Testimony of James Hendon

Commissioner for the New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS)

New York City Council Committee on Veterans

Topic: Veterans Advisory Board

January 22nd, 2025, 1:00 PM

Introduction

Good morning, Chair Holden, committee members, and advocates. My name is James Hendon. I

serve as Commissioner of the New York City Department of Veterans' Services (DVS). Thank

you for inviting us to participate in today's hearing about the New York City Veterans' Advisory

Board, also known as the VAB. I am joined today by Jason Loughran, our agency's Senior

Advisor for Intergovernmental Affairs.

Background

By way of background: according to Chapter 75 of the New York City Charter, the New York

City Veterans Advisory Board consists of thirteen members – seven of whom are appointed by

the Mayor, six by the City Council Speaker. Two of those thirteen members are to be immediate

family members, survivors, or caregivers of a Veteran. The remaining eleven members are to be

Veterans. The VAB has five duties. They are:

1- Advise the DVS Commissioner;

2- Hold at least one public meeting in each borough each year;

3- Keep a record of its deliberations;

4- Determine its own rules of procedure; and

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5- Submit an annual report of its activities to the Mayor and City Council. The report should include policy and legislative recommendations for DVS and the Council.

For decades, the Veterans Advisory Board has listened to the needs of New York City's Veteran and Military-affiliated community. The VAB has translated those needs into sound advice on matters including, but not limited to: the identification of Veteran liaisons in each agency, the expansion of the Veterans Advisory Board to include Veteran family members and caregivers, DVS' provision of contracting support to Veteran nonprofits that do business with the City of New York, and the creation of DVS.

Broader Challenges

That being said, the VAB's work – all of our work – is nested within broader challenges that must be tackled if we are to make sure that New York City's Veteran community continues to thrive. Chief among those needs is the need for self-identification among Veterans. According to the VA's FY 23 Geographic Distribution of VA Expenditures Report, the Veteran self-identification rate nationwide is 34.3%. That proportion dips to 29.8% in New York State, then to 24.1% in New York City. This compounds with another issue: the federal government does not aggressively market VA services. Case and point: the VA has a \$369.3 billion FY 25 budget. The VA's budget is the largest in the federal government, second only to the budget for the Department of Defense. However, many families are not aware of all offerings that are available to them. That and there is no dedicated line for marketing and / or advertising in the VA's publicly available budget documents. Add to that: America has a declining Veteran population overall. Older, draft era Veterans are passing away. Our military was significantly larger during the conscript era — which ended in 1973 — compared to the all-volunteer era that we

operate in today. The annual rate of the Veteran population's decline is 1.82 percent nationally, 3.19 percent in New York State, and 4.83 percent in New York City based on VA and Census data. Compound the lack of self-identification, limited marketing, and population decline issues and you have a group of extremely complex, interwoven problems.

The solution is to roll up our sleeves as a community, unite, and do the hard work needed to triage what is in front of us.

For one thing, there must be a robust, whole-of-government approach towards identifying and serving US Military Service Members – past and present – and their loved ones. Secondly, there must exist strong public-private partnerships throughout the innovation ecosystem so that all stakeholders can join in this struggle. I am speaking of government, finance, academia, industry, the entrepreneurial sector, and the nonprofit space. Thirdly – and most importantly – undergirding this all must be a strong, influential Veteran community. This includes individuals, families, networks, and organizations. You name it.

The tip of the spear for New York City's influential Veteran community is its Veterans Advisory Board.

To that point, the VAB has played a critical role in providing the situational awareness that DVS – and our leaders in government (elected and appointed officials) – need when working to solve challenging community problems. By providing thoughtful, community-driven recommendations in its annual report, the Veterans Advisory Board establishes an enduring line of communication between New York City's Veterans and their local government. The VAB's public meetings serve as a forum for stakeholders to promote activities and opportunities to Veterans and their loved ones. VAB meetings are also a place where, in real time, DVS accepts

feedback and input from the public, listening to our community's advice. We course correct on the spot when necessary.

VAB-Informed Actions

Highlights of DVS actions that were directly influenced by the Veterans Advisory Board are:

- Veteran Business Leadership Association (VBLA): DVS launched this effort to empower Veteran entrepreneurs by providing one-on-one assistance with city and state certifications, contracting opportunities, and networking. This program exemplifies how enhanced contracting capabilities can directly benefit New York City Veterans. We have partnered with organizations such as the NYC Department of Small Business Services, the LaGuardia Community College APEX Accelerator, Bunker Labs, and JP Morgan Chase. These organizations offer a variety of services geared towards Veteran (and Veteran spouse) business owners that facilitate starting, operating, and growing a Veteran-owned business within New York City. Links and further information on all VBLA programs can be found at nyc.gov/vetbusiness.
- Housing and Support Services: Since the establishment of our Housing and Support Services team in 2015, DVS has successfully housed 1,417 homeless Veterans. This demonstrates our commitment to addressing critical housing issues identified by the VAB. More information can be found online at nyc.gov/vethousing.
- Mission: VetCheck: This outreach program, which was inspired by the VAB, connects

 Veterans to essential services. Mission: VetCheck addresses gaps in communication and support for our most vulnerable Veteran populations. The program is effectively us, volunteers, and our partners at New York Cares ensuring that someone calls each Veteran

in New York City and conveys to them (at some point) that "we see you, we appreciate you, and we love you. Is there anything that you need?" In the most recent Holiday Session for Mission: VetCheck (held on December 23rd, 2024), the program yielded (in one day) 1,563 check-in calls proving to be the most successful single Mission: VetCheck session held since the pandemic. Details can be found at nyc.gov/vetcheck.

- Supporting Veteran Vendors: New York City has a tradition of supporting Veterans interested in operating as street vendors. The City and State's support dates back to laws established to benefit 19th century Veterans hungry for entrepreneurial opportunities in the wake of the Civil War. Veterans Committee Chairmen Robert Holden introduced Intro 686 of 2024. Intro 686 looks to amend the membership of the Street Vendor Advisory Board to include the Commissioner of DVS or their designee, to increase the number of Speaker appointed members of the Street Vendor Advisory Board to seven – so as to include a Veteran community member. It would also require the Department of Veterans' Services to post on its website information related to resources and support for Veteran vendors. Currently, information that we place online for Veteran Street Vendors can be found at nyc.gov/vetvendors. This bill has been continually suggested and advocated for by the Veterans Advisory Board. Along with them, we thank the Chair, the Veterans committee, and the entirety of the City Council for their support with this pending matter.

Strengthening Collaboration with the Veterans' Advisory Board

The partnership between DVS and the Veterans' Advisory Board is rooted in a shared mission: to enhance the quality of life for New York City's Veterans and their families. Over the years, this

collaboration has yielded tangible results, ensuring that the voices of our Veteran community are heard and that their needs are addressed through innovative programs and policies.

Advancements on Key Recommendations

1. Contracting Power for Small-Dollar Contracts

One of the pivotal recommendations from the VAB has been to enhance DVS's contracting capacity, particularly concerning small-dollar discretionary awards. In February 2023, DVS was granted the authority to approve discretionary contracts of up to \$20,000 for initiatives benefiting Veterans. This milestone has enabled DVS to:

- Support Veteran-owned businesses through direct partnerships;
- Facilitate funding for grassroots Veteran service organizations that provide essential community-based programs; and
- Streamline the procurement process in order to quickly address pressing needs within the Veteran community.

This enhanced contracting power aligns with our objective to foster economic empowerment among Veterans. It underscores New York City's commitment to its Veteran population.

2. Aligning the VAB with New York City's Community Veterans Engagement Board (CVEB)

The VAB has emphasized the importance of strengthening its ties with federal programs in order to increase transparency and optimize effectiveness. In response, DVS facilitated the VAB's introduction to the U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs Community Veterans' Engagement

Board program. In 2025, the VAB will double as the Community Veterans Engagement Board, or CVEB, for New York City. The Veterans Advisory Board doubling as the CVEB means that:

- Future VAB meetings will be attended by VA leaders in addition to representatives from the Department of Veterans' Services;
- Attendance at VAB meetings will spike relative to prior history because the meetings will be held on VA sites.
- We will have more lead time to promote VAB meetings than ever before. This is because, working with the VA, the VAB will identify meeting locations well in advance.

Looking Ahead and Recommendations

As we reflect on the progress made, it is clear that the partnership between DVS and the VAB is stronger than ever. Moving forward, we remain committed to:

- Expanding our contracting authority to maximize support for Veteran-focused initiatives;
- Strengthening the connection between the VAB and CVEB in order to ensure comprehensive community engagement and service delivery; and
- Continuously evaluating and improving programs to meet the evolving needs of our Veteran population.

In light of this, we would like to voice some recommendations that we believe would increase the effectiveness of the VAB further.

- Right now, members of the VAB serve three-year terms. Start and end dates for the members have no rhyme and reason; they are not uniformly staggered. In a perfect world, each year, one-third of the VAB's members would transition off of the board while one-third transitioned on (or, at the discretion of the Mayor and City Council Speaker, existing members would be re-appointed on). Given 13 members, this equates to four members rolling on (and off) during Year 1, four members during Year 2, and five

- members during Year 3. The start and end dates for members would match with the start and end dates of the fiscal year (New York City's fiscal year begins on July 1st). Streamlining this process would ease the administrative burden and further increase the efficacy of the VAB.
- Another problem that the VAB faces is a lack of timely appointments to vacant seats and a lack of timely re-appointments, when needed, for members retained in current seats. In my time as DVS Commissioner and my time as a member of the Veterans Advisory Board for two years before that (dating back to 2018) I have never seen the board current on all of its appointments. I have also never seen all seats on the board actively filled. Even today, as of this testimony, the family member / caregiver seat appointed by the Council Speaker has not yet been filled. It has been vacant for years. Consistently filling vacant seats would allow the VAB to maximize its diversity of viewpoints, leadership, and opinions.
- Finally, we support current efforts that would have the New York City Veterans Advisory Board double as the VA's New York City Community Veteran Engagement Board. This takes the synergy and effectiveness of the VAB and puts it on steroids. Another reason why a VAB / CVEB merger is important: it is highly likely that, in the spring of 2026, the next iteration of the VA's Asset Infrastructure Review Commission (the AIR Commission) will recommend to the US Senate that the VA hospitals located in Manhattan, Brooklyn and a major VA Clinic in Staten Island be closed. This would echo recommendations made by the AIR Commission in its 2022 report. Those recommendations were ignored due to the political composition of the US Senate at the time. The Senate Majority Leader was a New Yorker. That is no longer the case. If and when the next AIR Commission report says "these VA medical facilities need to be shut down because not enough Veterans are using them," we need an active CVEB to help counter that narrative and to advocate internally in our community's defense. The potential hospital closure fight brings things full circle when I began by saying that the #1 problem our community faces is that we collectively do not self-identify, the #2 problem is that the VA does not market its services, and the #3 problem is that the Veteran population is declining. Even given future projections of New York's Veteran community (assuming no increase in the military's size and no wars), there will be more

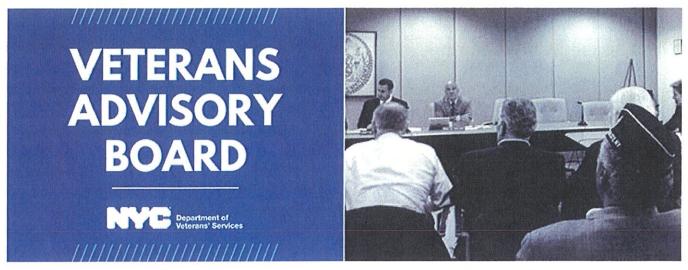
than enough Veterans in 2045 to fill our VA clinics and hospitals almost two times over. The challenge is taking steps to inspire our brothers and sisters to self-identify. Along with DVS and elected leaders (such as yourselves), the CVEB will be near the center of gravity for this fight.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to express my gratitude to the New York City Council, the Veterans' Advisory Board, and the entire New York City Veteran community for their unwavering support. Together, we have made significant progress. However, our work is far from complete. By continuing to collaborate and innovate, we can ensure that New York City remains a national leader in Veterans' services. We are happy to answer any questions the Committee may have. Information on the topics spoken about today – and all things involving the Department of Veterans' Services – can be found at nyc.gov/vets), our agency can be reached via telephone at 212-416-5250, email at connect@Veterans.nyc.gov/vets), and social media using the hashtag @nycveterans. Details about the Veterans Advisory Board can be found at nyc.gov/vetboard.

Separately, all Veteran-serving nonprofits that are interested in applying for City Council discretionary funding are encouraged to visit nyc.gov/vetcouncilfunding. The deadline to apply for City Council discretionary funding is Wednesday, February 19th. Veterans interested in applying to join their local community board are encouraged to visit nyc.gov/vetcommunityboard. For all boroughs except for Richmond County, applications to join one's local community board are due from mid-February through early March. The application to apply to join one's community board in Staten Island is rolling.

Thank you.



The NYC Veterans Advisory Board (VAB) functions through the contributions of 13 veterans who have been appointed to three-year terms by either the Mayor or the Speaker of the New York City Council. The members represent the five Boroughs of New York City.

The VAB's main activities include:

- Advise the New York City Department of Veterans' Services on all matters concerning veterans
- Meet at least quarterly
- Keep records of all deliberations
- Determine its own rules of procedure
- Submit annual reports for the Mayor and the Speaker of the New York City Council
- One of the VAB's signature initiatives was its successful advocacy resulting in the "2008 Veteran Liaison Requirement." This initiative requires all New York City agencies to identify a senior member responsible for coordination with DVS. Having these coordinators helps facilitate accurate information-sharing and timely problem-solving on behalf of New York City Veterans and employees.

Through regular meetings, this diverse group of New York City veterans ensures the lines of communication are maintained and cultivates an active community.

2025 Veteran Advisory Board Public Sessions

Wednesday, February 26th (Manhattan)

Wednesday, April 30th (Queens)

Wednesday, June 11th (Staten Island)

Wednesday, August 27th (Bronx)

Wednesday, October 29th (Brooklyn)

All Sessions begin at 6pm sharp and are hybrid. For those interested in attending in-person, respective locations will be shared closer to the session date. For those choosing to attend via zoom, follow the link below.

Link to Zoom Meeting

Meeting ID: 959 242 2343 Passcode: 191295 Dial in: (646) 558-8656

All Veterans, their family members and caregivers are encouraged to attend!

Chapter 75: Department of Veterans' Services

Section 3100. Department; commissioner.

There shall be a department of veterans' services, the head of which shall be the commissioner of veterans' services. The commissioner may appoint deputies within available appropriations.

(L.L. 2015/113, 12/10/2015, eff. 4/8/2016)

Section 3101. Definition.

As used in this chapter, the following term has the following meaning:

Veteran. The term "veteran" means a person who serves or has served in the active military service, including the navy, coast guard, air force, marines, army, space force, and their respective national guard or reserve components, regardless of discharge status or time served. "Veteran" also means a person who serves or has served in the United States public health service or as a commissioned member of the national oceanic and atmospheric administration.

(L.L. 2015/113, 12/10/2015, eff. 4/8/2016; Am. L.L. 2022/019, 1/9/2022, eff. 5/9/2022)

Section 3102. Powers and duties.

- a. Except as otherwise provided by law, the commissioner shall have such powers as provided by the commissioner of the state department of veterans' services and shall have the duty to inform military and naval authorities of the United States and assist members of the armed forces and veterans, who are residents of the city, and their families, in relation to: (1) matters pertaining to educational training and retraining services and facilities, (2) health, medical and rehabilitation service and facilities, (3) provisions of federal, state and local laws and regulations affording special rights and privileges to members of the armed forces and veterans and their families, (4) employment and re-employment services, and (5) other matters of similar, related or appropriate nature. The commissioner shall also assist families of members of the reserve components of the armed forces and the organized militia ordered into active duty to ensure that they are made aware of and are receiving all appropriate support available to them. The department also shall perform such other duties as may be assigned by the state commissioner of the department of veterans' services.
- b. The commissioner shall utilize, so far as possible, the services, commissions, boards, bureaus, institutions and other agencies of the state and of the political subdivisions thereof and all such officers and agencies shall cooperate with and extend such services and facilities to the department as it may require.

(L.L. 2015/113, 12/10/2015, eff. 4/8/2016; Am. 2019 N.Y. Laws Ch. 56, 4/12/2019, eff. 4/12/2019; Am. 2022 N.Y. Laws Ch. 56, 4/9/2022, eff. 4/1/2022)

Section 3103. Veterans' advisory board.

- a. There shall be a veterans' advisory board consisting of 13 members, 11 of whom shall be veterans and two of whom shall be immediate family members, spouses or domestic partners, survivors, or caregivers of veterans. Of these 13 members, seven shall be appointed by the mayor, including one immediate family member, spouse or domestic partner, survivor or caregiver of a veteran, and six shall be appointed by the speaker of the council, including one immediate family member, spouse or domestic partner, survivor or caregiver of a veteran. Of these 13 members, there shall be at least one representative from each of the five boroughs of the city of New York. The mayor and the speaker shall each consider service in conflicts involving members of the United States armed forces when making such appointments.
- b. All members shall serve for a term of three years and may be removed by the appointing official for cause. Members of the advisory board shall elect by majority vote one such member to serve as chair and one such member to serve as vice chair, each to serve in that capacity for one-year terms. In the event of a vacancy on the advisory board during the term of office of a member by reason of removal, death, resignation, or otherwise, a successor shall be chosen in the same manner as the original appointment within 120 days from the date such vacancy occurred. A member appointed to fill a vacancy shall serve for the balance of the unexpired term.
 - c. The advisory board shall:
 - 1. Advise the commissioner on all matters concerning veterans;
- 2. Hold at least one meeting open to the public in each borough on an annual basis, with notice of each public meeting provided in accordance with the public notice requirements of article 7 of the public officers law except with

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- b. All members shall serve for a term of three years and may be removed by the appointing official for cause. Members of the advisory board shall elect by majority vote one such member to serve as chair and one such member to serve as vice chair, each to serve in that capacity for one-year terms. In the event of a vacancy on the advisory board during the term of office of a member by reason of removal, death, resignation, or otherwise, a successor shall be chosen in the same manner as the original appointment within 120 days from the date such vacancy occurred. A member appointed to fill a vacancy shall serve for the balance of the unexpired term.
 - c. The advisory board shall:
 - 1. Advise the commissioner on all matters concerning veterans;
- 2. Hold at least one meeting open to the public in each borough on an annual basis, with notice of each public meeting provided in accordance with the public notice requirements of article 7 of the public officers law except with

respect to those requirements provided in section 31-105 of the administrative code, and with each public meeting recorded and broadcast in accordance with subdivision d of section 1063 of the charter;

- 3. Keep a record of its deliberations;
- 4. Determine its own rules of procedure; and
- 5. Submit an annual report of its activities to the mayor and the council on or before December 31 of each year. Such annual report should include policy and legislative recommendations for the department of veterans' services and the council.
- d. The department shall maintain on its website and regularly update a list of all members appointed to serve on the veterans' advisory board, including information about each member's term, appointing official and any additional information deemed by the department to be relevant.

(L.L. 2015/113, 12/10/2015, eff. 4/8/2016; Am. L.L. 2022/019, 1/9/2022, eff. 5/9/2022)



TESTIMONY BEFORE THE CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

Chair Holden and to the honorable members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Submitting this testimony is Makedah Salmond, Project Director of the Veterans Assistance Project at the City Bar Justice Center, which is a nonprofit, civil legal aid affiliate of the New York City Bar Association. The Veterans Assistance Project (VAP) provides veterans and their survivors living at or below the poverty line in New York City with pro bono legal assistance on a variety of issues, principally those related to disability claims before the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). VAP is dedicated to empowering veterans and their families to reach financial stability by providing legal advice, advocacy, and representation to veterans who are experiencing poverty and facing other systemic barriers related to their claims for benefits. VAP partners with over 60 law firms and corporate legal departments and has trained over 470 pro bono attorneys to provide counsel and representation to veterans and their survivors. In recent years VAP has provided legal assistance to more than 3,000 veterans in New York City and secured approximately \$10 million in retroactive benefits in addition to more than \$340,000 in ongoing monthly benefits.

Cultural Issues that Affect Veterans

Nonprofit legal services providers that serve veterans need increased funding to better meet the legal needs of veterans. Organizations that serve veterans must have familiarity with military and veteran culture to provide veterans and their families with competent legal representation.

Veterans who are members of underrepresented groups, including BIPOC and women, also bring a unique perspective and unique struggles that must be accounted for. Due to the inherent discretion involved in military justice, BIPOC service members face discipline and 'bad paper' discharge at disproportionate rates which cause them to be more likely to be denied veteran benefits, increasing their vulnerability to poverty. Veterans with "Other than Honorable" discharges make up 15% of the homeless veteran population despite being only 3% of the total veteran population. According to Connecticut Veterans Legal Center, the rate at which these discharges, which make veterans presumptively ineligible for VA benefits, are issued has skyrocketed since the 2000s, despite rates of misconduct not increasing in parallel, with the data also showing that mental health issues, sexual trauma, sexual, gender, and racial discrimination

¹ Don Christensen & Yelena Tsilker, "Racial Disparities in Military Justice," May 5, 2017.

² Jeremy R. Bedford, "Other Than Honorable Discharges: Unfair and Unjust Life Sentences of Decreased Earning Capacity," University of Pennsylvania Journal of Law & Public Affairs, 732, last visited January 6, 2025.



being common markers for veterans who receive an OTH discharge.³ Women veterans, as well as veterans who identify as LGBTQ face disproportionately higher rates of sexual assault in the military, which is a significant contributor to PTSD rates among those veterans.⁴,⁵ Since the early 2000s, approximately 13% of veterans leaving the military have received an OTH discharge.⁶

Veteran Specific Legal Expertise

Many veterans are unaware of forms of relief that are available to them. Approximately 85% of veterans who receive an OTH discharge are ineligible for VA benefits. However, it is possible for veterans to regain their eligibility. For example, in recent years changes to laws and regulations have increased opportunities for benefits ineligible veterans to become eligible through discharge upgrades. Veterans discharged under Don't Ask Don't Tell, or whose discharge is attributable to undiagnosed mental health issues such as PTSD or military sexual trauma, can pursue a discharge upgrade to attain an Honorable or General discharge and become eligible for all VA benefits. Veterans who do not qualify for a discharge upgrade can still regain VA eligibility through a 'character of discharge review' conducted by the VA. However, many veterans are not aware of these options. Lack of access to these benefits, along with the stigma associated with a 'bad paper' discharge contributes to the poverty rates of these veterans. Veterans' benefits are often more generous than other comparable federal, state, and local programs; increasing access to VA benefits reduces burdens on other programs.

Fully utilizing these programs requires providers with expertise in veterans' practice, otherwise opportunities to apply for specialized aid can be missed. Legal services organizations like VAP are qualified to assist veterans and their families in applying for benefits. For example, VAP has assisted survivors of veterans to apply for Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC), a VA benefit that assists surviving family members of certain disabled veterans. This aid can help, for example, a surviving spouse remain self-sufficient without the assistance of their deceased spouse's disability benefits. Without DIC benefits, these survivors would be forced to rely on other forms of assistance and may face financial instability. This assistance has helped surviving

³ Connecticut Veterans Legal Center, "Discretionary Injustice," last visited January 7, 2025.

⁴ <u>Department of Defense, 2023 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Military Members, last visited January 6, 2025.</u>

⁵ Ashley C. Schuyler et al., "Experiences of Sexual Harassment, Stalking, and Sexual Assault During Military Service Among LGBT and Non-LGBT Service Members," 33(3) J. Traumatic Stress (June 2020): 257-266.

⁶ <u>Jeremy R. Bedford, "Other Than Honorable Discharges: Unfair and Unjust Life Sentences of Decreased Earning Capacity," University of Pennsylvania Journal of Law & Public Affairs, 694, last visited January 6, 2025.</u>

⁷ Jeremy R. Bedford, "Other Than Honorable Discharges: Unfair and Unjust Life Sentences of Decreased Earning Capacity," University of Pennsylvania Journal of Law & Public Affairs, 704, last visited January 6, 2025.



spouses remain in their homes and continue their lives after the death of their disabled veteran family member. With increased funding, VAP would be able to reach more clients and train more volunteers to represent clients before the VA.

New York Lacks Sufficient Civil Legal Services Programs to Meet the Needs of Veterans

Due to the sheer number of veterans in New York, organizations that serve veterans do not have the resources to meet all their needs without additional funding. Currently, most veteran legal services in New York are offered through non-profit legal organizations like VAP, funded through various public and private grants. However, even though organizations in New York City assist many veterans, there are veterans who cannot be helped due to a lack of funding or resources. This includes limits to the scope of service that some organizations provide due to budget concerns, staffing limitations, and other difficulties inherent to the non-profit space.

Existing programs to fund legal service organizations that assist veterans often fall short, either due to a lack of funding or due to strict eligibility requirements. In 2023, the VA launched the Legal Services for Homeless Veterans and Veterans-At-Risk for Homelessness Grants (LSV-H), which offered \$11.5 million in total grants to bolster support for homeless veterans in a wide variety of legal situations. However, there are over 16 million veterans in the United States, with many not being eligible for this aid. While this funding will be useful for serving a portion of the veteran population, many veterans are ineligible for the aid, either due to their discharge status or due to financial ineligibility. LSV-H funds can only be used on veterans who fit the federal regulatory definition of homeless or at-risk for homelessness. While that type of support is needed, the struggles of veterans who do not fit into any one specific box, which is why grant programs with strict eligibility requirements can fail to meet all the needs of the veteran population. On the other hand, there is currently a proposed program Legal Services for Veterans—Legal Assistance for Access to VA Programs (LSV-A) that makes nearly all veterans eligible for legal assistance, but only for programs related to the VA or discharge upgrades. For organizations that hope to help veterans in their other unmet legal needs, the LSV-A funding scheme exposes a gap that leaves some veterans without access to legal assistance because they do not fall into any of the right buckets. For that reason, municipalities with large veteran populations like New York City should increase funding to fill in these gaps by granting legal service organizations funds that can be used to assist veterans in any reasonable way.

While VAP is focused on practice before the VA, helping veterans access benefits increases their overall wellbeing. Ensuring that a veteran or their survivor is receiving all income and benefits they are entitled to can help them remain housed, pay for childcare, or pursue an education. Directly increasing the funds available to legal service organizations and allowing them to use



those funds to best serve the veteran community will relieve the burden on other aspects of our social safety net and improve outcomes for veterans.

Conclusion

On behalf of the City Bar Justice Center's Veterans Assistance Project, I encourage the members of the City Council Committee on Veterans to support increased funding to legal service providers focused on assisting New York City's military and veteran population. Comprehensive, culturally sensitive, veteran focused civil legal services can be life changing for New York City's veteran population. The programs can ensure access to benefits, homelessness prevention, economic security, and family cohesion for New Yorkers who sacrificed on behalf of our country at the time they are most in need.

Respectfully

Makedan K. Salmond City Bar Justice Center

42 West 44th Street

New York, NY 10036

TESTIMONY OF JOSEPH BELLO NY METROVETS

BEFORE

THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

Oversight – New York City Veterans Advisory Board (VAB)

January 22, 2025

Chairman Holden, members of the Veterans Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at today's oversight hearing on the city's Veterans Advisory Board (VAB).

Established in 1987 under Local Law 53, the VAB currently consists of 13 members representing all five boroughs who are appointed by the Mayor and the City Council Speaker on behalf of the Council.

Under the City Charter, the VAB's primary role is to advise the Commissioner of the Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) on all matters affecting veterans. The board also performs several additional functions including:

- Community Engagement: Through its public meetings, the VAB serves as a conduit for veterans and their families to raise issues and concerns, and provide feedback to DVS, while seeking answers from the agency.
- Advocacy: The VAB acts as a voice for veterans, ensuring they are heard at the highest levels of city government.
- Advisory and Policy Recommendations: The board works to identify gaps in existing
 policies and recommends legislative or administrative changes to address these
 shortcomings.

While the VAB has grown over the years, including legislation in 2022 (Local Law 19), which expanded membership to include Gold Star families and caregivers, its effectiveness has noticeably declined. This decline has been particularly evident in public engagement. Having served on the board for several years, I want to share thoughts on some of the challenges contributing to this decline and propose legislative solutions to address them.

Challenges Facing the VAB

Although the VAB is mandated to operate as an independent entity, it heavily depends on DVS for logistical and operational support. This support includes assisting with meeting locations, publishing board information, and archiving minutes, videos, and reports on its website.

<u>Unfortunately</u>, this reliance has resulted in issues such as delayed meeting notifications, missing minutes, unarchived videos, and outdated or incomplete member information on the VAB webpage.

Additionally, as the chair may recall, concerns were raised in 2022 regarding the potential influence of DVS officials (particularly the Commissioner) on Council Speaker appointments. Those concerns have not diminished.

Finally, in recent years, many have observed VAB meetings overshadowed by DVS presentations, leaving little room for meaningful local discussions. The meetings also seem constrained by an informal two-hour time limit, with minimal effort by the agency to address veterans' questions from one meeting to the next. These issues have significantly undermined transparency and eroded trust in the board.

Legislative Recommendations

To address these challenges and strengthen the VAB, I propose the following package of legislative actions for the committee to consider.

1. Term Limits: The lack of term limits on the VAB has stifled the introduction of fresh perspectives and ideas. While some board members have served for extended periods, others participate minimally, further diminishing the board's overall effectiveness. ("resume filler.")

VAB members are currently appointed to three-year terms by the Mayor or the Council Speaker. The charter requires that vacancies—due to removal, resignation, death, or other reasons—be filled within 120 days of the vacancy. However, appointees <u>only serve the remainder of the unexpired term left by their predecessor</u>.

I propose legislation allowing new appointees to serve a <u>full three-year term from the date of their appointment</u>. This would ensure appointees have adequate time to contribute meaningfully to the board while reducing any perceived influence from the agency and other stakeholders.

Additionally, I recommend introducing a two-term (six-year) limit for board members. This change would foster fresh leadership, ensure a continuous infusion of new ideas, and help the VAB remain dynamic and responsive in addressing the needs of New York City's veterans.

2. Operational Support: The city charter calls for the VAB to elect a chair and vice-chair annually. To strengthen governance and improve documentation, I recommend legislation codifying the position of Secretary and amending the charter to extend the term of each officer to two years, allowing for greater continuity and stability.

Additionally, the lack of a legislated DVS liaison to the VAB has caused frequent turnover in this role, disrupting continuity and support. Since 2018, the VAB's annual reports have consistently called for funding resources from DVS to support record-keeping and ensure continuity.

In the absence of dedicated funding in the upcoming FY26 budget, I propose legislation that would designate a DVS position as the liaison to the VAB; as well as mandating meeting location support. This position, with defined duties, would ensure dedicated communication and operational support for the board.

3. Public Engagement: Expanding outreach is essential to increase awareness of the VAB's role and encourage greater participation from veterans. Currently, the charter (§ 31-105) requires DVS to: "Post VAB meeting notifications on its webpage at least one week prior to each public meeting." However, many veterans do not frequently check DVS's website, leaving them unaware of the board's meetings and purpose, which limits its reach and impact.

Additionally, DVS is required to: "Maintain and periodically update contact information for veteran organizations within the city and notify them of meeting details by regular or electronic mail at least one week in advance." During my tenure on the board, particularly as the Secretary, I never saw evidence that this requirement was ever met. I recommend legislation requiring

meeting <u>notifications</u> be <u>published</u> at <u>least 2 weeks</u> in advance and are included in the last two editions of DVS's Friday newsletters prior to the meeting date.

4. Oversight Hearings: It's worth noting that the last oversight hearing occurred in 2017. To ensure the VAB is fulfilling its mandate, I recommend this committee hold oversight hearings at least every two years. Regular oversight hearings will provide an opportunity to assess the board's activities, deficiencies, and ensure they meet the needs of the veteran's community.

In conclusion, the VAB is a vital advocate for veterans' concerns. By addressing its challenges and implementing these proposed recommendations, we can strengthen the board, promote greater accountability, and ensure it fulfills its mission of serving those who have served.

Thank you, councilmembers, for your time. I look forward to answering any questions and working with you to help strengthen the VAB.



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Testimony of Bryan Ellicott-Cook

Director of Government Relations, SAGE

Before the New York City Council Committee on Veterans

Hearing on T2025-2914: The New York City Veterans Advisory Board

January 22, 2025

My name is Bryan Ellicott-Cook and as Director of Government Relations. I am here on behalf of SAGE and our SAGEVets program, a dedicated initiative supporting LGBTQ+ older veterans. SAGE has worked for over four decades to advocate for and support LGBTQ+ older adults, ensuring their voices are heard, their needs are met, and their dignity is upheld.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on the critical role of the New York City Veterans Advisory Board (VAB) and to highlight ways it can better serve the diverse community of veterans who call this city home. The VAB is unique in its structure and purpose. Comprised of 13 veteran leaders appointed by the Mayor or the Speaker of the New York City Council, it represents all five boroughs and it plays an essential role in advising the NYC Department of Veterans' Services (DVS) on veteran-related issues. Its main activities include holding quarterly meetings, submitting annual reports, and cultivating active communication between veterans, their families, and the services available to them.

One of the VAB's signature achievements—the 2008 Veteran Liaison Requirement—demonstrates the Board's power to enact meaningful change. By requiring all city agencies to designate a senior member responsible for coordination with DVS, the VAB has streamlined services and created critical pathways for information-sharing and problem-solving.

However, to build on its success and to ensure the Board remains inclusive and impactful, I respectfully offer the following recommendations:

1. Expand Outreach to Underrepresented Veterans:

The VAB must actively engage with underrepresented communities, particularly LGBTQ+ veterans, veterans of color, women, and older veterans. Public sessions and quarterly meetings should prioritize outreach to these groups to ensure their experiences and challenges are fully understood and addressed.

2. Diversify Membership:

While the VAB's borough representation is admirable, it must also reflect the diversity of the veterans it serves. Members with lived experiences as LGBTQ+ veterans, caregivers, and advocates for older veterans would bring invaluable perspectives to the Board's deliberations and priorities.

3. Leverage Community Partnerships:

As part of its commitment to fostering communication, the VAB should deepen relationships with community-based organizations like SAGE. Collaborative efforts can amplify the voices of underserved populations and create targeted solutions to address issues like social isolation, access to healthcare, and navigating complex benefits systems.

4. Expand Public Education Efforts:

The VAB's regular public sessions provide a unique opportunity to educate veterans and their families about available services. Expanding outreach efforts and providing detailed reports on the challenges and successes raised during these sessions will help the broader community understand the Board's impact.

5. Champion LGBTQ+ Inclusion:

The VAB can take the lead in advocating for cultural competency training across all city agencies, ensuring that service providers understand the unique needs of LGBTQ+ veterans, particularly as they age.

Finally, I encourage all veterans, their family members, and caregivers to participate in the VAB's upcoming public sessions. These sessions, such as the February 26th meeting in Manhattan and others throughout the year, are vital forums for sharing experiences, asking questions, and fostering connection. SAGE would be honored to collaborate with the VAB in future sessions to help elevate the voices of LGBTQ+ veterans and their families.

On behalf of SAGE and SAGEVets, I thank you for your continued commitment to our veterans and for working to ensure that no one is left behind. We stand ready to support the VAB and the NYC Department of Veterans' Services in advancing equity, inclusion, and dignity for all who have served.

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