4 contracts. Let's say they sit there dormant. Many  
5 times the billboard is peeling already, that they  
6 don't have another ad, and billboard companies might  
7 be able to donate that space. We provide the art.  
8 Let's say your office provides the art, and they just  
9 put it up for a few months. But things like that,  
10 creative ways, especially when the City of New York  
11 is not funding you properly to do any outreach,  
12 really. I don't even know if you can do any mass  
13 mailings at this point with that budget, especially  
14 when they throw PEGs in. Again, that's-- do you want  
15 to speak about your resolution? [inaudible] when  
16 you're ready. Okay. Anyway, any of my colleagues  
17 have questions? Okay, Council Member Marmorato?

18 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Thank you so  
19 much and it's so good to see some of my Bronx  
20 veterans here today. Hopefully you guys are going to  
21 speak in a little bit, and I'd like to hear what you  
22 have to say, and thank you for showing up. So, it  
23 kind of like boggles my mind to hear that some of the  
24 peacetime veterans don't receive services. What  
25 would you say are like the most important services

1  
2 that they're not receiving, like, something that  
3 would be such valuable to their life?

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think the VA  
5 healthcare is the top of the ticket as far as-- we  
6 think about it, the VA guidelines right now, you have  
7 to have at least two years of active service, Council  
8 Member Marmorato. So what's happening is, if I'm a--  
9 it's really the Guard and Reservist-- Guardsmen and  
10 Reservists who served during periods when we were not  
11 at war. So think about that period between the end  
12 of Vietnam to the beginning of Desert Shield/Desert  
13 Storm. And so a lot of folks may have-- we had  
14 someone who worked in our office who served for eight  
15 years, and she was in the Reserve, and you know, she  
16 was not eligible for VA healthcare. SO I'd argue  
17 that's one of like the largest things that is often  
18 not available and that happens to disproportionately  
19 affect peacetime era veterans the way these rules are  
20 drawn up.

21 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: You're going  
22 in with the same intent as if something does occur  
23 and you may have to serve. I don't understand why  
24 they're not entitled to any kind of healthcare  
25

1  
2 services, not even like physicals, anything like  
3 that. Just no health insurance.

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: The caveat as of  
5 late, giving credit to the Federal Government, they  
6 made it where if you have toxic exposure while in  
7 military service, you may be automatically eligible  
8 for VA healthcare. That's something tied to the PACT  
9 Act, and so that is something that we are grateful  
10 for on the federal side, but the fact remains that  
11 for many of our folks who answered the call and who  
12 served, especially Guard and Reserve who served and  
13 were not at war, and they were not in situations to  
14 be deployed, those folks [inaudible] benefits. And  
15 then the-- I just have to underscore as you  
16 deliberate on what to do next with these things, we  
17 don't' even know the exact number of folks who are  
18 like this? Because even that 28,000, just keep in  
19 mind, it's-- the Census Bureau only counts someone  
20 who served in active status at some point and no  
21 longer serves. So you have to have served on active  
22 status and no longer served. That person I mentioned  
23 was in our office who was Reservist, she did eight  
24 years. She was in the Reserve. She was never called  
25 up on active order. She's done training orders, but

1 not active orders, and therefore, she's not included  
2 in the Census Bureau's information. And so it'd be  
3 remiss if we did not make it clear to folks that  
4 we've got a huge blind spot here that's intentionally  
5 created at the federal level so we don't even fully  
6 know the number of peacetime era veterans that are  
7 out here that have these needs.

9 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Thank you so  
10 much. Thank you, Chair.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, Council Member  
12 Paladino will talk on her Resolution, and then we'll  
13 go back to some more questions.

14 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Good morning.  
15 How's everybody. I just want to talk a little bit  
16 about Resolution 279. We're introducing this to make  
17 it a Korean War Veterans Day. We often talk about  
18 Vietnam and the forgotten heroes of the Vietnam War,  
19 well, we also are forgetting-- let me correct--  
20 conflict. You see it was never categorized as a war,  
21 it was always considered a conflict. So with that  
22 right there, you're not getting the recognition that  
23 you deserve. So we are calling up on the United  
24 States Congress and the City Council to recognize our  
25 forgotten heroes of the Korean War. And this

1 Resolution is extremely important to us. Committee  
2 Member, Committee Chair Holden and myself along with  
3 Gennaro, that we want to see this July 27<sup>th</sup> made  
4 officially Korean War Veterans Day. No longer to be  
5 forgotten. No longer to be considered a conflict.  
6 It was a war whereas we still have-- I think it's  
7 38,000 or 28,000 still on the line in Korea right now  
8 serving. We have got the largest-- it is the largest  
9 outpost for our service men here. And it's  
10 absolutely-- they need to be recognized and we got to  
11 go forward with this. So, again, calling upon  
12 everybody to cooperate and make sure that this passes  
13 and is, again, recognized. Thank you very much.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Council  
15 Member. You know, the Korean War, and I remember, you  
16 know, because I was alive during the Korean War. I  
17 remember it being called police action. Does anybody  
18 else remember that? I mean, they don't call it that  
19 anymore. Police action, believe that. You know,  
20 that's very odd that they just don't want to call it  
21 a war, but it actually was real combat. My father-  
22 in-law served both in World War II and Korea. He was  
23 20 years in the Army. Horrific fighting. It was  
24 really-- he was in Normandy, but he said the Korean  
25

1  
2 War was vicious because of the weather. He served at  
3 Inchon and served during the retreat. He was in  
4 artillery, but he would tell stories. He could  
5 actually talk about it, how horrific it was, the  
6 Korean War. But I'd like to introduce Council Member  
7 Ariola who has a few questions and comments.

8 CHAIRPERSON ARIOLA: I've been listening  
9 to your testimony, Commissioner, and each time we  
10 meet, we're all in the same boat so to speak,  
11 fighting for what our veterans need. Whether it's  
12 mental healthcare, healthcare in general, housing,  
13 food vouchers, housing vouchers, all the things that  
14 our veterans don't have or don't have in abundance  
15 which we are currently giving in abundance to people  
16 who have just entered our city, and this is something  
17 that we have to look at. So one of the questions on  
18 here is what can we as a City Council do to help you  
19 help veterans? That's really a question for us. And  
20 the answer is that we have to get with our  
21 colleagues. We have to sit with the Mayor. We have  
22 to sit with the Speaker, and say at this point what  
23 we're doing is putting us on the wrong side of  
24 history. We cannot be completely defunding our  
25 veterans and disregarding their needs while taking

1  
2 care of a humanitarian crisis that should be taken  
3 care of on a federal level. So I give you my  
4 commitment and I don't speak for the entire  
5 committee, but I believe that our Chairman who has  
6 been a staunch advocate and that's why he is the  
7 Chair of this committee. We need to do better. We've  
8 said that from day one. We haven't done better yet,  
9 but we need to do better. If the money is there for  
10 people who have just entered our city, the money is  
11 there to take care of those who fought for our city,  
12 our country, and we need to take better care of them,  
13 and then we will see veterans in homes. We will see  
14 veterans get the mental healthcare they need. We  
15 will see veterans get the cancer treatments and any  
16 other kinds of treatment that they need for their  
17 healthcare. We will see veterans placed in jobs that  
18 they can do still. We will see veterans put first,  
19 and that's my statement. Andi really-- I know that  
20 there are many people on both sides of the aisle that  
21 would feel the very same way. So I want the veterans  
22 in this room to go back to your fellow veterans to  
23 say that this committee is going to fight to make  
24 sure that you receive your fair share of the pie this

1 budget season. Thank you so much for the time,  
2  
3 Chair.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And on that subject,  
5 Council Member, we're trying as a committee to try to  
6 get member item initiatives for veterans. That means  
7 whatever the amount. It could be \$10,000 it could be  
8 \$50,000. But each Council Member gets right now, we  
9 get money for various populations in our district and  
10 around the City. Immigrants, we get a pot of money  
11 there for immigrant services. Obviously, we get  
12 money for our school. What we should get and my-- I  
13 would start at \$50,000. We should get \$50,000 in our  
14 budget for veteran's services. That's a no-brainer  
15 in my book, and I think most of the committee-- I  
16 think everyone here agrees that that should be-- and  
17 the money could be used for various things. So we're  
18 going to talk to the Mayor about helping out with  
19 that area, at least put-- if it is brought up in the  
20 budget, that the Mayor supports that. so let's say  
21 veterans services organizations, they would get money  
22 to help even-- and I'm hoping it could even go for  
23 capital, but that's important to fix some of the  
24 veteran services organizations that are suffering  
25 now. Even those so far-- and we do have bills on

1  
2 this, by the way, for actually helping them when they  
3 get-- let's say a fine from the DOB, Department of  
4 Buildings, that we give them a period to correct the  
5 situation rather than a fine, because that's like  
6 sometimes the nail in the coffin for some of these  
7 veteran service organizations. They're just staying,  
8 you know, with their-- trying to stay with their  
9 heads above water at this point, and now we're  
10 penalizing them for some violation, obscure  
11 violations in Department of Buildings. Why-- what's  
12 the advantage of-- do we need the money for our  
13 veterans services organizations? No. And we  
14 shouldn't expect that. We should actually correct  
15 the situation, help them to correct it, walk them  
16 through it, and give them more time. So that bill is  
17 also lingering, and I hope this committee can hear  
18 that in the near future. We've been joined by  
19 Council Member Nurse--

20 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing] I just  
21 want to say-- I'm thinking about Paul when you talk  
22 about that. This is the stuff we would talk about all  
23 the time. So as Paul Vallone passed, and he would be  
24 standing-- he'd be here with me if he was still here.  
25 And this was-- everything you're saying is everything

1  
2 I agree with you. I just want to say that I was  
3 thinking about Paul--

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Well,  
5 thank you for that. Right.

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: inaudible] speak on  
7 that as far as the dream here, Mr. Chair.

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So anybody else have  
9 any more question? Alright, we're going to let you  
10 go. So thank you so much. We appreciate the  
11 testimony, and again, we'll see you at the next  
12 hearing, but thank you again, Commissioner, for your  
13 commitment to our veterans. It's amazing all the  
14 work you do. you can't ever-- you know, he's always,  
15 you know, attending some veteran's function almost  
16 every night, because I do call him and he's always at  
17 some function. So we thank you, again, Council  
18 Member. Thanks for your--

19 COMMISSIONER HENDON: [interposing] Mr.  
20 Chair, if I may, just I want to be certain to express  
21 we completely support the work to acknowledge our  
22 Korean War veterans. I just want to be clear about  
23 that. I just want to let the record show, when we  
24 look at these numbers: we had 1.8 million in  
25 theater, 33,739 died, and then you have just in

1  
2 combat death, non-combat deaths, but deaths in  
3 service in theater, another 2,835, and then wounded  
4 in action 103,284. It's more than 7,500 still  
5 missing in action, too, that we haven't found yet.  
6 Teams still actively looking for brothers and sisters  
7 who are missing and uncounted for there. So, we very  
8 much support everything that you want to do there as  
9 far as recognizing the Korean War Veterans. I just  
10 want to say that.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you,  
12 Commissioner for that. Thank you.

13 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Thank you.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Okay, we're now  
15 going into the public testimony. I want to remind  
16 members of the public that this is a formal  
17 government proceeding and that decorum shall be  
18 observed at all times. As such, members of the  
19 public shall remain silent at all times. The witness  
20 table is reserved for people who wish to testify. No  
21 video recording or photography is allowed from the  
22 witness table. Further, members of the public may  
23 not present audio or video recordings as testimony,  
24 but may submit transcripts of such recordings to the  
25 Sergeant at Arms for inclusion in the hearing record.

1  
2 If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please fill  
3 out an appearance card at the Sergeant at Arms and  
4 wait to be recognized. When recognized you will  
5 have-- I'm going to change it to three minutes.  
6 You'll have three minutes to speak on today's hearing  
7 topic. And it's really-- the hearing topic is Cold  
8 War veterans. So if you have written statement or  
9 additional written testimony you wish to submit for  
10 the record, please provide a copy of that testimony  
11 to the Sergeant at Arms. So Regina, if you could  
12 call the first panel.

13 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: We'll have two panels  
14 today here in the room. The first panel will be  
15 Ashton Stewart, Peter Kempner, Joshua Sukwel [sp?],  
16 and Timothy Pena. Please come up and you may begin  
17 when you are ready.

18 ASHTON STEWART: My name's Ashton  
19 Stewart. I'm a Veteran Liaison at MJHS in the  
20 Hospice and Palliative Care Program. Chair Holden  
21 and members of the New York City Council Committee  
22 Veterans [inaudible] thank you for all of your work  
23 in coordinating this hearing today to address  
24 Resolutions 10, 157, 270, 279 which would publicly  
25 recognize the bravery and sacrifices made by our

1 World War II veterans and Korean Veterans. Since  
2 joining MJHS, the number of veteran patients we care  
3 for continues to grow, as does the complexity of  
4 their needs. Our aging veteran population, in  
5 particular World War II veterans and Korean War  
6 veterans face unique challenges on the daily basis  
7 that we see, that they need additional support and  
8 planning that are vitally necessary for patients and  
9 caregivers. Since 2010, MJHS has been a member of  
10 the We Honor Veterans Program, a national initiative  
11 between the VA and the National Palliative Care  
12 Organization. We are a level five provider which is  
13 the highest you can get, and we mentor other hospices  
14 across the country, and last year we won the We Honor  
15 Veterans Outstanding Programming Award for our robust  
16 program. We encounter far too many veterans who have  
17 not enrolled in the VA and are not receiving  
18 compensation for their injuries, and it frustrates me  
19 to meet a veteran at the end of life who is dying  
20 from a service-connected injury, yet never applied  
21 for benefits or sought support from the VA. To better  
22 help veterans admitted to our program, I recently  
23 earned recognition as a credentialed veteran service  
24 officer, and all who served receive accolades through  
25

1  
2 our We Honor Veterans Program whenever we have the  
3 opportunity to offer an in-person ceremony or a  
4 hybrid pinning ceremony, we do, and we meet with  
5 veterans and their families to honor them for their  
6 service and listen to their heroic stories of  
7 sacrifice and patriotism and provide them with a  
8 sense of comfort. One such ceremony took place last  
9 summer when we honored a 90-year-old Korean War  
10 veterans on July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2023, was the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary  
11 of the end of the Korean War, but living in New York  
12 City you wouldn't have known it. We acknowledge this  
13 anniversary through an incredibly powerful and moving  
14 pinning ceremony in the presence of the veteran, his  
15 wife and his family for not one but three milestones.  
16 We acknowledged his valor as a US Marine fighting in  
17 a war on foreign soil while trailblazing his way in  
18 the US Military history as he was one of 300,000  
19 Black soldiers who were the first to fight in a newly  
20 de-segregated military. This ceremony marked the  
21 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Executive Order 9981 which  
22 abolished segregation in the military signed on July  
23 26<sup>th</sup>, 1948. It was a powerful ceremony for all  
24 present, but nothing compared to the jubilation felt  
25 when celebrating this couple's 68<sup>th</sup> wedding

1 anniversary. Among other accolades, this Marine was  
2 presented with a special citation from New York City  
3 Department of Veteran Services Commissioner James  
4 Hendon acknowledging this exemplary service and  
5 leadership. There is so much richness in the  
6 veteran's life that often goes by unnoticed or  
7 unspoken. There are also many missed opportunities  
8 for veterans to access benefits. The VA has  
9 recognized that less than a quarter of veterans are  
10 accessing memorial benefits, even though almost all  
11 veterans and their spouses are eligible. This number  
12 lags far behind the interest shown by MJHS veteran  
13 families indicating that awareness is crucial.  
14 Mathew Quinn, the VA's Undersecretary for Memorial  
15 Affairs recently stated at the Senate Committee on  
16 Veterans Affairs hearing that increasing awareness is  
17 a top priority to inform the underused memorial  
18 benefits. By supporting resolutions 10, 157, and  
19 279, there's an opportunity to connect with veterans  
20 and their families to empower them with the knowledge  
21 on how to access these benefits. Veterans often have  
22 unique circumstances that affect eligibility outcomes  
23 and they need help understanding how to navigate the  
24 application process, and one such case was one that  
25

1 we saw last year with the POW. MJHS cared for a  
2 Jewish World War II veteran who was held prisoner by  
3 the Nazi's for 90 days, and we was discharged with 20  
4 percent service connection disability, and it wasn't  
5 until 2020 when he was diagnosed with PTSD that he  
6 was increased to 100 percent, and fortunately, this  
7 rating of 100 percent allowed us to submit a DIC  
8 claim for his surviving spouse. So it's not just  
9 veterans who are unaware of their benefits, it's also  
10 the surviving family members. Public declarations  
11 that celebrate the bravery and sacrifice of our  
12 veterans, as these three resolution will do, will  
13 help address this gap and engage those who are still  
14 with us and who served during World War II and the  
15 Korean War. And in closing, MJHS is grateful for  
16 this opportunity to share experience and observations  
17 with the Committee on Veterans, and we're also  
18 grateful for the collaboration that we've shared with  
19 New York City and the New York State Department of  
20 Veteran Services and the many VSOs we collaborate  
21 with. MJHS saw a 46 percent increase in our hospice  
22 patients last year. The fact that we can attribute  
23 to the increasing number of veterans in New York City  
24 over the age of 65 that reached 71 percent in 2020.  
25

1  
2 We seek to collaborate with you and your colleagues  
3 and other veteran community stakeholders to advance  
4 our shared work in supporting this vulnerable  
5 population to ensure they receive the best possible  
6 care throughout their entire life journey. Thank  
7 you.

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. Peter?

9 PETER KEMPNER: Chair Holden, members of  
10 the Committee, good morning. My name is Peter  
11 Kempner and I'm Legal Director at Volunteers of Legal  
12 Service. Volunteers of Legal Service, also known as  
13 VOLS, Veteran initiative is part of our senior law  
14 project where we focus on end-of-life and in-capacity  
15 planning for older veterans. We provide these  
16 veterans free of charge with powers of attorney, last  
17 wills and testaments, living wills, healthcare  
18 proxies and other advanced directives, allowing them  
19 to make their wishes clear and end of life and  
20 empower their caregivers to act on their behalf. We  
21 also do veteran outreach through our Micro Enterprise  
22 Project which focuses on small business owners and  
23 micro entrepreneurs for many veterans who are  
24 returning home. Owning a small business is an  
25 effective path to financial stability and

1 independence upon their return from service. In  
2 addition to my work with VOLS, I'm also a clinical  
3 adjunct professor at New York Law School where I  
4 created and have taught their veterans justice  
5 clinics since 2015. I've been a legal services  
6 attorney for over 20 years and have focused on  
7 serving veterans for over 12 of those years. This  
8 experience has taught me that the legal issues faced  
9 by veterans are often in an interconnected web. For  
10 instance, knowing that your client has served in the  
11 military and when they served can often be the key to  
12 unlocking benefits and services that can contribute  
13 to protecting their rights. Sadly, that's not always  
14 the case for veterans who served during what is  
15 considered to be a peacetime period. New York City  
16 veteran-- the New York City veteran population is an  
17 aging population. Many of our veterans served during  
18 this Cold War period that we've talking about this  
19 morning, generally considered 1945 to 1991. And  
20 while some of these veterans served during the Korean  
21 War period and the Vietnam War period, a fair amount  
22 of them served during what is considered to be  
23 peacetime. But unfortunately, these veterans may  
24 face unique challenges due to the definitions as was  
25

1 talked about by Commissioner Hendon by the Department  
2 of Veterans Affairs, and those definitions have been  
3 adopted by the New York State and New York City  
4 programs as well. For some of these programs, these  
5 veterans are just categorically ineligible because  
6 they did not serve what was considered to be in  
7 official wartime period as defined by federal law.  
8 One of the most critical benefits that we look at is  
9 veterans-- the veterans Pension program. This  
10 program provides monthly payments to war time  
11 veterans who are least 65 years old, who are totally  
12 and permanently disabled or a patient in a nursing  
13 home because of a disability or receiving SSI or SSD  
14 benefits. Because the veteran pension is only paid  
15 to low income veterans with very limited resources,  
16 it's often a lifeline for veterans who would  
17 otherwise be at risk of homelessness or hunger. For  
18 a single war time veteran, the VA pension could range  
19 from \$16,551 per year up to \$27,609 per year for a  
20 veteran who needs in-attendance-- aid and attendance  
21 of another person to help with their activities of  
22 daily living. For Cold War veterans with limited  
23 resources who face the same disabilities or the same  
24 advanced age may find themselves living off of SSI  
25

1 benefits alone which only amount to \$12,360 per year.  
2 This differential of \$4,000 to \$15,000 per year could  
3 make the difference between a veteran having a roof  
4 over their head and food on their table. The lack of  
5 access to the VA pension is just one example of how  
6 Cold War veterans and other peacetime veterans  
7 receive disparate treatment when it comes to access  
8 to benefits and services. These veterans raised  
9 their hand and served our country honorably, but  
10 simply because they did not enlist during the  
11 designated wartime period, they could be left out.  
12 Thank you for allowing us to submit this testimony  
13 today, and we hope that the City will continue to  
14 invest in services and programs that make New York  
15 City a place where veterans feel supported, welcomed,  
16 and at home. Thank you.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Peter, I just want  
19 to jump in for a question.

20 PETER KEMPNER: Yes, Council Member.

21 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Because this is a--  
22 you know, this problem on veteran pensions which we  
23 might di, you know, a least do a deeper dive in  
24 future hearings. I just want to ask you about that  
25 since you're an expert on that part, which let's say

1  
2 someone served in peacetime. For instance, I have a  
3 veteran who served on an aircraft carrier. He  
4 developed lung cancer. Would he be eligible even  
5 though he was in peacetime? He served aircraft  
6 carrier with jet fuel constant, and you have to make  
7 the connection. Would he get the pension?

8 PETER KEMPNER: The connection is the key  
9 word there. So, that veteran may be eligible for a  
10 service-connected disability benefit, which you have  
11 to show that there was an event in service, in this  
12 case the inhaling of jet fuel, coupled with a current  
13 disability, the lung cancer, and that there was a  
14 nexus between those two things. That's often  
15 difficult to prove and the VA often, you know, denies  
16 initial claims and you have to go through the appeals  
17 process which could take years or even decades. The  
18 VA pension is different. The disability does not  
19 need to be related to the service. So this could be a  
20 disability that is, you know, entirely unrelated that  
21 develops years or decades later, and the simple fact  
22 that they served during the wartime period, that they  
23 meet some other criteria with respect to financial  
24 eligibility, then they would be able to get the  
25 pension. It's much less of a pension that it is to

1  
2 get service-connected disability. But a peacetime  
3 veteran could get services connected disability, but  
4 they have to show that nexus between the current  
5 disability and the event in service.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You know, we just  
7 saw an article about how the VA makes it more  
8 difficult with the paperwork like you just mentioned.  
9 They just pile it on and people get frustrated and  
10 just give up. You've seen that probably. So, I  
11 just--

12 PETER KEMPNER: [interposing] Oh,  
13 absolutely.

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: couldn't handle all  
15 the paperwork and I just walked away.

16 PETER KEMPNER: And not just the  
17 paperwork, the roadblocks that they put up. I mean,  
18 these claims can take years and years and years. You  
19 know, colleagues of mine who represent veterans  
20 before the VA in the claims cases sometimes are  
21 successful decades later.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. Thanks

23 JOSHUA SOOKLAL: Morning Chair Holden,  
24 Council Member. My name is Joshua Sooklal. I am one  
25 of the Military and Veterans Programs Manager for

1  
2 Hope for the Warriors, our national nonprofit devoted  
3 to helping post-9/11 military members and their  
4 family and everything around them really. I'm here  
5 to say thank you so much for Resolution 0157  
6 recognizing June 6<sup>th</sup> annually as D-day Remembrance,  
7 mainly because that's roughly 80 years, 80 years that  
8 it should have been done already. I represent a  
9 community that I found very wholesome. They've  
10 taught me how to be a good human, and that is my  
11 brothers and sisters of the post-9/11 GWAT [sic] era.  
12 What I see is the lack of help. I've heard everyone  
13 speak. Everyone wants to help, but no one's really  
14 helping. The idea that I have to go through schools,  
15 different organizations, really I get tired. But I  
16 have people holding my hand, helping me along the  
17 way. And I just want to know do I get more help?  
18 Can I get the City's help? Because in the end, people  
19 come to New York for this one reason. If you can  
20 make it in New York City, you can make it anywhere in  
21 the world. And after going thru whatever anyone had  
22 to go through in the military, you want to make it.  
23 You want to do it. In the end, you want to thrive.  
24 So, GWA [sic] era ended 2021. We will have our  
25 veterans coming out of the service. We need to help

1  
2 them. Help me help them. I don't plan on  
3 reinventing the wheel. I just plan on using it, and  
4 I need help. Thank you.

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you for your  
6 testimony. We'll talk offline, too. So, thank you.

7 TIMOTHY PENA: Thank you for having me  
8 here. My name is Timothy Pena. I run an  
9 organizations called The Forgotten Veteran. I'm also  
10 a Cold War vet. I had-- I went in in the late entry  
11 in 1977. At the time, my dad had been in Vietnam.  
12 My uncles had been in Vietnam, and my grandfather was  
13 Seabees in World War II. So, D-Day, as you know,  
14 Seabees played-- well, the biggest part. They're the  
15 ones who put everybody on the beach and cleared the  
16 beach for the D-Day invasion. So, thank you for  
17 making this in honor of my grandfather. So, I spent  
18 five months in the shelter at Borden Avenue. I've  
19 worked in transitional services since I was homeless.  
20 Became homeless in 2016, and went into a transitional  
21 program in Phoenix. I was immediately put at the  
22 front desk, and I spent nearly two years there as a  
23 front desk manager for Catholic Charities and which I  
24 received a stipend, a monthly stipend. I got nearly  
25 \$300 or \$400 a month stipend for the front desk work,

1  
2 and I also did all of their social photos. We did  
3 the announcements. I did the resources, as well as  
4 the outreach program for Mana [sic] House which is--  
5 and we did that for about two years. We had anywhere  
6 from 100 to 120 visits per month by veterans who were  
7 in the homeless shelter, in camps, in their cars.  
8 Some of these guys were reservists, not eligible for  
9 the VA programs that we were with the grant per diem  
10 program which is the same program over at Borden  
11 Avenue. There's a lot of talk here today about Cold  
12 War veterans and our benefits. I was PTSD for 30  
13 years, before I suffered a huge breakdown in 2014,  
14 and it was then that I decided that I needed to  
15 either get help through the VA-- part of that was  
16 getting diagnosed and filing a claim. As far as-- so  
17 I was a peacetime, but because I was in a combat  
18 program or a combat situation, I was PTS-- I got  
19 PTSD, however you want to put it, in the Persian Gulf  
20 during the Iranian hostage siege. I was considered a  
21 combat zone. So, I've actually gotten a lot of my  
22 benefits that wartime veterans would have gotten,  
23 but-- because of that. One of the things that I  
24 strongly support is that cooperation between  
25 fantastic organizations that are here in New York

1  
2 City who are just dying to help us, and making sure  
3 that we have those access to those services through  
4 these shelters, through DVS, through the VSOs. I  
5 would suggest that with nearly 50 percent of the  
6 veterans that I came across while I was working in  
7 transitional services and what I witnessed over at  
8 Borden Avenue in the five months there, that we are  
9 really wanting to step up. We're kind of those guys  
10 who can help the Iraq and Afghanistan veterans  
11 maneuver through the system, because we've actually  
12 kind of gone through it. But we're seeing a lot here  
13 with veteran eligibility. I can guarantee you that  
14 the community doesn't care. The community sees as a  
15 veterans. They see us as a veterans whether we  
16 served in the National Guard, whether we served in  
17 the Reserves, whether we saw combat. They don't  
18 really care that much, and we're being denied access  
19 to resources, jobs, and housing, because of these  
20 policies that are not being worked with. It's not  
21 that DHS doesn't want to help us. It's that they're  
22 being prevented from helping us, and they're being  
23 prevented because we are stuck in these shelters with  
24 no community interaction, no community engagement.

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, Tim, let me  
3 ask you something, because you said you're a Cold War  
4 veteran, but yet you're getting combat services or  
5 benefits.

6 TIMOTHY PENA: Right.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Did you have to  
8 apply for that, or did they just naturally consider  
9 you a combat veteran?

10 TIMOTHY PENA: I had-- so what I ended  
11 up-- when I filed my claim, I filed my claim in 2015.  
12 And so at that time, I was just filing a claim for  
13 disability, and I ended up getting 70 percent for  
14 PTSD, and the PTSD is more or less-- so my underlying  
15 conditions were depression and anxiety. I had  
16 witnessed a suicide while we were in the Persian  
17 Gulf, and just never got past it, and I went for  
18 years and years without being diagnosed. Finally, I  
19 got diagnosed in 2017, and it opened up a lot of  
20 doors for me. So, it was determined because of the  
21 Iranian Hostage siege, that was a combat zone, the  
22 whole Persian Gulf. So all of us that served in that  
23 period of time in that position part of the siege,  
24 and I'm thinking it's what, 144 days or something  
25 like that, 444 days. I was actually, in a combat

1  
2 zone. And these are the types of things that they  
3 don't know.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, there's a lot  
5 of Cold War veterans that had-- you know, they had  
6 period of combat which are not recognized.

7 TIMOTHY PENA: Right.

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: So, that's why in  
9 your case it's obviously that it was, but there's--  
10 over the years, the Cold War extends-- originally,  
11 the Cold War was considered before the Vietnam, you  
12 know, when I was growing up it was before the Vietnam  
13 era, but then we had Cold War even now. So,  
14 obviously-- but we do have skirmishes. We do have  
15 battles. We do have action by our service members.  
16 So, your case, that's very interesting because I just  
17 wanted to see was it diff-- like, you said it really  
18 wasn't difficult to get it. They recognized it on  
19 their own. It's like I just wonder about other Cold  
20 War veterans who were contently having these battles,  
21 paperwork, and that's what I think we need to-- we  
22 need to try to break through that area. Thank you so  
23 much. Thank you all for your testimony, appreciate  
24 it.

1  
2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: I'd like to call our  
3 next panel, Armando Crescenzi and Jean DeFrancis.  
4 You may begin when you're ready.

5 ARMANDO CRESCENZI: Good morning. Good  
6 morning, ladies and gentlemen, esteemed members on  
7 the Council on Veterans. I extend my heartfelt  
8 gratitude to the committee for this opportunity to  
9 speak. To the veterans advocates and the service  
10 organizations present, your unwavering commitment to  
11 our cause is evident here today. We stand as a  
12 beacon of hope, ensuring the voices of New York City  
13 veterans will resonate throughout these chambers, and  
14 that our city will never forget its duty to those who  
15 served. My name is Armando Crescenzi. I'm a life  
16 member of the DAV, the Military Officers Association  
17 of America, and the American Legion. Where I'm  
18 currently a post commander. While my academic  
19 credentials speak to political science and law, my  
20 most profound badge of honor is my DD214. In 2010, I  
21 embarked on a mission close to my heart, by founding  
22 a nonprofit organization called Put Veterans First.  
23 As service-disabled veterans, our mission is clear,  
24 to empower our fellow veterans to forge their own  
25 path through small business street vending in the

1 bustling heart of New York City. My journey into  
2 street vending began in 2003 where I became  
3 acquainted intimately with the hurdles and injustices  
4 that disabled veterans face daily. It's a reality  
5 stained with disgrace. Our New York State  
6 Legislature boasts laws designed to favor veterans,  
7 such as the freedom for a disabled veterans to vend  
8 throughout the state, throughout the state in any  
9 city, unshackled by local placement restrictions.  
10 Yet, despite the promise enshrined in General  
11 Business Law 35 and upheld by the Appellate Division  
12 in Caswon [sp?] V. Apponti [sp?]. The reality falls  
13 far short. The competitive landscape of street  
14 vending presents formidable challenges, even for the  
15 most resilient. While General Business Law 35  
16 theoretically grants a veterans' access to prime  
17 locations, the City refused to acknowledge our state-  
18 granted rights, rendering them null and void. Mayor  
19 Adams recent visit to Corona Queens painted a stark  
20 picture of sidewalks overrun by illegal vendors.  
21 While I empathizes with their plight, it's  
22 disheartening to witness, a de fact moratorium  
23 enforcing vending laws against illegal immigrants.  
24 Today, I implore the City of New York to extend the  
25

1  
2 same courtesy and respect towards disabled veterans,  
3 and to show the tens of thousands the same respect it  
4 shows to us disabled veterans that it shows to the  
5 tens of thousands of immigrants who are vending  
6 illegally. Declare a moratorium or a grace period.  
7 Liberate the service-disabled veterans from the  
8 shackles of the City placement restrictions. Let a  
9 veteran pursue the American dream with the same furor  
10 as any other New York City resident with the  
11 entrepreneurial spirit. Thank you.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you.

13 GENE DEFRANCIS: Good morning, Chair  
14 Holden, New York City Council Members of the Veterans  
15 Committee. My name is Gene DeFrancis and I am the  
16 Commander of the American Legion in the Bronx County.  
17 Thank you for providing the opportunity to speak on  
18 behalf of our members and Bronx veterans. Since its  
19 inception by Congress in 1919, the American Legion  
20 has drafted the GI Bill, ushered in the modern VA,  
21 and most recently promoted the passage of the PACT  
22 Act. The American Legion is the nation's largest and  
23 most powerful organization of US veterans and their  
24 families. Today, it has nearly two million  
25 legionnaire members. I will not go in to detail in

1  
2 the nuances and different cultures and roles of each  
3 branch of service. However, I will say the common  
4 thread of every American veterans is the desire for  
5 peace, freedom, and both security of self and family.  
6 The American veterans is part of an all-volunteer  
7 force, and they do not join to harm others, but to  
8 protect and serve. As veterans we have no say in  
9 which conflicts we engage in or where we are  
10 stationed globally. We are property of the United  
11 States government. We do what we are told or risk  
12 non-judicial punishment tor court martial. Every  
13 veteran from cool to Special Forces knows the taste  
14 of the gas chambers we experienced in boot camp. We  
15 know the bitterness of missing important dates,  
16 birthday's, weddings, and funerals. We know what  
17 it's like to be told what to eat, when to eat, how to  
18 eat. We know the feeling and what it feels like to  
19 be marginalized and surrender our freedoms. We are  
20 broken down to be built back up as part of a cohesive  
21 team in our respective branch of service. This  
22 creates strong pillars of our community and city that  
23 strive for success it is why we value or current  
24 veterans so much. Each of us is also trained in  
25 security and serve as sentinels to watch over our own

1 and keep them safe. Yes, some have struggles that we  
2 are dedicated to acknowledging and improving, but at  
3 large the American veterans are leaders and a  
4 valuable asset to our communities. I'm here today  
5 with my colleagues to remind the New York City  
6 Council of our value, the sacrifice and commitment we  
7 have made and continue to make through our community,  
8 state, and nation. And to ask that this city and  
9 nation honor their commitment and past agreements  
10 with our veterans. So when we ask for preference for  
11 housing and employment, some challengers ask if we  
12 think we are special. I'm here to say clearly and  
13 without hesitation yes, we are. We made sacrifices  
14 that most of those who criticize veterans will never  
15 understand. As Commander of the Bronx County  
16 American Legion, many members have expressed their  
17 concerns over two particular issues that have gained  
18 our attention: One, the new rules that New York City  
19 veteran vendors renegotiated in GBL 35A were modified  
20 in bad faith and not in their best interest with no  
21 clear organization to step up and advocate for them.  
22 These veterans were steamrolled with the new  
23 regulations. We are here today to ask this committee  
24 to review this and reinstate the agreement made with  
25

1 these veteran vendors in GBL35. A veteran vendor in  
2 your community, in your heavily trafficked parks and  
3 landmarks is an asset and we must enhance this asset.  
4 It's no secret that all of our communities are  
5 struggling with safety, whether it is perception or  
6 reality. I will not debate this issue. Our neighbors  
7 do not feel safe. In the Allison [sic] section of  
8 the Bronx, we engage in what is called the Safe Haven  
9 program. Small businesses register with local  
10 precinct and build a relationship. They are provided  
11 a sign in their store window that signals to the  
12 community that if they believe they are in danger,  
13 they can find safety at this location. For instance,  
14 if a child is walking home from school and feels they  
15 are being followed by a van, they can enter one of  
16 these business knowing it is a safe location until  
17 guardians or an authority can be contacted. We have  
18 spoken to our members and we offer the same proposal  
19 for our parks and throughout our five boroughs. A  
20 safe haven for our community and all we request in  
21 exchange is for experienced and registered veterans  
22 to vend. This includes in parks and high-trafficked  
23 areas they were previously allowed to vend prior to  
24 GBL 35-A, but with open and cooperative  
25

1 communication. This protects our veterans and  
2 guarantees tier location so that our veterans no  
3 longer will have to sleep in their vehicles to secure  
4 their location in front of the Metropolitan Museum.  
5 And it'll protect our veteran vendors, especially our  
6 service disabled veterans from conflicts and over-  
7 saturation. We ask our veterans will be protected  
8 and location secured in the event of too many vendors  
9 moving to a location, creating an unsafe condition.  
10 Our veterans will stay in their locations, because  
11 they are registered with the City and the local  
12 precinct as a safe haven. Our veterans will provide  
13 fingerprints and background checks so that they can  
14 assist anyone in danger, even added training to  
15 identify risks and threats to the community. We are  
16 not police officers, and we are not suggesting we  
17 serve as vigilanties. We are there to make a living  
18 wage, and support our city while doing so. We can  
19 serve as eyes and ears to keep our city's most  
20 vulnerable safe during the day and night in our parks  
21 and in our plazas where we are not obstructing  
22 traffic and providing a service to all New Yorkers  
23 and tourists alike. The American veterans are heroes  
24 and we are ready to serve and collaborate with the  
25

1  
2 city we love. I add that no veteran honorably  
3 discharged should be denied a vendor's license, and  
4 they should be processed and distributed properly.  
5 Locations should be secured and approved by proper  
6 channels, including the local precinct, serve as a  
7 safe-haven partner. Veteran safe haven vendors  
8 should be desired in all locations, including plaza  
9 and business improvement districts. Veteran's  
10 especially older or disabled veterans should be able  
11 to secure their location and continue to register and  
12 apply a helper. Taxes and fees of this service is  
13 something we can discuss in future communication.  
14 And lastly, I want to discuss the HHC approval of  
15 Fortune Society Just Home Project in the Bronx. The  
16 American Legion will not sit by and allow un-vetted,  
17 rehabilitated felons to receive resources and  
18 services before the veterans of the United States of  
19 America. We acknowledge and know full-well people  
20 make mistakes. They can be rehabilitated and can  
21 learn from these mistakes. Many veterans have also  
22 found themselves on the wrong side of the criminal  
23 justice system. The concern is that by Just Home's  
24 admission and own words, they do not discriminate  
25 against the service based on the crime committed.

1  
2 They include murderers, rapists, and violent  
3 offenders with no promise or guarantee that they have  
4 or will receive treatment and rehabilitation. With  
5 resources readily available, with federal funding  
6 dedicated to servicing veterans, there is zero  
7 logical or ethical reason that veterans do not  
8 receive priority for this location. Our elected  
9 officials have approved this plan. The community at-  
10 large has overwhelmingly supported this proposal and  
11 has stated so in various public hearings, yet HHC  
12 Board has ignored this option and voted to approve  
13 the Just Homes program without considering other,  
14 more-effective options. Our leadership has spoken  
15 with VA leadership who are in desperate need of more  
16 space. They have gained community and elected  
17 official support, which I'll add Just Homes does not  
18 have. We ask Just Homes to look for another location  
19 which will allow us the resources we earned and HHC  
20 Jacobi Medical Center loses nothing, and the  
21 community and veterans receive the option they  
22 deserve and desperately need. I thank you for your  
23 time and the extra time and look forward to continued  
24 partnership and communication.

1  
2 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Gene, and  
3 by the way, we were just talking-- I was just talking  
4 to my colleague. We're going to request a joint  
5 hearing with Small Business Services to really  
6 resolve this and really get some of your ideas going.  
7 So you have that commitment from me. We can only  
8 request, though. We can't--

9 GENE DEFRANCIS: [interposing] I  
10 appreciate you, and our members are ready to assist  
11 and continue the dialogue any way we can.

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: great. Thanks.  
13 Thank you both for your testimony.

14 GENE DEFRANCIS: Thank you all for being  
15 here.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: We have to resolve  
17 this in my lifetime. I mean, really this has been a  
18 nagging problem for a very, very long time.

19 GENE DEFRANCIS: And it's frustrating to  
20 a lot of our members and veterans, especially when  
21 the agreement was--

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] But  
23 again, these ideas are great, and let's implement  
24 them. Thank you so much.

1  
2 GENE DEFRANCIS: And it costs us nothing.  
3 We're giving our services.

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you.

5 GENE DEFRANCIS: Thank you.

6 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. We have  
7 one more last-minute addition to the in-person  
8 testimony, and please come forward, Ricardo Garcia.  
9 If there is anyone else here who wants to testify,  
10 please fill out an appearance card now. Otherwise  
11 after Ricardo Garcia, we will be going to Zoom  
12 testimony. So, last chance for appearance cards.  
13 Mr. Garcia, you may begin when you're ready.

14 RICARDO GARCIA: Hello? Okay. Good  
15 afternoon everybody. Well, actually good morning.  
16 Wow, it's still morning. Yikes, pretty long morning.  
17 It's a pleasure to see all of you. Councilman  
18 Holden, it's always good to see you, and all the rest  
19 of you Council Members. I'm actually going to  
20 highlight or discuss the same concern that my  
21 colleague had presented. I'm the Vice Commander,  
22 First Vice Commander for the American Legion, and in  
23 the same thread, I'm going to discuss the Just Homes  
24 initiative that is presented-- that was just recently  
25 presented by my colleague. Good afternoon, Council

1  
2 Members. My name is Ricardo Garcia, and I'm here to  
3 propose an alternative to the current proposal, but  
4 first, let me introduce myself. I'm a US Army combat  
5 disabled veteran that served 25 years in the United  
6 States Army. One of the biggest issues that has  
7 faced the veteran community in addition to  
8 reintegration and returning from service is securing  
9 access to healthcare and homelessness barriers. In  
10 New York State, the United States Census notes that  
11 665,257 veterans in 2021 reside within the State of  
12 New York, and in New York City of those 665,000,  
13 144,558 as of 2021. Many of these veterans have been  
14 diagnosed with health conditions that have adversely  
15 impact their ability to live fulfilling and healthy  
16 lives. As a result of these conditions, some  
17 veterans' ability to secure employment has been  
18 deterred as a result of those ailments. The  
19 inability to secure employment directly results from  
20 the health conditions and then the significant  
21 correlation between living fulfilling lives and  
22 securing adequate housing which has been hindered due  
23 to some of these ailments. While many strides have  
24 been made to identify and improve the health outcomes  
25 of this population, the biggest healthcare issue

1 facing veterans is reducing homelessness. It's  
2 synonymous. Sadly, in New York City, many veterans  
3 still do not have access to housing. Congress has  
4 gone to great lengths to fund several programs within  
5 the Veterans Administration to combat the veteran  
6 homelessness crisis, but the data still reveals that  
7 many are still struggling to find homes, particularly  
8 here in New York City. The programs I previously  
9 highlighted, that I previously discussed, I will  
10 highlight now such as the HUD VASH program, the  
11 Housing and Urban Development, VA Supportive Housing,  
12 SSVF, Supportive Services for Veteran Families, and  
13 the Grant Per Diem. All of these have all been  
14 helpful in reducing the number of homelessness  
15 veterans, but there are many more who have not  
16 benefited from these services and are unaware that  
17 these services exist. In 2009, just to highlight how  
18 much money has been funneled by the United States  
19 Government, \$376 million was invested to combat  
20 veteran homelessness. As of 2022, federal funding  
21 has increased to \$2.8 billion. \$376 million in 2009.  
22 In 2022, \$2.8 billion. I'll repeat that number. \$2.8  
23 billion as of 2022 to combat veteran homelessness.  
24 So, the reason I'm bringing this up is because the  
25

1  
2 Just Homes initiative is looking, you know, to-- they  
3 have an empty building there that would absolutely,  
4 you know, fit the need of the veteran population, and  
5 in addition to that, the James J. Peters Veterans  
6 Medical Center stated on many conversations that I  
7 had with them that they would be willing and would  
8 love to work with Health + Hospitals Corp to create  
9 a-- to create, you know, a facility or a center that  
10 could mitigate the veteran homelessness, but the  
11 veteran administration could not directly insert  
12 themselves into the property. They have to use an  
13 outside entity, for example Jericho Project, Tunnels  
14 for Towers, you know, Services for the Underserved,  
15 the Volunteers of the America. Any one of these  
16 nonprofit organizations that would work with the  
17 Veteran Administration, they could actually take that  
18 building that is in existence over there at Jacobi  
19 Hospital and retrofit it to fit the need of the  
20 veteran population. The reason why this is critical,  
21 because it would enhance the medical services that  
22 are being provided to the community on the east side  
23 of the Bronx. In addition, it would almost  
24 automatically reduce any veteran homelessness or  
25 veteran housing barrier issues that exist. So we are

1 asking the Council if you could, you know, please  
2 seriously and earnestly take a look at this Just  
3 Homes initiative that is in the Bronx and perhaps  
4 maybe consider this alternate plan which the  
5 community has advocated for on numerous occasions,  
6 that the community is, you know, asking the City to  
7 please turn this into veteran housing instead of what  
8 they're looking to do. And it's a collaborative work  
9 between J. Peters VA Center and Jacobi that would  
10 produce tremendous results and enhance their  
11 research, their medical research, enhance their  
12 services for all the veterans. Thank you for your  
13 time.

14  
15 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Council Member  
16 Marmorato has a--

17 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: Thank you for  
18 coming here today--

19 RICARDO GARCIA: [interposing] Absolutely.

20 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: to speak on  
21 behalf of the Bronx County veterans. This is  
22 something that we have brought to the attention of  
23 Jacobi Health + Hospitals. We have brought to the  
24 attention of certain people in the Council, and this  
25 is a problem, because we as a community have a need

1  
2 for housing and we-- our needs are not being met.  
3 This is a project through the veterans that we are  
4 fully as a community would support. We have the  
5 need, and we would support them 100 percent. I've  
6 had people who live right outside the walls of this  
7 building saying how they could come and help with the  
8 veterans on a day-to-day basis, help them with their  
9 shopping, help them with any kind of support that  
10 they need, and our cries are being-- we're not being  
11 listened to as a community, and this is like kind of  
12 devastating. So thank you for coming and speaking on  
13 behalf of our community, and I really do appreciate  
14 it, and hopefully this something that we continue  
15 fighting together.

16 RICARDO GARCIA: Absolutely. I couldn't--  
17 thank you. Thank you so much. Really, I mean, it's a  
18 win/win for everyone, for the City--

19 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: [interposing]  
20 Yeah, it's--

21 RICARDO GARCIA: financially--

22 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: [interposing]

23 It's right on the campus of the hospital. They could  
24 have their healthcare needs be met. They could have  
25 their mental healthcare needs be met.

1  
2 RICARDO GARCIA: Yeah. And the Veterans  
3 Administration is ready to go. They're already--  
4 they're all set. Just, you know--

5 COUNCIL MEMBER MARMORATO: [interposing]  
6 These are organizations that have the funding.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah. Thank you.  
8 Thank you for that. Council Member Paladino has a  
9 question or a comment.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: Comment. Here  
11 we go again. Misspent, misappropriated funds once  
12 again, veterans being ignored. Illegal immigrants  
13 crossing the border and getting their needs met. In  
14 a minute, in a minute they're found housing. You  
15 found your own. You found your own solutions here in  
16 the Bronx, Jacobi Hospital. So my question is simply  
17 why? How come? And I just don't understand. So  
18 that's three questions along with my statement. What  
19 do you know about that? So, now, I want answers to  
20 this. I want to know why this is-- why your voices  
21 are going unheard. And thank you for testifying  
22 today, and thanking Kristy for making us aware of  
23 your dire straits that you are in, because once  
24 again, our veterans are put on a backburner while  
25 those who swim the Rio Grande to get here are getting

1  
2 everything they need, and you have put your lives on  
3 the line and your health needs aren't being met.  
4 Your housing needs aren't being met. Our veterans  
5 need to be handled and handled properly. I promise  
6 you this committee will work on whatever it is that  
7 our veterans need. Thank you very much for coming  
8 here. Thank you.

9 RICARDO GARCIA: Thank you.

10 COUNCIL MEMBER PALADINO: And thank you  
11 to everybody.

12 RICARDO GARCIA: Thank you. Did you want  
13 me to answer those questions?

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: No, no, you can.  
15 Wait, Ricardo, wait, wait.

16 RICARDO GARCIA: I think we should start  
17 with funding DVS, giving them a significant amount of  
18 money so they can move accordingly because they're  
19 really the tip of the sphere.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You know, I visited  
21 a supportive housing for veterans in the Bronx, and  
22 they said they had vacancies for supportive housing,  
23 but not for affordable housing. So the next step was  
24 a big problem. So, people had to stay in supportive  
25 housing longer, and it was very, very difficult, and

1 many just transitioned into finding their own  
2 apartments without any help. So when I-- I have an  
3 affordable housing construction project going up in  
4 my district, and we had no carve-out for veterans,  
5 but I've spoken to the developer. I said, well, I'll  
6 approve this or at least I'll support this if you  
7 consider veterans priority, and he said we could do  
8 more of that construction if the City wanted to do  
9 it. so that's our goal here in this committee is to  
10 get affordable housing priority for veterans, and  
11 we're going to work with all the Council Members here  
12 to make sure that happens.

14 RICARDO GARCIA: So, the affordable  
15 housing has to match-- be in alignment with, you  
16 know, the community gross income. For example, on  
17 160st, there was an article that was released, I  
18 think it was last week, the median based income to  
19 qualify for that affordable housing is \$65,000, but  
20 in 161<sup>st</sup> street the median income is \$35,000. So  
21 that's not affordable housing by any means.

22 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right, right.

23 RICARDO GARCIA: And then the other thing  
24 that we also have to look at is that-- just going  
25 back to the Just Homes initiative. There's over 80

1 units in there that could be dedicated, you know, to  
2 one-bedroom apartments for individuals that will meet  
3 that need. In addition to that, they could provide  
4 clinical support. They could provide, you know,  
5 healthcare providers, clinicians, because it's right  
6 on the campus for Jacobi. In addition to that, a lot  
7 of the Jacobi staff does not want what's coming. So,  
8 I just-- I think it's a win/win. Maybe a new  
9 request, a new RFP perhaps should go out, might help.  
10 You know, because--

12 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Well,  
13 we'll certainly-- we'll talk to you again about some  
14 idea. But again, you said you served 25 years?

15 RICARDO GARCIA: 25 years.

16 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Wow, what-- how--

17 RICARDO GARCIA: [interposing] If I was  
18 smarter--

19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] So when  
20 you enlisted--

21 RICARDO GARCIA: I would probably done  
22 four.

23 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: When you enlisted,  
24 how old were you?

25 RICARDO GARCIA: Oh my God, I was 18.

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CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: 16?

RICARDO GARCIA: Eighteen.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Eighteen, wow.

RICARDO GARCIA: Well, it's actually 17,  
went in at 18.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Wow. Thank you for  
that amazing service, and thank you for your advocacy  
now.

RICARDO GARCIA: Absolutely. No, it's not  
a problem. Served at the World Trade Center during  
9/11, you know, served many of the bridges and  
tunnels and the airports on the security missions  
[inaudible].

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thanks. The  
American Legion is amazing. Thank you so much for  
your testimony.

RICARDO GARCIA: God bless you all.  
Thank you. Have a wonderful day.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL: And we have one final,  
final, in-person witness before going to Zoom  
testimony. Gus Stavroulakis, please come forward.  
You may begin when you're ready.

GUS STAVROULAKIS: I want to say thank  
you for having this forum and allowing us to speak.

1  
2 So I want to emphasize a few things that's already  
3 been said. As a Navy veteran and currently serving  
4 within the National Guard, a lot of Guardsmen and  
5 Reservists do not get the benefits that they need,  
6 especially when they're signing on SAD which is State  
7 Assigned Duty. Currently, we had COVID-19 where we  
8 had many, multiple National Guard members in response  
9 to assisting nursing homes and providing vaccines to  
10 service members where they will not be eligible for  
11 any federal benefits, along with assisting in the  
12 asylum [sic] mission. I had met multiple soldiers  
13 that are assisting in this mission that will not see  
14 federal veteran benefits at all. It's something that  
15 I wanted to make known to more people, as this is not  
16 an issue that is talked about a lot. Second thing  
17 is, I'm a researcher at NYU currently working with  
18 veterans' health issues in preventing opioid overdose  
19 within the veteran population. This is an issue that  
20 has not been addressed. I work with many veterans,  
21 currently homeless or in shelter such as Borden  
22 Avenue, and do not necessary get the resources that  
23 they need whether through mental health or physical  
24 health. And so like a lot of my other veterans have  
25 mentioned is their housing. They're going two to

1 three years without any housing address, living in a  
2 shelter for multiple years and being passed around  
3 from one shelter to another. I just wanted to let  
4 the committee know that this is happening and to be  
5 aware of this issue. Thank you.

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, that's what I-  
8 - you know, I heard at Borden. Every time I visit we  
9 get the same-- and the biggest complaint is the  
10 mental health issue that we're not really addressing,  
11 you know, really serious issues. So we really need--  
12 certainly, I don't know if NYU still has that waiting  
13 list to help with mental health issues. Do they  
14 still do--

15 GUS STAVROULAKIS: So, NYU just like a  
16 lot of veteran benefits have strings attached. A  
17 lot-- as we are-- as I am one small entity within  
18 NYU, and as a researcher I just want to say I'm  
19 talking about for myself not as a representative of  
20 my university that I work for. Their mental health  
21 services are for certain types of veterans, for  
22 either deployed or combat veterans such and so forth.  
23 So depending on the facility and the organization it  
24 varies. Part of my job in my role is to help  
25 navigate fellow veterans for either their health

1  
2 needs or whatever type of services that they're  
3 looking for, and what I tried to do is navigate them  
4 to low threshold resources that might not necessarily  
5 be a barrier. If they do qualify for certain VA  
6 benefits and they're willing to navigate that way,  
7 that's how I navigate my-- the individuals that I  
8 work with along with either city benefits as well,  
9 too, navigating towards that way because the  
10 threshold is lower.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you again for  
12 your testimony and all the work that you're doing I  
13 appreciate it.

14 GUS STAVROULAKIS: Thank you.

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Okay, seeing no other  
16 appearance cards at the moment, we are going to turn  
17 to testimony of witnesses on Zoom. We have four  
18 currently registered, and I will call you one by one.  
19 We will start with A. Gentry Torell, and the Sergeant  
20 will tell you when to begin.

21 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

22 ANNE GENTRY TORELL: I'm actually a  
23 representative of NYU, so hopefully I can answer some  
24 of those questions. But good morning, Chair Holden  
25 and members of the Committee on Veterans. Thank you

1  
2 for holding the hearing today and for the opportunity  
3 to testify. I'm Doctor Anne Gentry Torell, Clinical  
4 Psychologist and Assistant Professor in the  
5 Department of Psychiatry at NYU Langone Health. I'm  
6 testifying today on behalf of the Cohen Military  
7 Family Center at NYU. Our center was established  
8 just over 11 years ago to fill a well-documented gap  
9 in services available to veterans and their families.  
10 The Military Family Center provides free mental  
11 health treatment for veterans and their families  
12 regardless of discharge status who are experiencing  
13 the long-term effects of military service. This also  
14 includes treatment for co-occurring substance use and  
15 mental health disorders. Since inception our center  
16 has served 4,077 veterans and their family members.  
17 To reach veterans who are ineligible for care  
18 elsewhere or who may be disconnected from mental  
19 health services, we have developed strong  
20 partnerships at the VA, the Department of Veteran  
21 Services and many other organizations. The sheer  
22 number of individuals served demonstrates the  
23 necessity for public/private partnerships in order to  
24 meet the needs of the veterans and their families in  
25 our community. Central to the mission of the

1  
2 Military Family Center is decreasing barriers to  
3 high-quality evidence-based care for our nation's  
4 military families. While the center was originally  
5 established to meet the needs of the growing number  
6 of post-9/11 veterans seeking mental health services,  
7 we consistently receive referrals from veterans and  
8 family members of all eras who continue to be  
9 affected. In an attempt to honor our mission, we  
10 extend our resources to meet these needs. All too  
11 often we have seen well-intentioned new missions that  
12 sometimes minimize the impact of veterans of prior  
13 wars. Thus, we believe it is essential to honor our  
14 World War II, Korean War, and Cold War veteran as is  
15 described in these resolutions. We applaud the New  
16 York City Council Committee on Veterans for  
17 supporting this legislation towards the equity for  
18 veterans of all eras to ensure they are acknowledged  
19 through their work and sacrifices. This  
20 acknowledgement can often enhance a sense of meaning  
21 in one's life, which we know has a positive impact on  
22 mental health. Veterans and their family members are  
23 seeking mental health services at a higher rate than  
24 ever before, and this sharp increase in demand for  
25 our services has resulted in struggles to meet the

1 demand and ultimately a wait list for services. For  
2 example, we currently have a wait list for our City  
3 Council-funded traumatic brain injury program. The  
4 funding for the mental health services for veterans  
5 initiative remains the sole source of funding for  
6 center's TBI program, and this program provides much-  
7 needed evaluation and rehabilitation services for  
8 veterans with TBI, many of whom struggle with co-  
9 occurring substance use disorders. Our center is  
10 quipped to work together with the community to  
11 address the ever-growing needs of veterans and their  
12 families. We hope the Council will further invest in  
13 the veteran population, and we urge the Council to  
14 consider further supplementing citywide capacity to  
15 meet the ongoing demand for support services for  
16 veterans. Thank you again for the Council's past  
17 funding for the Military Family Center and the  
18 opportunity to testify today.

19  
20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right on time. Thank  
21 you very much. By the way, we do have to-- I don't  
22 like the idea of a waiting list for veterans. That  
23 bothers me. Let's talk about exactly how much you  
24 need and how many veterans are not being served. TBI  
25 is very, very important area, and that needs to be

1 fully funded. So this committee will support you,  
2 obviously. We've heard nothing but great things  
3 about your organization. It does amazing work with  
4 our veterans, and thanks so much for your testimony,  
5 and thanks for being very concise on the time. Thank  
6 you.  
7

8 ANNE GENTRY TORELL: Absolutely. Thank  
9 you.

10 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: thank you. Our next  
11 witness on Zoom is Sergio Villaverde, and the  
12 Sergeant will let you know when to begin.

13 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

14 SERGIO VILLAVERDE: Good morning, Chair  
15 Holden and committee members. I thank you very much  
16 for holding this important hearing and all of the  
17 work that you do. My name is Sergio Villaverde. I'm  
18 personally a disabled veteran as well. I served 32  
19 years in the Coast Guard Reserve. I'm a retired New  
20 York City Police Officer, former New York City EMT,  
21 and I'm currently an attorney with my own small  
22 community practice. I also serve as Vice Chair of my  
23 local Community Board and Chair a Special Committee  
24 on Veterans. I do want to bring to the attention of  
25 the committee as-- in our discussions, much has been

1  
2 said-- maybe everything's been said, but not everyone  
3 has said it. There are some things, particularly  
4 with respect to being a Reservist and a National  
5 Guard member that we are often overlooked as was  
6 testified to previously. We don't often meet the  
7 federal guidelines for veterans. We're not counted,  
8 and you know, during World War II, during most of the  
9 major conflicts, the majority of the people serving  
10 are our fellow citizens. As Winston Churchill called  
11 them, twice a citizen. Serving as citizens and  
12 serving as part of the military. And Reservists, you  
13 know, face special stressors that even active duty  
14 people don't face, the employer discrimination. It's  
15 illegal, it's illegal by federal law, by state law,  
16 but you know, people have a hard time with people  
17 serving in the Reserves and losing them the time that  
18 they do. I think we need to do-- we need to find  
19 ways to do more to support our employers. As a small  
20 business owner, I know how it is on both sides of  
21 that. So, you know, the employer discrimination that  
22 we face. The family stressors that all military  
23 families face, even serving on your weekends, serving  
24 on your two weeks of training, missing family events,  
25 missing birthdays, missing holidays are all things

1 that Reservists and Guard members face, and we don't-  
2 - I don't believe we do enough. I know that our  
3 current Commissioner in the city is himself a  
4 Reservist. So that's a great thing. He's able to  
5 speak to that with authority, and he has expanded  
6 many of our benefits, but there are-- we still have a  
7 long way to go in supporting, recognizing the  
8 Reservists, their families, the Guardsmen, their  
9 families, also, the community that supports them. We  
10 really have to find creative ways to support  
11 employers who hire Reserve and Guard members, because  
12 they play an important role. As the gentleman who  
13 was here before, he served on state active duty.  
14 He's been critical during COVID, during other crises  
15 for us, and we need to be able to provide support in  
16 that community. And I thank you very much for your  
17 time.

18  
19 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Wow, thank you  
20 again. Your resume is unbelievable, all of your  
21 service to our nation, our city. We thank you. But  
22 you just gave me another hearing topic. I just want  
23 to thank you for that one, because we do have to  
24 address this, that all the discrimination against the  
25 Reservists. This needs to be really exposed. So, and

1  
2 like you're right about supporting businesses, but  
3 that's a very, very good idea. Maybe we could do  
4 that through legislation. It's possible. But again,  
5 I just can't believe all of your accomplishments and  
6 how you served our city and our nation. Again, I  
7 want to thank you.

8 SERGIO VILLAVERDE: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

9 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Our next  
10 witness on Zoom will be Ryan Graham, and the Sergeant  
11 will let you know when to begin.

12 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

13 RYAN GRAHAM: Good morning or good  
14 afternoon everyone. Thank you to the members of the  
15 Committee on Veterans and Chairman Bob Holden for  
16 holding this hearing to discuss Resolution 0010,  
17 0157, and 0279. Many of you already know me. Some  
18 of you here don't. I am Ryan Graham. I wear  
19 different caps, but obviously today I'm wearing my  
20 cap under-- as the Vice Chairman of the Legislative  
21 Committee for the Department of VFW, and I'm also the  
22 Chairman for District One Legislative Committee, a  
23 subordinate to the Department of New York. The  
24 Department of New York encompasses the entire state  
25 of New York with over 300 posts and nearly 40,000

1  
2 members having served in conflicts ranging from World  
3 War II to Korea, Vietnam, and Desert Storm, Operation  
4 Enduring Freedom, and Iraqi Freedom, as well as small  
5 combat operations over the prior years, including  
6 operations under Korean Defense and the Cold War.  
7 While major conflicts such as World War II, Vietnam,  
8 and the most recent global war on terror operations  
9 in Afghanistan and Iraq [inaudible] profiles, we  
10 cannot forget those who have served under the banners  
11 of least known wars and conflicts. The Korean War  
12 otherwise known as the Forgotten War, operations  
13 including Korean defense following the Korean War  
14 armistice, and the Cold War lasting for over 40 years  
15 are conflicts that should be remembered not only for  
16 the purpose of history but for those who served and  
17 sacrificed under those engagements. Personally, my  
18 own service is intrinsically linked to my uncle  
19 William [sic], a veteran of the Korean War, having  
20 served as a paratrooper under the First Calvary  
21 Division and his younger brother, my father, Donald  
22 Graham, serving in the United States Airforce as a  
23 military policeman and patrolling south of the DMZ  
24 following the armistice during the service years  
25 between 1956 and 60. Although both of them are long

1  
2 gone, their service to their country and community  
3 when they came back home is one of the primary  
4 drivers for my own service, and the reason why we  
5 shall not forget their service away and back at home  
6 in New York City. while we strive to support those  
7 that have served through fiscal and other means,  
8 veterans and VSOs alike, we must not forget to  
9 remember those conflicts-- these conflicts from the  
10 Korean War and Korean defense following the armistice  
11 and those [inaudible] serving on the front lines of  
12 the Cold War. Besides supporting our veterans and  
13 VSOs through tangible means, it is also  
14 responsibility of those that have served and those  
15 that have not to remember and become teachers to  
16 those important moments in history. In conclusion,  
17 we support these resolutions. And speaking a little  
18 bit off of these resolutions, things that were  
19 touched upon, thank you Chairman Holden for bringing  
20 up the VSOs as far as the fines. One of the things  
21 we've been saying for years is outreach instead of  
22 fining VSOs out of existence, and obviously we don't  
23 have too many advocates on the legislature, whether  
24 City Council or the State and obviously Senator  
25 Addabbo, he's pushed the 120-day bill. I just had to

1 mention that. So, hopefully eventually we get this  
2 pushed through. And a few other things. And I love  
3 councilwoman Ariola and Paladino, because they may be  
4 brief in what they say, but it's very powerful, and I  
5 know Joann-- I'm sorry, Councilwoman Ariola, she  
6 mentioned the founding part. I've been dealing with  
7 policy for over a decade for veterans under the  
8 banner of the VFW, and unfortunately, it's a low  
9 hanging fruit to be honest. And metrics is something  
10 I believe it. One of the key indicators is the budget  
11 for the City Council for DVS. \$5.11 million compared  
12 to a \$117 billion dollar budget. That is a fraction  
13 of a fraction of a percent. That, honestly-- I'm  
14 going to be frank. It's pitiful, and like I said,  
15 I-- thank you so much, you know, for, you know,  
16 Chairman Holden and the other Council Members on the  
17 Committee. I know you guys push a lot to get funding  
18 whether for veterans in general or VSOs. And I just  
19 want to throw out a metric, a few more numbers.  
20 \$5.11 million, that's not a lot. I saw recently, I  
21 think it's sitting in the queue, a couple Council  
22 Members pushing for a \$15 million budget in the  
23 budget towards for migrants when it comes to mental  
24 health. That's three times the amount for an entire  
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1 agency, and that's shameful. And I know there's been  
2 some other speakers. I'll be quick. But another  
3 number-- now this is most recent with Iraq and  
4 Afghanistan. We unfortunately had 7,000 casualties,  
5 give or take a few numbers. Up until today-- now,  
6 granted I'm part of the first part of the global War  
7 on Terror. I served in Iraq. I enlisted right after  
8 9/11, and most of us, we're hitting our 40's now, and  
9 suicide numbers are at 30,000, over 30,000 already.  
10 So that's more than four times the number of people  
11 that died on the battlefield. So you can only  
12 imagine previous generations. And I'm just going to  
13 throw out one last thing, an intangible. March 5<sup>th</sup>,  
14 so about a month ago, good friend of mine-- actually  
15 really good friends from high school. I know Council  
16 Member Ariola knows it, she represents the part of  
17 the district. Friend of mine from high school, John  
18 Adams, he also enlisted in the military around the  
19 time I did, became a senior NCO, got out, got his  
20 degree, went back in, and commissioned as an officer.  
21 [inaudible] Luciano [sic] an Ozone Park native, he  
22 unfortunately took his own life on March 5<sup>th</sup>. So,  
23 honestly, and just to cap this off, I've said it  
24 already but thank you again, Chairman Holden and the  
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1  
2 Council Members on this Committee. You guys, you  
3 push a lot. We need more support from the rest of  
4 the Council and the Mayor's Office to really support  
5 initiatives. I mean, it's been too long. We are the  
6 low hanging fruit. We see a lot of money being  
7 pushed towards other things, but veterans are always  
8 kind of left at the wayside. Thank you. And I  
9 apologize for going over the time, Chairman Holden  
10 and the Committee, and that's it. Thank you.

11 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright, it's always  
12 great to see you, and thank you for all the work that  
13 you do for our veterans. And I know it's almost like  
14 a fulltime job your work. It probably is a fulltime  
15 job. You're amazing. You're all over the place, and  
16 you touched upon a lot of great things, and I agree  
17 with everything you said, especially DVS budget. It  
18 is an embarrassment, and I think we all need to tell  
19 the Mayor that. That's-- you know, I used to mention  
20 doubling it, but now I'm beyond that. Quadruple the  
21 budget would be a start. But again, Ryan, nice to  
22 see you again. Thank for touching on so many great  
23 things, and again thanks for waiting around for your  
24 testimony.

25

1  
2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Thank you. Our final  
3 Zoom witness is Vishal Villani [sp?]. The Sergeant  
4 will tell you know when to begin.

5 SERGEANT AT ARMS: Time starts now.

6 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Vishal Villani?

7 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Is he on? Does  
8 anybody know if he's on? No, that's Ryan. That's  
9 the previous one.

10 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: Okay, we do not see  
11 Vishal Villani, and I'm going to just call others who  
12 had registered to make sure they are not on, Michael  
13 Applegate [sp?], Mary Wakazor [sp?], and Brendan  
14 Gibbons. If none of those are here, we are ready to  
15 adjourn the hearing. Let me just double-check,  
16 Council Member, for one minute with my people running  
17 the Zoom.

18 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Alright, we'll just  
19 check to see if the people that Gina called are still  
20 online, because we'd hate to not have their testimony  
21 when they waited so long. Going to wait one more  
22 minute. I'll just fill in the dead time here now,  
23 but I just want to thank everyone both present and  
24 online for an amazing hearing. We got so many great  
25

1  
2 ideas. I think the testimony was probably the best  
3 I've seen as a Committee Chair.

4 [applause]

5 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I think we're not  
6 allowed to clap, but-- this, we got-- I got a lot of  
7 ideas. I think everyone here. We have a greater  
8 resolve now to not only increase DVS' budget, but  
9 also the budget for our veterans and certainly we  
10 will push hard, but the veteran community has been  
11 like, again, so amazing over the years as I've been  
12 Committee Chair, and such great individuals. So,  
13 again, I want to thank everyone here, both here and  
14 online. And how we doing on the--

15 COMMITTEE COUNSEL: [interposing] I'm not  
16 having--

17 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: [interposing] Okay,  
18 I'm sorry if you were online or you can't get  
19 through, if you could submit testimony, we'll  
20 certainly look at it. And again, I thank everyone  
21 who testified, and this hearing is adjourned.

22 [gavel]

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COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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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 May 6, 2024