



Testimony of Loree Sutton, M.D., Brigadier General, U.S. Army, Retired  
Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Veterans' Affairs  
New York City Council Committee on Veterans

**Oversight – Evaluating the Effectiveness of MOVA's Role Serving New York City Veterans**

1:00 pm, Wednesday, May 6, 2015

Good afternoon, Chairman Ulrich and the members of the Committee on Veterans. My name is Loree Sutton and I remain honored as always to serve as the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Veterans' Affairs. Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you and address today's topic of evaluating the effectiveness of MOVA's role serving New York City Veterans.

Mr. Chairman, during the nearly nine months since August 18, 2014, when you and I met at City Hall as Mayor de Blasio appointed me as Commissioner, Mayor's Office of Veterans' Affairs, we have kept our promise to collaborate and do whatever it takes to improve the lives of NYC veterans and their families. In working together, we have shared the view that New York City is uniquely positioned to lead the nation in this endeavor. While much has been done, much work remains. While many veterans are thriving, many are also struggling.

Together, we face a pressing challenge to communicate, coordinate and connect veteran needs with care, services and resources throughout the City agencies as well as community-based organizations and service providers within the five Boroughs. Our vast City agency resources combined with robust community partnerships are the key elements required to effectively meet the needs and promote the strengths of our city's veterans. Further, we both endorse that there is always more we can do, and we must join our efforts to make things better. Veterans and their families deserve our best.

Established in 1987 under Local Law 53, MOVA's mission is to improve the lives of New York City veterans and their families. Leveraging the resources of agencies across the City government, MOVA provides services and connects veterans, active duty military and their families to the vast New York City, state, and federal programs, as well as public/private resources which are available throughout the city of New York. There are over 225,000 veterans

who live in New York City, coupled with military families and over 20,000 retired veterans, bringing the population to over 500,000 who call New York home.

In addition to MOVA's role with respect to policy coordination, direct services, referrals, and community engagement, we are co-located with a dozen Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), including the American Legion; Veterans Are Still Warriors; Marine Corps League; Montford Marines Association; United War Veterans Council; Catholic Veterans; Haitian-American Veterans; Rakkasan Big Apple Chapter; Jewish War Veterans; Vietnam Veterans of America; VFW NYPD ; and Southwestern Asia Veterans. Known as Veterans' Hall, this collaborative sharing of office resources, work space and meeting room facilities provides frequent interaction and fosters MOVA's ability to support these VSOs and the veterans they represent.

I commenced duties on September 1, 2014, when Mayor Bill de Blasio appointed me as Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Veterans' Affairs. I completed my initial assessment of MOVA, local community needs, and government and not for profit services and resources available throughout the city, in December of 2014. During the assessment, MOVA engaged and visited over 250 city offices and agencies, veteran service organizations, veteran membership organizations, health care programs, educational institutions, and public/private organizations, throughout the five Boroughs.

Throughout this intense period of focused engagement, the overwhelming feedback from service providers, veterans and their family members had to do with a pervasive lack of knowledge of existing services rather than a lack of actual resources. As organizational executives are learning from healthcare reform and other sectors of the economy, the first leadership priority is to make best use of existing resources through coordination, partnership and collaboration. This initial phase of organizational development is essential to formulate a strategic plan based on actual strengths, weaknesses, gaps and opportunities. Mission and strategy drive programs and budget.

Operationalizing the Mayor's guidance, I am intensely focused on building MOVA's organizational foundation and capacity to fully leverage its relationship with the Mayor and his Administration; all levels of government; and the vibrant public, private and not-for-profit sectors throughout New York City. This remains a work in progress, as we engage our partners in support of MOVA's key strategic initiatives to end veteran homelessness; incorporate veterans and families within the First Lady's mental health roadmap strategy; and connect veterans with City career, business and employment opportunities. Committed to actualizing MOVA's full potential, we are relentlessly moving forward to realize this urgent goal.

Mayor de Blasio's vision, informed by my assessment, resulted in new strategic priorities.

The top tier includes:

**Ending Veteran Homelessness** – During his State of the City address in January, Mayor de Blasio issued an historic pledge to end veteran homelessness by the end of 2015. The city has placed over 200 veterans in homes so far this year and 873 veterans were housed last year. Veterans currently receive top placement priority for all City housing programs. The City has identified the best available housing options for approximately 850 of the veterans in shelter, which comprises 93% of the current list of veterans awaiting permanent housing.

In November, 2014, MOVA was elected to serve as a member of the Continuum of Care Veterans Task Force, a public-private inter-agency working group which is co-chaired by the VA and HPD; members also include additional City agencies (HRA, DHS, & NYCHA) and the seven NYC not-for-profit service providers who currently receive Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) grant funding. The purpose of the task force, established in October 2013, is to provide a leadership role in the prevention and eradication of homelessness in NYC. A broad-based coalition of homeless housing and shelter providers, consumers, advocates, and government representatives, the task force works together to shape citywide planning and decision-making, consistent with best national practices.

Best practices include maintaining a relentless focus on removing barriers to permanent housing; prioritizing chronically homeless veterans with HUD-VASH/supportive housing options; coordinating outreach efforts to locate, identify and engage homeless veterans; targeting rapid re-housing interventions such as the VA SSVF program; leveraging local housing and services for VA-ineligible veterans; increasing early detection and access to preventive services to keep vulnerable veterans and families housed; and closely monitoring progress towards the goal of ending veteran homelessness; sustaining gains; and applying lessons learned with veterans to the larger homeless population.

**Promoting Veteran/Family Mental Health** – MOVA wasted no time in seizing the opportunity to partner with Chirlane McCray, the First Lady of New York City, and incorporate veterans and their families in her Mental Health Roadmap, which will be released in the fall of 2015. To this end, MOVA hosted a recent 2-day 'sampler' tour of holistic programs supporting veterans and their families in NYC, including the Fountain House Veterans Roundtable (13 organizations represented, including IAVA; The Mission Continues; Exit12; Story Corps; The Headstrong Project; Outside the Wire; and Team Red, White & Blue); Trauma & Resiliency Resources (featuring integrative retreats with yoga, EMDR and equine training;) Animal-Facilitated Therapy/Music Therapy/Art Programs at the Manhattan and Brooklyn VA hospitals; and a military spouse roundtable at Fort Hamilton.

MOVA is pleased to partner with the First Lady's team, the Department of Health and Mental Health and other City agencies to facilitate cultural transformation and implementation of a public health approach empowering individuals and championing community-based services that enhance social support; dignity and independence. MOVA will also assume a vital coordination role to ensure that NYC veterans and their families are connected to quality public, private and community social profit services.

**Launching City Recruitment Initiative** – MOVA will soon begin assisting agencies to adopt best practices in recruiting veterans for City career opportunities. Efforts will include posting City job openings where veterans and their families can readily access them; working with human resource professionals to learn how to read military resumes and interview veteran candidates; and adopting standard intake questions to help veterans and their family members self-identify themselves when applying for City career and other opportunities.

### **MOVA Gets Going in 2014:**

Day-to-Day Constituent Services (since September 1, 2014): In addition to the work performed by agency liaisons throughout City government, MOVA has assisted over 750 veteran constituents in person, through email and by phone. Our outreach has included over 10,000 individuals who received information about MOVA and city of New York services, including VA Benefits; public benefits; veteran burial assistance; indigent burial assistance; discharge replacement & upgrade; education assistance; employment resources and referrals; eviction assistance; homelessness/temporary housing assistance; housing resources assistance; military orders verification; senior protective services assistance; Veterans' Treatment Court Mentor and assistance; and utilities arrears assistance.

Lunch, Listen, and Learn: MOVA hosted several working sessions to engage community advocates, service providers and veteran service organizations in addressing a number of topics of relevant concern to veterans and their families. Given the popular response, MOVA plans to continue this program on a bimonthly basis starting in June 2015.

Community Program Visits: These visits informed MOVA's strategic priorities and recommendations, through face-to-face meetings with veterans and veteran service organizations who are serving the city's veterans and their families, such as Veteran Treatment Courts in Brooklyn and the Bronx; Samaritan Village; Fountain House; visits to VA medical treatment centers and the Veteran Affairs Benefits Administration; Vet Centers; Iraq & Afghanistan Veterans of America; The Mission Continues; U.S. Garrison Fort Hamilton; VFW; American Legion; Bob Woodruff Foundation; The Intrepid Museum; Robin Hood Foundation;

American Legion; Bob Woodruff Foundation; The Intrepid Museum; Robin Hood Foundation; Joining Forces Philanthropy Roundtable; Catholic Charities; and Veterans on Wall Street. MOVA also toured the homeless shelter intake process and met with service providers.

Federal/State Officials: MOVA had unprecedented access to engaging substantively with senior officials, including the VA Cabinet Secretary; Deputy Secretary; Under Secretary for Benefits; DOL Director of Veteran Employment; VA Medical Center/Vet Center leadership; Fort Hamilton Command Team; Civilian Aide to the Secretary of the Army; United States Interagency Council on Homelessness; and Army for Life / Marine for Life / Fleet Week leadership. These strategic working relationships have raised MOVA's profile locally and nationally, thereby enhancing our ability to improve the lives of NYC veterans and their families.

MILVET Engagement: MOVA has forged a new working relationship with the CUNY and its NYC academic system encompassing 25 colleges. Catalyzed by the MOVA Commissioner's John Jay College keynote address at the June 2014 Women Veterans Empowerment Symposium, this collaborative partnership with CUNY has continued to broaden and deepen. Recent activities include MOVA consultation with the CUNY Chancellor, John Jay College President and CUNY senior academic leadership; additional MOVA speaking engagements at CUNY student events; and MOVA participation in the John Jay College Corporate Roundtable on Veteran Issues. MOVA is also pleased to welcome Samuel Innocent as a new member of the NYC Veteran Advisory Board, appointed by Mayor de Blasio in April 2015. Mr. Innocent, a combat veteran, serves as the CUNY Staff Assistant for Veteran Affairs and Urban Initiatives and is a member of the NYC Veterans Alliance. MOVA celebrates this collaboration and looks forward to next steps on behalf of NYC student veterans within the CUNY system and beyond.

City Council Hearings: MOVA participated in 8 hearings (three in 2014), frequently engaging with community advocates to better understand their concerns. Hearing topics included: proposed establishment of a department of veterans' affairs; the Veteran Advisory Board (VAB); ending veteran homelessness and hunger; supporting veteran owned businesses and promoting veteran entrepreneurship; strengthening the transparency of the VAB and of various services provided to veterans by City agencies; evaluating the City's veteran treatment courts; veteran liaisons at City agencies; and today's topic, evaluating the effectiveness of MOVA's role serving NYC veterans.

City Agencies: MOVA met with over 30 City Commissioners to discuss collaborative opportunities. Agency visits included SBS, DHS, HRA, HPD, DCA, DFTA, DIPTA, NYCHA, FDNY, NYPD, DOC, MOCS, MOCJ & MOPDV, and MOCD. Visits also included the Public Advocates Office, Office of all Borough Presidents, and Chambers of Commerce.

IDNYC: Mayor de Blasio commits to the addition of a ‘veteran designator’ to the hugely popular IDNYC municipal identification card, which features numerous benefits and cultural attractions. The ‘veteran designator’ action was initiated in 2014; the launch is planned for 2015.

Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA): Commissioner Sutton/MOVA co-authored a letter with Commissioner Menin/DCA to acknowledge federal actions, underscore NYC commitment to thwarting financial predatory actions, and advocate for increased safeguards. MOVA is continuing its collaboration with DCA, advocating for stronger regulatory enforcement and prosecution of recent abuses exposed within the finance/loan industry that have targeted veterans and their families. Our combined advocacy, joining efforts at the State and Federal level, is intended to assist in protecting veterans from unscrupulous individuals bent on exploitation.

Community Events and Ceremonial Support: MOVA’s participation included Veterans’ Day Parade; CUNY Veteran Academic Awards; Salute to Women Who Served; Department of Labor Veteran Information Forum at BMCC; Military Retiree Appreciation Day; Air Force Birthday; Korean War Veterans Veterans’ Day Salute; Presentation of Insignia of the Legion of Honor to American WW II Veterans; United War Veterans Council events; Star Spangled Banner Reception; Iraq Afghanistan Veterans of America annual Gala; Knights of Pythias; Welcome Home Vietnam; Salute to Women Who Served; Volunteers of America Safe Haven Veterans’ Day Event; Theater of War; Arts in the Armed Forces, to name a few.

### **MOVA Appointments to City Task Forces:**

Behavioral Health Task Force on the Criminal Justice System: MOVA’s role is to ensure that the MOCJ/DOC strategy incorporates a veteran-informed perspective as well as emerging neuroscience findings. Working meetings to date have focused on standardizing intake questions to identify veterans and their family members as well as to ensure appropriate behavioral health services at all points in the system. These new questions will spearhead our efforts across City agencies to identify the veterans and their family members so that we can better meet their needs.

SBS/MOCS/MOVA Veterans Business Report/Task Force: MOVA partnered with SBS in co-hosting four follow-up feedback sessions and participating in a quarterly City-wide veteran business entrepreneur event. MOVA is establishing a Veteran Business Owner Task Force in addition to its existing Committee on Women Veterans, both of which will report findings and recommendations to the VAB. MOVA is also partnering with SBS to notify veteran business owners to register their business in the new PIP portal, now up and running. We will further our work with SBS, MOCS and other partners to fulfill the action recommendations aimed at building increased capacity for assisting veteran business owners in a variety of domains -- networking, mentoring, training, engagement, outreach and leadership -- to start and grow their own businesses as well as to pursue other career employment opportunities.

## **'MOVA on the Move' in 2015:**

Completed Legislation: Mayor de Blasio signed 3 veteran bills into law reforming the VAB and establishing agency reporting for select services sought by veterans.

Veteran Advisory Board Appointments: Mayor de Blasio appointed six highly qualified new VAB members to fill expired membership terms. The Speaker appointed one new member and renewed terms for two previous members; two additional Speaker appointments are pending in June 2015. Four of the new VAB members have served in Iraq or Afghanistan, and reflect diversity and depth with respect to branch/era of service, professional expertise and veteran community advocacy activities.

Respect for the Fallen: MOVA collaborated on updating City's flag-lowering protocol to assure appropriate respect and honor for our fallen comrades.

Agency Veteran Liaisons: As I testified before this committee a week ago, the veteran liaisons at City agencies are integral resources for MOVA, whose staff members draw upon liaison expertise and knowledge within their respective agencies across City government to support the needs of veterans and their family members on a regular basis. In a reciprocal supportive role, MOVA is a trusted resource for City agency liaisons. MOVA's relationships with Agency liaisons form the bedrock foundation upon which MOVA, with our expertise concerning veteran-specific needs, and liaisons, with their expertise in agency-specific resources, build alliances and keep each other informed of emerging developments.

To recap, agency veteran liaisons conduct three essential roles: 1) supporting the veteran employees within their own agencies, liaisons provide crucial assistance to secure benefits, services and support; 2) supporting the non-City needs of veterans employed by their respective agency, veteran liaisons frequently consult with MOVA to determine the best course of action for a given challenge; and 3) responding to MOVA queries regarding the needs of veteran constituents who are not City employees, liaisons are readily available for consultation to assist MOVA staff with constituent issues. MOVA and the veteran liaisons are ideally suited for this teamwork role, given their combined extensive knowledge base concerning City agencies and local, state and federal resources, as well as MOVA's longstanding relationships with veteran service organizations and others who serve the veterans' community.

MOVA is broadening and deepening its relationship with City agency veteran liaisons, whose role we regard and value greatly as a strategic force-multiplier. Accordingly, we are proactively engaging with the liaisons to identify current and emerging agency programs and resources that would be of interest to veterans and their families as well as best practices for supporting existing City employees who are veterans and/or members of the Reserves and National Guard.

Having shared many of MOVA's activities and achievements since September 2014, I will now close with a few enduring thoughts:

The issues that veterans face during their transition to civilian life are extraordinarily complex and permeate every aspect of their journey home: from securing employment, to finding a home, to accessing health services, to simply reuniting with family and friends with the health, confidence, and security they deserve, to rededicating themselves to continued service on behalf of others. As greater numbers of our men and women in uniform return home, their long term health and well-being is our responsibility, as a community, to safeguard and ensure. This is not charity; it's our national duty.

Under Mayor de Blasio's leadership, MOVA will continue to fully engage in collaboration with City agencies as well as partnerships with civic, social profit, corporate, academic, and philanthropic organizations dedicated to serving veterans, including the Chambers of Commerce in all five boroughs and the VA New York Harbor Health Care System. These linkages extend beyond New York City to include the New York State division of Veterans' Affairs, as well as the U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs. The VA system cannot do it all. Together, we must work as a team. As your MOVA Commissioner for Veterans' Affairs, I will continue to directly engage with all of the boroughs, all generations of veterans, all components—active, reserve, and national Guard members, all services, veterans and their family members—as well as engaging the commitment and creativity of civic leaders, advocates, and stakeholders in all sectors.

Concurrently, I am joining forces with my fellow commissioners and other key members of this administration to identify potential synergies, as virtually every policy issue facing New York City is relevant for veterans and their loved ones. A multi-pronged strategy is critical to the way ahead. Having led and changed complex organizations over the past three decades, I am also drawing upon and broadening my network, to maximize MOVA's capacity for collaboration, stewardship, creativity, partnership and coordination. It is exciting to imagine the possibilities that lie within our grasp. Working together, let's keep after it!

To this end, I thank you for your continued leadership, passion, energy and enthusiasm. At this time, I welcome your thoughts, questions and concerns.

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PUBLIC ADVOCATE FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK

## Letitia James

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### TESTIMONY

#### BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON VETERANS OVERSIGHT - EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MOVA'S ROLE SERVING NEW YORK CITY'S VETERANS.

MAY 6, 2015  
CITY HALL

Good afternoon members of the City Council Committee on Veterans. My name is Oswaldo Pereira. I am an outreach coordinator in the Office of Public Advocate Letitia James and also a veteran. I thank you for the opportunity to address this Committee on behalf of Public Advocate James. Before I begin, I'd like to note that I am reading this testimony on behalf of the Public Advocate, not myself.

Over the past few months both I and representatives from my office have met with leaders from a host of organizations representing the interests of veterans including Disabled Veterans of America; Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans; the Wounded Warrior Project; the United War Veterans Council; the American Legion; New York Metro Vets; New York City Serves; New York City Veterans Alliance; the National Association of Black Veterans; and the Bronx Veterans' Mentors. The overwhelming consensus among these veterans groups and others is that the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs (MOVA) must be strengthened to meet the growing needs of New York City's veteran community and their families.

Unfortunately, today many veterans throughout New York City feel forgotten and uncared for. Many have expressed the sentiment that, of all cities in the U.S., our City should rise to meet the challenge of caring for our veterans. Our City, which was so ruthlessly attacked fourteen years ago by a small group of terrorists and experienced the largest terrorist attack that our nation has ever suffered, should better understand the sacrifices that veterans have made and the needs that result from those sacrifices. New York City veterans return home after serving in the longest war this nation has ever seen and sacrificed parts of themselves – both physically and emotionally – that they can never regain. To think that veterans would have to return home to fight even further for the most basic services seems both unjust and unpatriotic.

Three weeks ago I stood on the steps of City Hall and witnessed a large group of veterans assembled in protest calling for better services and demanding to be treated with the respect that they have surely earned. While I know that much of that fault lies at the feet of the federal VA, I could not help but think about what we are doing locally. Disappointingly, our Mayor's Office of Veterans' Affairs is not funded in a way that reflects the actual needs of our veterans. With a staff of six and a budget of \$600,000, MOVA is not in a position to provide the services that our veterans truly need. Think for one moment about the numbers: we have over 200,000 veterans city-wide. With a budget of \$600,000, that means we are allocating just three dollars per veteran.



PUBLIC ADVOCATE FOR THE CITY OF NEW YORK

## Letitia James

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Veterans deserve to have a department that can truly serve their needs. I am concerned that MOVA, as it is currently funded, does not have the resources necessary to serve the needs of our veterans. As we head into executive budget negotiations, I urge this Committee, the rest of the Council and our Mayor to please give our veterans the support that they both need and have earned.

Good afternoon and thank you again for the opportunity to speak before this committee.

**NYC Veterans Alliance**  
**[www.nycveteransalliance.org](http://www.nycveteransalliance.org)**

Testimony by Kristen L. Rouse  
Interim Director, NYC Veterans Alliance

Hearing on Oversight of the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs

NYC Council Committee on Veterans  
Honorable Eric Ulrich, Chair

May 6, 2015

My name is Kristen L. Rouse, and I am speaking on behalf of the **NYC Veterans Alliance**. I am a veteran of the United States Army, I served three tours of duty in Afghanistan, and I have lived in Brooklyn since leaving Army active duty in 2007.

One of the reasons I love New York City is its incredible history of taking pride in its military and veterans—from the Revolutionary War battles fought on this soil to the hundreds of thousands of troops who sailed on crowded ships from New York Harbor to fight in wars overseas—to now being home of the largest Veterans Day parade in the country. New York also has a history of providing for its veterans, like the city-subsidized housing at Peter Cooper Village in Stuyvesant Town that gave affordable housing to thousands of veterans and their families after World War II.

Yet despite this proud history, and despite thousands of men and women deploying to wars on multiple fronts since 2001, no recent NYC mayor has truly prioritized the more than 220,000 NYC veterans who stepped up proudly to serve this country during times of both war and peace. We appreciate the service and efforts of Commissioner Sutton, but the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs offers little more than a symbolic role, with only a Commissioner and five staff members. MOVA doesn't have enough people to field a softball team, let alone oversee veterans affairs for the nation's largest city. This affects not only veterans, but also more than 250,000 spouses and dependents also impacted by veterans benefits and programs in NYC. This in total represents about *one in sixteen NYC residents* who MOVA's functions—or dysfunctions—directly affect.

MOVA's entire annual budget is just \$600,000, nearly all of which goes to staff salaries. Half of this amount is funded by a New York State grant. That means NYC in actuality spends only \$300,000 in city tax dollars on MOVA's critical functions—that's little more than *one dollar per year per veteran*. This simply is not enough. We therefore offer the following recommendations:

- 1) **NYC government must allocate more funding for NYC veterans.** More funding would enable more sufficient staffing and resources, to include restoring the veterans benefits counselors that MOVA lost last year due to lack of funding.

- 2) **NYC government must empower MOVA to oversee and coordinate all city funding and programs targeted at veterans.** MOVA should oversee the \$400,000 in discretionary funds that City Council gave last year to veteran service organizations. This funding is currently overseen by agencies like the Department of Youth and Community Development, which do not have a full understanding of what VSOs do and are therefore unable to properly determine whether VSOs are effectively using city funds for their intended purposes. MOVA should also oversee and account for the full expenditure of the \$3.4 million in federal funds that City Hall receives to end veteran homelessness. MOVA should have full oversight of other vital city initiatives for veterans, such as ensuring veterans receive preferences for low-income housing; ensuring programs like veterans treatment courts are providing the same quality of services to veterans in each borough; ensuring CUNY colleges are provide proper benefits and credits to student veterans; ensuring veterans and military reservists employed by city agencies receive proper protections and benefits; ensuring the proper licensing and treatment of veteran street vendors; providing veteran business and employment opportunities; and providing assessments of how city agencies are serving the veterans they reach—just to name a few city-level programs that require more than six people to oversee on a continuous basis.
  
- 3) **MOVA must function as a true liaison for implementation of direct federal funds and programs serving veterans in NYC.** In addition to the city initiatives I just listed, MOVA should also be monitoring and providing substantive, qualitative input on direct federal programs for veterans, like the \$22 million in federal funds that go straight to nonprofits in NYC for supportive services for veterans and families struggling with homelessness. MOVA should also be monitoring and providing substantive input on the quality of VA healthcare facilities in NYC. If local veterans are not receiving the quality of care and services they deserve from the VA, MOVA should be empowered to voice and address these concerns.

- 4) **NYC must have a veterans affairs agency that is accountable to both the Mayor and to our elected representatives in the City Council.** Veterans affairs should not simply be a matter of whether the sitting mayor cares about veterans or not—veterans affairs must be overseen by the whole of our elected government. For this reason, we strongly support the Veterans Committee’s bill to establish a Department of Veterans Affairs for NYC.

A recent study by *Got Your 6*, a national veterans coalition, showed statistical proof that veterans are more engaged in our communities than our civilian counterparts—we volunteer more, more of us donate to charity, more of us regularly vote in elections, we do more to help our neighbors, and we’re more active in community organizations and government. Veterans have a lot to offer NYC, and those of us who live here do so because we love this city and care about it. NYC can and must lead the nation in welcoming veterans and integrating them into all aspects of what makes New York the greatest city in the world, from business and entrepreneurship to public service, academics, entertainment, and the arts. But NYC can’t do that with just symbolic representation and empty talk. We need more than six people. We need more than one dollar per veteran. We strongly urge you to prioritize veterans affairs with the funding, oversight, and leadership this city deserves.

On behalf of the NYC Veterans Alliance, I thank you for this opportunity to speak today.

Pending your questions, this concludes my testimony.



Wednesday, May 6<sup>th</sup> 2015

Written Testimony respectfully submitted to the NYC Committee on Veterans by CPT Scott M Davidson .RET USA

Hon. Eric A. Ulrich, Chair, NYC Committee on Veterans

Hon. Robert E. Cornegy, Jr., Chair, NYC Committee on Small Business

Good Afternoon Chairs Ulrich and Cornegy; other members of the NYC Committees on Veterans and Small Business; and guests.

My name is CPT Scott M Davidson .RET USA and I serve as the President and CEO of Vets GSA and Vets MS which are Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Businesses. I also serve as the co-founder of the not for profit organization 360 Veterans with LTC Justin Constantine, USMC .RET which hosts the NYC Veterans Resource Expo. I also serve on the American Legion's National Veteran Small Business Task Force in Washington DC. I am a medically retired Army Captain who served 2 combat tours in Iraq and was medically retired from a combat related injury I sustained while in Iraq.

My focus today is to speak about the effectiveness of the Mayor's Office of Veterans' Affairs (MOVA). As I start I would like to first focus on the stated mission and function of MOVA which is that the agency advises the Mayor on issues and initiatives impacting the veteran and military community. Also stated in its mission is that MOVA works with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the New York State



**360 Veterans**

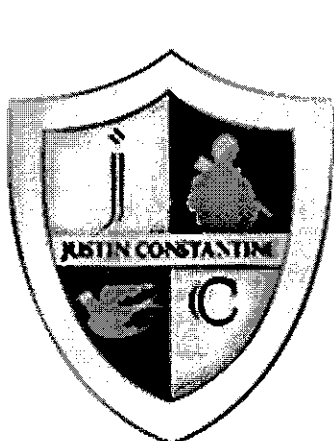




Division of Veterans Affairs (NYSDVA), City Agencies, veterans' organizations and other stakeholders to offer services to veterans, their dependents and survivors, while encouraging innovative partnerships to ensure creative problem solving. The reason I state this is because I want it to be clear so we understand the position and responsibilities of the office.

With that being said my nonprofit has personally worked with MOVA with regard to providing services for NYC Veterans at the NYC Veteran Resource Expo which was held on March 5<sup>th</sup> 2015. We are also working closely with MOVA for our upcoming expo on June 5. Our Veteran Resource Expo provided Veterans, Spouses and Caregivers access to a multitude of resources in one setting related to Veteran education, employment, health, business and housing, and we continue to do so as we work with MOVA and other city resources. MOVA, the Small Business Service and many other organizations in the city came together for an incredible successfully event for Veteran outreach and resources. MOVA coordinated efforts with our office, although at the time Commissioner Sutton had just inherited an office that was facing an onslaught of shortfalls of a tremendously oversaturated system that probably hadn't been as efficient as it could since the opening of the office.

Regarding the effectiveness of MOVA, I believe that any perceived inaction or underserving of the NYC Veteran community is driven by a combination of overwhelming demand and a lack of resources, and not from any type of inaction on Commissioner Sutton's part. Primarily, there should be a realistic expectation that it would be extremely difficult to serve 250,000 Veterans with a staff of 4 or 5 people.



**360 Veterans**







Most agencies with that mission have a greater staff and established partnerships that have been well developed over years in order to serve the general population, or in this case a specific large demographic. Understandably, there is a greater focus on MOVA in recent times given the influx of returning Veterans from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to an already strained Federal system which cannot handle the job transition, mental wellness, homelessness, and disability issues - it should not be a surprise that a very small city organization with limited resources cannot meet immediate expectations and timelines that have been set. By no means am I saying that it is acceptable to not serve the Veteran community with a high degree of professionalism, but I believe we need to focus on the fact that there is a greater opportunity here to improve the current system with support and partnership than to expend further time and resources to rally against it. I believe that if MOVA were given the proper resources, it could work far more effectively with Veteran Resource partners to bridge the many gaps that exist in New York City. For the purpose of this testimony, the resources I am referring to can be simply defined as dedicated personnel to MOVA and new hires that can provide greater coordination to ensure available current resources are available for the Veteran population.

#### **Solutions and Way Ahead:**

In closing I see this time as an opportunity. 360 Veterans is already working with MOVA and other city, state, and Federal agencies, as well as Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez and Veteran Service Organizations like the American Legion and a multitude of other public and private resources. We are now holding 360-degree full resource events on a quarterly basis throughout the boroughs in New York



**360 Veterans**





City. This represents positive action in order to make a change and create the required synergy among public and private organizations in order to start to build strong relationships to support MOVA in fulfilling its mission. This is directly in line with MOVA's charge to encourage innovative partnerships to ensure creative problem solving.

As Veterans we know that we are only as strong as the team, so I want to remind everyone here today and across the city to look at this as an opportunity to come together and focus our energy and efforts to support our peers. In the end, never forget that we take care of our own because history has shown us no one else will.



**360 Veterans**



Testimony offered by Frank LaMarsh, Past 2<sup>nd</sup> District Commander, American Legion, Department of New York, to the Committee on Veterans Affairs, chaired by the Honorable Eric Ulrich, New York City Council on May 6, 2015.

Opening greetings by Mr. LaMarsh.

Good afternoon, I'd like to thank the committee for this opportunity to speak to you today as a member of the largest congressionally chartered veteran's organization in the world; the American Legion.

Please allow me to briefly state our credentials in regards to the subject matter for today's hearing.

The American Legion was chartered by Congress in 1919 as a patriotic veterans organization. Focusing on service to veterans, service members and communities, the Legion evolved from a group of war-weary veterans of World War I into one of the most influential nonprofit groups in the United States. Membership swiftly grew to over 1 million, and local posts sprang up across the country. Today, membership stands at over 2.4 million in 14,000 posts worldwide. The posts are organized into 55 departments: one each for the 50 states, along with the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, France, Mexico and the Philippines.

Over the years, the Legion has influenced considerable social change in America, won hundreds of benefits for veterans and produced many important programs for children and youth. The following are examples of some of the significant contributions the legion has made.

The Legion's efforts result in the creation of the U.S. Veterans Bureau, forerunner of the Veterans Administration.

Past American Legion National Commander Harry W. Colmery writes the first draft of what will later become the "GI Bill of Rights" – considered the Legion's single greatest legislative achievement. Higher education becomes democratized after 8 million veterans go to school on the GI Bill, get better jobs, buy houses in the suburbs and raise families. For every dollar spent on educating veterans, the U.S. economy eventually gets \$7 back.

The Veterans Administration is elevated to Cabinet-level status as the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The Legion fought hard for the change, arguing that veterans deserve representation at the highest levels of government.

*Today, as at its formation, the Legion remains at the forefront of efforts to improve education and other benefits for all veterans.*

I'd like to thank Mayor di Blasio and Speaker Viverito for their efforts in assembling the Veterans Advisory Board (VAB) that will be in place to assist the Mayors Office of Veterans Affairs.

I'd also once again thank and commend the Mayor and Speaker on their choice of Brigadier General Loree Sutton, USA Retired, as its commissioner.

Our thanks also go out to the members of the VAB who have willingly offered their time to help improve the rights and benefits of our veterans.

In addressing the purpose of this hearing, to evaluate the effectiveness of MOVA's role in serving New York City's Veterans we must keep in mind a few key points.

The new VAB was named within the past 30 days. Prior to them being announced Commissioner Sutton was working with a lame duck board. I am not sure what impact this had on some of the commissioner's decisions.

In the short time the new VAB has been in place, they may not have had enough opportunity to provide the input necessary to produce quality results from the MOVA.

In order to more objectively evaluate the success of the MOVA more time may be needed for the VAB and Commissioner Sutton to work together. Perhaps this type of hearing is a bit premature.

It is the hope of the American Legion that the individual board members will be holding some type of veterans' town hall meetings in their respective boroughs prior to their general meetings. This would be a great tool in assessing the concerns of the veteran community that can be discussed and then be brought to the attention of Commissioner Sutton.

As to the matter of the American Legion supporting the establishment of a New York City Department of Veterans Affairs, it is our understanding and desire, that the commissioner and board members remain intact. Additionally, the City Council will have a direct impact on the newly created departments' budget, which we see as having a very positive affect on improving the care of our veterans.

As previously stated, because of our experience in helping to establish the Veterans Administration and the creation of the Department of Veterans Affairs, the American Legion is willing and able to assist with the creation of a New York City Department of Veterans Affairs.

Thank you

**Statement of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America**

before the

**New York City Council Committee on Veterans**

~~for the hearing on~~

**The Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs (MOVA)**

**May 6, 2015**

Chairman Ulrich, esteemed members of the committee:

My name is Jason Hansman, an Iraq veteran and the Director of External Program Relations at Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA). On behalf our NYC membership, I would like to extend our gratitude for the opportunity to share our thoughts on the role of the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs (MOVA) in serving this city's veterans.

IAVA is the only major veteran service organization headquartered here in NYC and boasts a membership of more than 10,000 veterans in the New York City area. Given our close ties to NYC we'd like to see it as the leading city on veteran's issues. However, to be this national leader we need a city level agency supporting veterans that is highly effective with clear priorities and goals.

We want to begin by thanking Commissioner Sutton for her hard work and dedication over the past eight months. She has been front and center at veterans events across the city and has met with many veterans groups, including IAVA, in her first months in office. We are also encouraged to see Commissioner Sutton identifying her office's priorities – mental health, homelessness and veteran entrepreneurship.

At the same time it is clear that this office is ill equipped to handle the breadth and depth of the issues veterans face in this city given its current staff size and budget.

Currently there are over 230,000 veterans that reside in NYC – and in a city budget of over \$60 billion we only allocate \$600,000 to veterans services. That’s just \$2.50 per veteran in the city – to say nothing of military families. Currently the city of New York spends more on ~~the Mayor’s Office of Film, Television and Broadcasting -- approximately \$1 million -- than~~ it does on veterans.

Recently IAVA polled our NYC membership and what they told us overwhelmingly is that the city isn’t listening to them. Only 5% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the mayor is listening to our veterans and service members, and only 4% of veterans surveyed agreed that the mayor was improving the lives of veterans and service members. Our members are demanding more – more support and more resources... and more leadership from our mayor.

It would be disingenuous and dishonest to say that we are leading the way here in NYC when it comes to veterans services. We only need to look north to the city of Boston where they spend \$5.5 million on veterans services. And in San Francisco the mayor recently announced a two year \$1.7 million city commitment to end veterans homelessness. Both these cities, and their mayors, have shown up to support veterans – while we in NYC are still waiting on ours.

But this is not just about budgets – but about services. As of right now, especially with the elimination of benefits counselors from MOVA last year, MOVA provides no direct services. And while there are critical functions that can be played outside of direct services, this city and its veterans need the city to step up and provide critical services to our veterans. There would be no stronger message of support by our mayor and our City

Council than to establish a Department of Veterans Affairs for the city of New York, which is why we are here today to support this bill.

There is no question that we have a long way to go for NYC to be the leading city in ~~the country for veterans. And to that end JAVA looks to be a resource for this committee~~ and for MOVA. But we need MOVA and we need the mayor to take the lead.

I thank the committee for their time and welcome any questions.

Testimony of Brett Morash, Ph.D., Lt. Commander, U.S. Navy, Retired

Vice President Veterans Division

Services for the UnderServed Inc.

**Oversight – Evaluating the Effectiveness of MOVA’s Role Serving New York City Veterans**

1:00 pm, Wednesday, May 6, 2015

Good afternoon. My name is Brett Morash the Vice President of Veterans Services at Services for the UnderServed Inc. and a retired U.S. Naval Officer having served on active duty over twenty years as a Surface Warfare Officer before retiring in April of 2013 into the role I now hold. Services for the UnderServed, SUS, is a large New York City based non-profit that provides a whole spectrum of supports for the disadvantaged and as the name says the underserved of New York City. The division I lead is the largest provider of veteran’s services in New York City with the exception of the VA, with programs that serve veterans in poverty and at highest risk. We provide veterans services including homeless prevention services, employment and education programs, suicide prevention, mental and physical health supports, as well as running the coordination center for the NYC Serves network.

As a recently returning veteran I know from personal experience that the transition from military service back to civilian life is not easy and can have a lasting impact on one’s ability to obtain employment, stable housing, and integrate back into the community. While New York City is clearly a patriotic city it is not a military city. This is the reason that I’m here today to discuss the importance of MOVA’s efficacy in the veteran space.

To start, I can tell you that in my two years of working at SUS I have seen a marked increase in the prominence of MOVA under Commissioner Sutton’s leadership. Prior to her appointment, I can say emphatically that MOVA would have been the last place I would have looked for guidance... Today I can say equally emphatically that it is now the first. While MOVA may not directly coordinate efforts it is the organization that I believe is the right one to provide the “unity of effort” that is so desperately needed. In my opinion its evolving role is clearly moving in a positive direction, especially as relates to steering the tens of millions of dollars of federal, state, and foundation resources flowing into the City.

As a complete divergence from before, I have seen General Sutton at virtually all of the meetings I attend, most importantly the NYC Continuum of Care Homeless Veteran Task Force meetings and the NYC Serves Progress meetings... among others. If she isn’t in attendance then MOVA’s Chief of Staff Catherine LaPorte is... There are other critical meetings the Commissioner is integrated into that play an equally essential role in the holistic approach toward ending veteran poverty and homelessness. The salient point is that the real opportunity for MOVA to make a difference is in their attendance and commitment to being a participant at those meetings, and not just an observer; for it is these forums where the strategic decisions are made that impact the operational effectiveness at the street level. Further, only MOVA is situated in a place to provide an impartial and comprehensive view of the issues facing the veteran community unbridled by goal driven funding while at the same time providing the leadership toward the common good for the myriad of Providers, including SUS, who are beholden to goal driven funding. In essence, the Providers have their lanes of traffic but MOVA can truly enable the integrated approach to services dovetailing goals cohesively as part of the strategy.



In my opinion, in order to best engage in the aforementioned strategic approach the office needs the appropriate staffing, resourcing, and cachet to be truly effective. It will require that the staff are experienced with a granular understanding programmatic nuance, implications of policy at the national level effecting the local, and of course how the money works vis-à-vis goals, for a Provider it's also a business reality not just altruistic intent. MOVA cannot be expected to be the respected, knowledgeable, and unifying organization in needs to be on a shoestring budget; most certainly not on the token budget that the office is funded at. While, I argue that the dollar figure may be a moving target it painfully clear that it is woefully inadequate for the task at hand. As a single point of comparison my Coordination Center for NYC Serves is staffed by four people, costs half a million dollars per annum to maintain, is less than four percent of my overall budget, and it is expected to serve 2,000 people in its first year of operations... an average of \$250 per veteran. In essence the City demands that MOVA provides the "unity of effort" to focus the labors of scores of programs... worth tens of millions of dollars... serving the over two hundred thousand veterans of New York City... the bottom line is that an average of \$2 per veteran per year is spent on MOVA. To paraphrase Jackie Chiles, "...it's outrageous, egregious, preposterous..."

You have the power to fix it. Your ability to both empower and give permanency to Commissioner Sutton's office will be key to making the difference. Give her the ammunition she needs to fight the war on poverty in the veteran population by going to the next level.

Thank You.

Meeting May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015

Questions for the City Council Hi my name is Richard Rivera I am a Disabled Veteran who possesses these licenses that are affected by the fact that the City has won the current decision based on 35a which is connected to food.

- 1) Citywide Permits on Parks Property allowed or not allowed.
  - a) Cops right now are telling Disabled Veterans in certain areas of the park that they are not allowed ~~on~~ <sup>in</sup> Parks Property. They are even being told you could cross the street to that side of the other ~~side~~ <sup>part</sup>. Because that becomes another jurisdiction.
  - b) Then they are being told that if you want to come here you have to go get a V permit. Keep in mind this would be like taking a Blue license that could go anywhere and switching it for a Yellow license that is restricted to certain areas.
  - c) Plus the Disabled Veterans that have a Citywide have it before a V permit ever existed.
- 2) Now if yes I'm sure it should be in the Disabled Veterans name.
- 3) But if it doesn't require for the named veteran as Permittee to be present. Are there any stipulations for the disabled veteran that is present? Workers Compensation.
- 4) Disabled Veterans are allowed to work restricted streets. In the event that a disabled veteran wants to work a restricted street but as a food vendor. Even though a food vendor is not allowed on that restricted street then the disabled veteran should be able to. Not just merchandise my question are cops in the midtown core going to be educated to these facts.
  - a) Example the same cops in the park have said otherwise.
- 5) If two Disabled Veterans reach a restricted street in the midtown core one with merchandise and one with food. And all of the licenses and permits belonging to the individuals are present. Are both going to be allowed to stay, even though currently there is no priority system in food? Or is one going to have to leave. And what will be the guideline for enforcement.

Note these are important questions clarification will create less quality of life issues for the Disabled Veteran, NYPD and NYC. Thank you for this time to speak before you.



Brooklyn Small Business Development Center  
New York City College of Technology



05/06/2015

**'Oversight - Evaluating the Effectiveness of MOVA's Role Serving New York City's Veterans.'**

My name is Robert Piechota. I am the Director of the Brooklyn Small Business Development Center, (SBDC). New York City has eight SBDCs dedicated to the small business owners of New York City. Each SBDC is prepared to advise and support the entire spectrum of small business owners (from "start-ups" to mature businesses seeking "exit strategies"). The Veterans and military family members within the NY City area are a very important segment of our client base. The NY City based SBDCs see approximately four hundred clients from this client segment. I offer this testimony not only as the Director of the Brooklyn Small Business Development Center, but as the lead in Veteran entrepreneur issues for NY City SBDCs, and as a veteran myself.

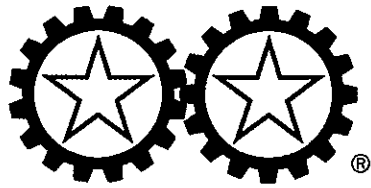
Whatever direction MOVA takes under its new leadership, it is my hope that this office serves to upgrade all services afforded to veterans and military family members by cultivating a culture of cooperation and mutual support including all organizations internal and external to the NY City governmental agencies. The relationship that the Brooklyn SBDC has with the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs, (MOVA) historically has been very sound. MOVA's cluster of services and interests is deep and wide. Veteran entrepreneurship technical assistance is but a fraction of the constellation of services veterans and military family members may require. My input here today is based solely upon what MOVA has done in support of the "vetpreneur" as I have observed. I hope that the new Commissioner will want to utilize *all* resources in assisting the many needs of our veteran community. Commissioner Sutton apparently has taken a deliberate approach to the challenges in front of her, before making abrupt "quick fixes". While Ninety Day Assessment periods and "Road Maps" are necessary, I do hope that the new MOVA leadership infrastructure recognizes that there are many other resources outside of NY City governmental agencies that can assist in real entrepreneurial teaching, coaching and mentoring when appropriate. "One Stop Shops" sometimes are not the best, or only solution, for what an aspiring veteran entrepreneur needs. Collectively between NY City resources and other proven resource partners, MOVA's staff will someday be able to triage the right veteran to the right agency for the right outcome. This can be done only with the knowledge all the subject matter experts in our space beyond just fellow NYC agencies.

On staff currently at MOVA; Ms. Ines Adan, has been a valued ally with the SBDC program over the years. Ms. Latisha Russaw is another valuable partner within the MOVA organization in working with veteran entrepreneurs. If incoming personnel to the MOVA team are anything like these two, the Veteran community is truly fortunate.

The Brooklyn SBDC has taken the lead with many Veteran entrepreneur issues and practices such as last year's "Operation Transition Freedom", ("OTF") conducted at Fort Hamilton in October of 2014, Over 200 veterans and military family members with forty employers in attendance). "OTF", with the help of our partner, the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce, was the planned pre-cursor to a new wave of veteran resource networking events taking NY City by storm. As MOVA grows in scope and competency, it is my hope that the Commissioner's new administration recognizes resource partners that have demonstrated subject matter excellence supporting the self-employed veteran and military family member in NY City. I know I speak for my fellow SBDC Directors around the NY City area and beyond, that we are ready to assist MOVA as it attempts to implement services to our City's Veterans. SBDCs offer customized solutions through advisement, education, research and advocacy for our veteran entrepreneurs and innovators. In SBS's own controversial recently released study regarding Service Disabled Veteran Owned Business Set-asides, even SBS embraced the need to "leverage" the City's SBDCs for the City's "Vetpreneurs".



Robert J. Piechota  
Director- Brooklyn Small Business Development Center  
NY City College of Technology



AMERICA WORKS  
of New York, Inc.

Testimony of Craig Caruana, Director of Veterans Affairs and Matthew Silverstein, Director of  
Public Affairs

**Committee Hearing on the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs**

1:00 pm, Monday, May 5th, 2015

My colleagues and I would like to thank Councilman Ulrich as well as the rest of the committee's members for this hearing on an issue of importance to all of us – servicing the Veterans of New York City.

Mr. Chairman, This is our 4th time testifying to you and your committee on how to serve our Veterans. It disappoints us that not much has changed regarding The Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs.

For the past thirty-one years, America Works has been lifting people out of poverty by providing employment readiness and job placement services. America Works has served New York City's Veterans through the Department of Labor's Homeless Veterans Reintegration program, HRA's Back to Work Program and the Social Security Administration's Ticket to Work Program.

America Works has had a positive relationship with MOVA. In the past we received referrals for our Homeless Veterans program and MOVA was able to assist with providing interview attire for our Veterans going on job interviews. At one point we even had an office in MOVA, however, there were so few Veterans coming to MOVA for assistance it was no longer beneficial to operate out of their spaces. MOVA's role seems to have diminished over the years. What started as a strong collaboration between MOVA and job service providers became limited to the Veterans Clothing Boutique. MOVA would provide interview clothing to Veterans in need. Unfortunately, MOVA discontinued that service this year. America Works welcomes a more energetic MOVA in the Veterans community. America Works saw the appointment of General Sutton and the renewed interests of Veterans issues at the Council level as steps in the right direction.

## **Recommendations:**

- America Works continues to support the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs contracting job placements services to organizations like America Works. America Works has found over 700 jobs for homeless Veterans in New York City since 2009 at an average salary of about \$12.00 an hour. Over the past 30 years, America Works has assisted an estimated 12,000 Veterans find employment and over 500,000 people in total. Contracts for placement services would have metrics and goals to ensure funding was being used effectively to reduce unemployment.
- One contract which can be renewed is through New York's food stamp program. Existing HRA contracts set aside money for New Yorkers on Food Stamps. In July of this past year HRA removed the requirement for food stamp recipients to search for work. HRA accepted the Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents waiver, thereby removing work requirements for people on food stamps. In addition, HRA went one step beyond the waiver and said individuals on food stamps who want to work are not able to utilize the services of America Works or other vendors who have B2W contracts with the city. According to research from the Food Bank for NYC, 30 percent of New York City's veterans rely on emergency food each year. Allowing Veterans who are on food stamps to use America Works for employment services will have an immediate impact on the City's unemployed Veterans.
- One area that often does not get the attention it deserves is the number of ex-offenders who served in the military. According to media reports, in 2013, a total of 1,410 defendants in Brooklyn alone checked "have you ever served in the military" on their arrest intake form. A common story we hear at America Works is "I just got out of prison, hopped on a bus and came to New York." Under the previous Mayoral administration, America Works had a partnership with HRA. Inmates coming out of Riker's Island were sent to America Works for employment services. In a 2012 article published in the Journal of Consulting and Criminal Psychology, a survey found that 9% of respondents reported arrests since returning home from military service. Most arrests were associated with nonviolent criminal behavior. America Works recently partnered with the Manhattan Institute to conduct a study of recidivism and job placement. The study's key finding was that training designed to quickly place former inmates in jobs significantly decreases the likelihood that ex-offenders with nonviolent histories will be rearrested. Only 31.1 percent of nonviolent ex-offenders who received enhanced training were arrested during the 18 to 36 months in which they were tracked, compared with 50 percent of similar participants who received standard training.

For those with a felony conviction, finding employment can be a bridge too far. We highlight the issue of Veterans and felony charges as just one of the many issues facing the Veterans who actually need assistance. When we talk about assisting Veterans we should always focus on the ones that actually need our help: Veterans who did not successfully adjust to civilian life, Veterans who are unemployed, underemployed or homeless.

Whether we're discussing Veterans homelessness, how MOVA can be reformed, or the treatment of Veterans in the court system, these are all issues we've discussed before and certainly aren't new to the City's political leadership. It would be a shame if we're here in a few months' time, discussing all the same issues again. What the city needs is action.

Thank you for your time and we'll yield the remainder of our time to questions.

**STATEMENT OF JOSEPH A. BELLO  
NYC VETERANS ADVOCATE  
(*Founder, NY MetroVets*)**

**BEFORE**

**THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL VETERANS COMMITTEE**

**TOPIC: *Oversight - Evaluating the Effectiveness of MOVA's Role Serving New  
York City's Veterans***

**CITY HALL**

**COMMITTEE ROOM**

**NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

**May 6th, 2015**

Chairman Ulrich, CM Vallone, committee members. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to appear today to talk about the effectiveness of the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs (MOVA) in serving New York City's veterans.

As you know, the **City Charter** mandates that MOVA advise the Mayor on issues and undertakes initiatives impacting the veterans and military community. This includes enhancing the coordination of health and human service delivery programs; as well as developing and implementing policies and programs for veterans and their families citywide.

As the office receives half its funding from **New York State**, it's also mandated to inform members of the armed forces, veterans and their family members about education, retraining, medical, and other services; as well as any federal, state, and local laws and regulations that pertain to them.

The office also has additional responsibilities of working with the City's Veterans Advisory Board, working closely with the US Department of Veterans Affairs, the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs, and other City agencies and veterans' organizations, as well as coordinating and/or assisting in special events such as Fleet Week, Army Week, the Veterans Day Parade and other ceremonial functions.

So even in listening to the Commissioner talk about (what she's been doing/the Mayor's strategic plan), we see that it doesn't (necessarily) line up with what the office is required to do. The main reason the office has had difficulty in carrying out these requirements is something that advocates have been talking about for years – a MOVA office with a limited staff and budget.

However, if we're going to talk about "evaluating" the effectiveness of the office, (in my opinion) it is difficult to assess because of the lack of personnel, funding, transparency and communication.

Commissioner Sutton came into the job in September of last year and immediately went on a 90-day review of the office and community. Subsequently thou, following her 90-day review, there has been little communication to the community as to what the office is or will be doing, or what her thoughts are on how to make the office more proactive.

Therefore, the question being asked (in the community) in terms of evaluating the effectiveness of the office is: **"What is Commissioner Sutton doing differently to enhance/grow MOVA that former Commissioner Holliday wasn't?"** At this moment, there appears to be no definitive answer.

Therefore, we have to look elsewhere to evaluate MOVA.

A few weeks ago, in an interview with *Capital New York* after the Mayor's Veteran Advisory Board selections, Commissioner Sutton "applauded" advocates' energy and enthusiasm while stating: ***"The advocates are rightly impatient, I'm impatient, and we are all in this together."*** But let's be clear, Commissioner Sutton works for the administration.



As Commissioner, Ms. Sutton is responsible for the direct communication between the administration and the city's veterans' community. Part of her responsibility is to talk to and educate the administration so that they better understand that for veterans, like all communities, "all politics are local" and services, help & compassion begins at home.

As we well know, Mayor de Blasio has often talked about his father serving in the U.S. Army during World War II, losing a leg in Okinawa and the struggles he faced when he returned home. I've said before that this gives the Mayor a unique insight into the difficulties veterans face on an everyday basis and Commissioner Sutton has stated that she would not have taken the job if she wasn't sure how much he is committed to veterans.

Therefore, it's both frustrating and (once again) difficult to evaluate the office when the Commissioner states in one publication that like us she is impatient and then says in another that she came into the job "**knowing that this Mayor and this administration would commit whatever support, whatever tools, whatever resources are needed**" and yet when asked last week by a reporter to comment on the need for a City Veterans Department had no comment.

These statements, in my opinion, reveal the major issue in evaluating the effectiveness of MOVA – a disconnect, a lack of will, a lack of recognition or even a disagreement in policy between City Hall and the Commissioner and/or the Commissioner and the Community (or both).

With over a decade of war, it is no longer enough to just hold the title of Commissioner of Veterans Affairs in one of the greatest cities in the world and have no real resources to back it up. Ms. Sutton would be Commissioner in name only and that not only makes her job harder but tarnishes her credibility (which is already starting to take a hit) with the community while making it much more difficult in restoring and having veterans keep trust in MOVA.

Therefore, to help properly evaluate the effectiveness of MOVA, I would urge this committee to vote out and I ask every council member to support Intro. 314; which would establish a City Department of Veterans Affairs. It is time to create a free-standing direct services agency that can not only have preliminary and executive budget hearings on veteran issues, but can funnel contracts awarded to veteran service providers in the boroughs directly instead of through other city agencies that are unfamiliar with these groups.

In conclusion, with Memorial Day and Fleet Week coming up, the administration has an excellent opportunity to address in a serious way the current problems and needs of this city's veterans. During his 2013 campaign, Mayor de Blasio stated: "**Veterans issues are personal to me – and they will be an important part of my administration.**" Even Commissioner Sutton stated in September of last year that "**Introduction 314 deserves all due consideration as we dedicate ourselves to the historic journey that lies ahead.**" It's time for the administration to get on the same page, join (with this Committee) the Council and move forward. With the United States still at war, with veterans still returning home, and with many veterans coming to New York City for better economic opportunities, this office can do better. Thank you.

**P.O. Box 100490  
Staten Island, New York 10310  
347-466-0355  
zlee18@peoplepc.com**

**STATEMENT OF LEE S. COVINO  
VETERANS AFFAIRS ADVOCATE**

**BEFORE**

**NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL  
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS**

**COMMITTEE ROOM  
CITY HALL  
NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

**May 6, 2015**

Honorable Chairman, distinguished members of the Committee on Veterans, I appreciate this opportunity to comment upon the effectiveness of the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs (MOVA). In the absence of the Commissioner's long-awaited 90 day review of the office, I am unable to comment upon future plans of the office, so I will limit my comments to observations of the current situation.

My name is Lee Covino, past Vice-Chairman of the City's Veterans Advisory Board, where I served from 2002 until last month. I also previously served as the Staten Island Borough President's Veterans Affairs Advisor from 1990 until I retired in March of 2014. Currently, I am serving as Treasurer for the United Staten Island Veterans Organization, Inc. (USIVO), the primary sponsors of our annual Memorial Day Parade on Staten Island. I belong to several veterans organizations, most of which are represented under the umbrella of USIVO.

To understand where MOVA is today, I think it's important to know the general history of the governmental infrastructure which has evolved over the years.

Back in 1987, the City Charter established the Veterans Advisory Board. For whatever reasons, appointments were not made by the Mayor and the Speaker until 2002, a full 15 years later!

Also in 1987, there was no Committee on Veterans, only a subcommittee on Veterans chaired by Victor Robles. A Council Committee on Veterans Affairs was established in the 1990's, but few public hearings were held and it seemed just a plum for many years. Beginning with Chairman Hiram Monseratte – a Desert Storm veteran – the committee has become much more active and attentive to the issues affecting our veterans.

Meanwhile, MOVA was headed by a director and sparsely staffed with few external resources. Very few direct services were offered to veterans as the director tried his best to represent the office at events in the five Boroughs, as well as address major problems like avoiding Potter's Field burials for indigent veterans.

In 2008, Mayor Bloomberg elevated the office to a Commissioner level, with little or no enhancement of budget or resources. Direct services offered to veterans by MOVA continued to be an elusive objective for the office as the years passed.

In 2014 under Commissioner Terry Holliday, a grant to train and certify three veterans claims officers was obtained. This represented the first time that a direct-service component for MOVA was established. With state and local veterans service organizations at historic low staffing levels within the five Boroughs, it seemed like an important service to maintain as new discharges from the military returned to the City.

But it was not to be. The Mayor failed to include funding for the three counselors in his preliminary budget, and the Council failed to pick up the budget item in the adopted budget. End result: the three counselors were lost.

(2)

One of the biggest misconceptions promoted by the media is that the City funds MOVA to the tune of \$500,000 annually. But truth be known, **the Fiscal Year 15 City portion of MOVA's budget was a paltry \$262,332, according to the Gotham Gazette (1)**. The balance, or \$201,000 was in fact funded by the State, for a total annual budget of \$463,332. Therefore, the City only funded 57% of MOVA's FY 15 annual budget.

In closing, there is no reason why the City can't do more for its veterans, including the thousands that are expected to return to the five Boroughs in the coming years. There is no reason why the Mayor can't lobby for a greater State match, while increasing MOVA's budget proportionally to include restoration of the three benefits counselors.

That's why I support Intro. 314, which would establish a City Department of Veterans' Affairs. Hopefully, this agency would have minimum staffing requirements which would include the claims officer function, to be made available to all five Boroughs. It's time to create a free-standing direct-service agency with baseline funding that is not subject to the discretionary funding of the Mayor.

Thank you.

Reference:

- (1) Kristen Meriwether, "With City Budget Adoption Pending, Veterans Still Await Word On Funding," June 24, 2014

# ***The Veterans Mental Health Action Committee***

of the **Veterans Mental Health Coalition of NYC**

## **Oversight: The Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs – Examining the Role of MOVA in Serving New York City's Veterans**

Honorable Eric Ulrich, Chair  
The Committee on Veterans

Testimony by Dr. Melissa Earle

May 6, 2015

***The Veterans Mental Health Action Committee***

**The Veterans Mental Health Coalition of NYC**

50 Broadway, 19<sup>th</sup> Floor, New York, NY 10004

(212) 614-5753 | [sthompson@mhaofnyc.org](mailto:sthompson@mhaofnyc.org)



[www.facebook.com/vmhcnyc](http://www.facebook.com/vmhcnyc) | [www.mha-nyc.org/vmhc](http://www.mha-nyc.org/vmhc)

*A project of the Mental Health Association of NYC and NAMI-NYC Metro*

The Veterans Mental Health Action Committee of New York City

Good afternoon Chair Ulrich and members of the Committee, thank you for having us testify at this important hearing on the role of the Mayor's Office of Veterans Affairs (MOVA) in serving New York City's Veterans. My name is Dr. Melissa Earle, and I serve as Chair of the NYC Veteran Mental Health Coalition's Women's Veterans Committee.

The Coalition, which has over 1,000 diverse members was co-founded by the Mental Health Association of New York City (MHA-NYC) and NAMI-NYC Metro and promotes the mental health and well-being of New York City service members, veterans, and their families through education, information, collaboration, and promotion of a comprehensive array of services. VMHC has established a subcommittee on promoting needed policy reforms called the Veterans' Mental Health Action Committee. I am testifying on behalf of that committee today.

We count among New York City residents over 230,000 military veterans. And as more servicemembers transition back to civilian life, this number will increase by the thousands and will require additional resources in both dollars and staffing to fill the need. A range of coordinated services, from all levels of government, the private sector, and local civilian based providers is required for veterans and their families to successfully transition and thrive in their communities.

In New York City, MOVA is the lead government body addressing veterans needs including advising the Mayor on issues impacting veterans and coordinating with other veteran serving organizations and key stakeholders to support the city's veteran community. The VMHC has a good and collaborative relationship with this current MOVA Commissioner Loree Sutton. She has made herself available to both brief our entire Coalition early in her time in office and also speak during one of our educational lectures, funded by City Council, on the topic of "Women Who Serve". While MOVA has a critical leadership role, and has grown under the

current Commissioner, it continues to lack the funding, resources, and staffing to fully operationalize its mission.

In order for NYC to fully support and commit to addressing the needs of all veterans, it must do more. That is why the Veterans Mental Health Action Committee lends its support for recent city legislation being proposed by Council Member Ulrich that calls for MOVA to be elevated to the level of NYC Department of Veteran Affairs. With a Department dedicated to serving veterans, greater resources and funding can be secured to better overcome the complex challenges of veterans of all generations. Ideally, the Department would serve as a single stop model that would enable veterans to obtain the necessary information, resources, updates, and referrals to all of the services and benefits to which they are entitled. This would include but not be limited to disability compensation, discharge upgrades, educational and employment benefits, membership in veterans organizations, acquiring medals and records, behavioral health supports, cemetery and burial benefits, pensions, linkage of city services to NYC Serves, VA and State of NY mortgage information, vocational rehabilitation and more. In addition to funding, this will require many dedicated and certified staff that is able to perform these functions.

Furthermore, NYC veteran government leadership, whether MOVA or a Department, would do well to raise the profile of mental health issues among NYC's military veterans. This includes increasing awareness about challenges, needs, as well as strengths to the general public, fellow government partners, and the private sector so that necessary resources and supports can be mounted, coordinated, and sustained.

We thank you for the opportunity to speak today and for your consideration of how to maximize and elevate this important office. Please reach out to us if you have any questions.

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 05/06/15

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Boots Whitlock

Address: 790 11<sup>th</sup> Ave Apt 8D

I represent: Vet business owners

Address: Same

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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in favor  in opposition

Date: 05/06/2015

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Ryan S. Graham

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: VFW

Address: QUEENS, NY

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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in favor  in opposition

Date: 5/6/2014

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Scott Davidson

Address: 745 51<sup>st</sup> Ave Suite 505 NY NY

I represent: 360° Veterans / Vets GSA

Address: Same as above

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



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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

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in favor  in opposition

Date: 05/06/15

Name: FRANK LaMarsh (PLEASE PRINT)

Address: 324 CORTELYOU AVE S.F

I represent: AMERICAN LEGION

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 6 MAY 2015

Name: BRETT MORASH (PLEASE PRINT)

Address: 39 BROADWAY SUITE 1140

I represent: SERVICES FOR THE UNDESERVED

Address: 305 7<sup>th</sup> AVE NYC

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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in favor  in opposition

Date: 5-6-2015

Name: ANTHONY J. MARTINO (PLEASE PRINT)

Address: 64-19 METROPOLITAN AVE MIDDLE

I represent: Hess-Miller Funeral Home VILLAGE NY 11379

Address: SAME

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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in favor  in opposition

Date: 05/06/2015

Name: Rob Piechota (PLEASE PRINT)

Address: 25 Chapel St - Brooklyn

I represent: Small Business Development Center

Address: 25 Chapel

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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in favor  in opposition

Date: 05/06/15

Name: JIM MARKSON (PLEASE PRINT)

Address: 2345 OCEAN AVE APT. 6A BKLYN 11229

I represent: VVA CHAPTER 72, VFW 107

Address: BKLYN NY

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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in favor  in opposition

Date: 6 May 2015

Name: Kristen Rouse (PLEASE PRINT)

Address: 182 Franklin St, Apt 2E Brooklyn 11222

I represent: NYC Veterans Alliance

Address: Brooklyn, NY

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

[ ]

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_  
 in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: Dwayne GATHERS - COORDINATOR (PLEASE PRINT)

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: BRONX VETERAN TREATMENT COURT-MENTORS

Address: 130 WILLINGS BRIDGE RD

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

[ ]

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_  
 in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: Matthew SILVERSTEIN (PLEASE PRINT)

Address: 228 E 45 ST NY, NY 10017

I represent: AMERICA WORKS OF NEW YORK

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

[ ]

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_  
 in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: Craig CAUENOA (PLEASE PRINT)

Address: 228 E 45 ST, NY, NY

I represent: AMERICA WORKS

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 5/6/19

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Richard Rivera

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

I represent: Disabled Veteran Vendors

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 5/6/15

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Melissa Earle

Address: 200 E 66<sup>th</sup> Street Apt A1502

I represent: MHA NYC Veterans Mental Health Coalition

Address: 50 Broadway, NY NY 10004

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 5-6-2015

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: PAUL J SCHOTTENHAMEL

Address: 78-56 83 ST, GLENDALE, NY 11385

I represent: ALLIED VETERAN COMMITTEE OF RACEWORLD & GLENDALE

Address: J.B. GAULTY POST 562

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

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THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

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in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: DAN MCSWEENEY

Address: UNITED WAR VETERANS

I represent: COUNCIL

Address: 346 BWAY

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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in favor  in opposition

Date: 05/06/15

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: JOE Bello

Address: NY METRO VETS

I represent: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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in favor  in opposition

Date: 5-6-15

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Coco Culhane

Address: 40 Rector

I represent: Veteran Advocacy Project-UTC

Address: 40 Rector NY NY 10006

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**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

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in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Jason Hansman

Address: 292 Madison Ave 10<sup>th</sup> Flr

I represent: Iraq and Afghanistan Vets of America

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: May 6, 2015

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Conaklo Pereira

Address: 1 Centre St New York, NY 10001

I represent: NYC Public Advocate, Hon. Letitia James

Address: 1 Centre St New York, NY 10001

**THE COUNCIL  
THE CITY OF NEW YORK**

Appearance Card

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. \_\_\_\_\_ Res. No. \_\_\_\_\_

in favor  in opposition

Date: 5/6/2015

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: Commissioner heere Sutton

Address: 346 Broadway, NYC

I represent: MOVIA

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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

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in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)  
Name: Lee Covino  
Address: 18 CURTIS PLACE STATEN ISLAND  
I represent: VETS ADVOCATE  
Address: SAME

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

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in favor  in opposition

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

(PLEASE PRINT)  
Name: Jennifer Kwera  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
I represent: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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