

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF NEW YORK

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TRANSCRIPT OF THE MINUTES

Of the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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September 22, 2025

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HELD AT: 250 BROADWAY - 8TH FLOOR - HEARING
ROOM 1

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

COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Joann Ariola
Kristy Marmorato
Vickie Paladino

A P P E A R A N C E S

James Hendon, Commissioner of the New York City
Department of Veteran Services

Nicole Orlando, Deputy Chief-of-Staff of the New
York City Department of Veteran Services

Dr. Mecca Nelson, Veterans Advisory Board and
Chief Executive Officer of Mecca City of
Wholeness

Satish Dhanna, Veterans Program Supervisor at VNS
Health and medically retired U.S. Army veteran

Gene DeFrancis, United States veteran

Derek Coy, New York Health Foundation and United
States Marine Corps Veteran

Robert Poles, United States military veteran

Timothy Pena, United States Navy veteran,
Veterans Justice Project

Joseph Bello, NY Metrovets

Christopher Leon Johnson, self

1 COMMITTEE ON VETERANS

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2 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Good afternoon. This is
3 a microphone check for the Committee on Veterans.
4 Today's date is September 22, 2025. Location is the
5 8th Floor, Hearing Room 1, recorded by Ginelle
6 Yearwood.

7 SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Good afternoon, and
8 welcome to today's New York City Council hearing for
9 the Committee on Veterans.

10 At this time, I would like to remind
11 everyone to silence all electronic devices.

12 Also, going forward, no one is to
13 approach the dais. I repeat, no one is to approach
14 the dais.

15 If you want to sign up for in-person
16 testimony or have any questions during the hearing,
17 please see the Sergeant-at-Arms by the desk in the
18 back of the room.

19 Chair Holden, we are ready to begin.

20 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you. [GAVEL]
21 Good afternoon. I'm Council Member Robert Holden,
22 Chair of the Committee on Veterans. Welcome to our
23 oversight hearing on implementing recommendations
24 from the Veterans Advisory Board.

25

In 2015, the New York City Council passed Local Law 113, which required the creation of a Veterans Advisory Board, VAB. That's what we're going to call them. VAB was subsequently established pursuant to Chapter 75, Section 3103 of the City Charter. The VAB's role is to advise the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Veterans Services on issues concerning veterans, as well as active duty, reserve, and guard service members, and to connect the Mayor's Administration, DVS, the Council, and the veterans' community. The 13 members of the VAB are appointed to a three-year term, seven by the Mayor, and six are appointed by the Speaker. Annually, five public sessions, one in each borough, are required to be held in order to collect public input on issues of importance and/or concern to the veterans' community. In its annual report, the VAB recounts its activities for the past year and plans for the coming year, reports on progress of its prior recommendations, and offers new recommendations to the Mayor and the City Council, as well as to DVS. Today, we're going to be looking at the VAB's most recent recommendations in its 2024 annual report,

which we received in early June, and we will be hearing from DVS and VAB about these recommendations.

I want to note that this is a follow-up hearing to one which we held last January in response to the requests of interested public stakeholders about the structure and operations of the VAB. The VAB's 2024 annual report provides a range of recommendations. They cover the processing of grants, of the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Support Program, the appointment and requirements of VAB members, the encouragement and support of veterans for engaging in the local political process, increased funding for DVS, services for student veterans at CUNY, the policies and operations of veteran treatment courts, updating the VAB's bylaws, providing administrative support for the VAB, metrics for tracking VA claims and their resolutions, and DVS's contracting procedures and more. So, it's a laundry list of recommendations which we're going to be going through today. So, it's quite a list, and it includes a lot of important topics. I look forward to hearing the Commissioner's responses to each of the recommendations at this hearing.

At this time, I would like to acknowledge my Colleagues who are here, Council Member Kristy Marmorato and Council Member Joann Ariola, and on remote is Council Member Vickie Paladino, I understand.

And I'd also like to thank the Committee Staff who worked to prepare this hearing, Alejandro Carvajal, our Legislative Counsel; Regina Paul, our Senior Policy Analyst; and Phariha Rahman, our Financial Analyst. And finally, thanks to my Chief-of-Staff, Daniel Kurzyna.

So, I'd like to turn it over now to our Legislative Counsel to administer the oath to witnesses from the Administration.

We have Commissioner James Hendon and Nicole Orlando from DVS.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL CARVAJAL: Good afternoon. Please raise your right hands.

Do you affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in your testimony before this Committee and to respond honestly to Council Member's questions?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I do.

DEPUTY CHIEF-OF-STAFF ORLANDO: I do.

2 COMMITTEE COUNSEL CARVAJAL: Thank you.

3 As a reminder to all of our witnesses,
4 please state your name prior to your testimony for
5 the record.

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Good afternoon,
7 Chair Holden, Members of the Veterans Committee,
8 Members of the City Council, and members of the New
9 York City's veteran community who are joining us
10 today. My name is James Hendon, and I have the
11 privilege of serving as Commissioner of the New York
12 City Department of Veterans Services. I am joined by
13 Nicole Orlando, our agency's Deputy Chief-of-Staff.
14 Thank you for convening this hearing on implementing
15 recommendations from the Veteran Advisory Board.

16 At its core, today's discussion is about
17 translating the lived experience of New Yorkers who
18 served into policy that works at street level, policy
19 we can fund, measure, and sustain. As defined in the
20 New York City Charter, Chapter 75, Section 3103, the
21 Veterans Advisory Board consists of 13 veteran
22 community members, seven of whom are appointed by the
23 Mayor, six by the Speaker of the City Council. They
24 represent every borough and reflect the diversity of
25 service in our city. Their charge is simple and

essential. Keep the lines of communication open, identify what is working, and name what must change. In 2024, the Board held five public meetings, one in each borough. This year, they've held four meetings thus far. I invite everyone to participate in the Board's final session of the year to be held on Wednesday, October 29th at 6 p.m. in Brooklyn, either in person or online. Details about the meeting as it approaches can be found online at nyc.gov/vetboard.

Before responding to the Board's recommendations, we would like to first offer sustains and improves on the execution of the Veterans Advisory Board itself, including DVS's role in VAB activities.

Sustains. First, we appreciate that the Board now focuses each of its meetings on one to two of DVS's Charter-mandated areas. Our Charter-mandated areas are health care, housing, benefits, culture, education, and employment. Culture, which consists of veteran community recognitions, activities, and events, undergirds all meetings. It is mentioned in the background regularly. That said, the five annual meetings perform a deep dive into health care,

housing, benefits, education, and employment. We are grateful to the VAB for this innovation.

Another sustain. The evolution of having the NYC Veterans Advisory Board dually serve as the Community Veterans Engagement Board for the City of New York was a watershed, for reasons to be discussed later in this testimony.

Another sustain. Public meetings are handled in a way that is efficient and professional, while affording attendees the opportunity to present their viewpoints and feel seen, respected, and heard.

Another sustain. The VAB's advocacy has increased the mediums through which meeting notifications are posted. Notifications that years ago were only made via email to the veteran community and to veteran community leaders are now made via email, social media, newsletter, digital flyers distributed by the DVS and the Board, and they are posted on the DVS website, among other places.

Final sustain. The Board is nearing 100 percent strength. Currently, a prospective Mayoral appointee is undergoing vetting to fill a recently vacated seat. Once filled, the Board will be at 100 percent strength for the first time in more than five

years. This is a testament to the Appointments Unit from the Mayor and Speaker's Offices. It is important to give credit where credit is due.

Now to improves. First improve, we believe the way that the VAB lays out its recommendations should evolve. Recommendations should be displayed in a manner where it is easy for the policymakers who read it to view exactly which recommendations are addressed to them. Suggestions should be broken out as city, state, federal, then broken down further within those tranches as executive, legislative, and judicial. Doing this will attract more policymakers to read and act on the document.

Next improve. We, DVS, commit to increase the entities that we spread the word to when promoting Veterans Advisory Board meetings. We will inform not just veterans service organizations, as we currently do, but all community benefits organizations, all New York City elected officials, all community boards, and all community education councils.

Next improve. We need to establish mechanisms for codifying DVS VAB agreements and

Veterans Advisory Board bylaws such that they carry over as City Council administrations change, Mayoral administrations change, and/or the veterans advisory board membership changes. Day-to-day operating norms must be instituted in a manner where the norm is enforced and respected without needing to be codified into law.

Next improve. Moving forward, DVS commits to publishing a response to the Veterans Advisory Board report within 90 days after the report is published. The VAB report, which is traditionally published in the spring, is a point in time snapshot of issues raised during the calendar year before. As a way of closing the loop, our response will provide an update on where things stand and clarify any topics that need to be clarified, such that these items two are part of the public record. It must be said DVS will not publish a rebuttal to the VAB report. We'll publish what is effectively an update and a response. In addition to largely appearing in this testimony, our response to the Board's 2024 report will be posted online no later than 90 days from today.

Next improve. A meta issue that transcends the VAB but affects the VAB is a need for increased attendance. Roughly 20 to 30 veteran community members attend each of the Board's public meetings, all of which are hybrid at this time. Among other things, increased attendance directly ties to challenges with veteran self-identification. In a city where, according to FY23 VA data, only 24.1 percent of veterans self-identify, increasing New York City's self-identification rate could have the effect of tripling attendance at VAB meetings. Increased attendance equates to broader diversity of ideas, enhanced influence in multiple spaces, and greater synergy amongst meeting attendees. In general, VAB attendance, which like all veteran gatherings, is largely influenced by self-identification, is the key to the veteran community having a stronger voice.

And now to DVS's responses to the 2024 Veterans Advisory Board report. So each year the Veterans Advisory Board distills community input into recommendations for the Mayor and City Council, recommendations for DVS, and recommendations for legislation and programs. What follows is our

response where we agree, where we have acted, and where we commit to continued work to the Board's recommendations from their latest 2024 report. For the record, the 2024 Veterans Advisory Report and all VAB reports dating back to 2002 can be found online at nyc.gov/vetboard.

So first, recommendations to the Mayor and City Council. First recommendation was processing of the Private First Class Joseph P. Dwyer Veteran Support Program Grants. The Board rightly noted delays in 2024 related to approval and reimbursement for the Dwyer program. The cause was a process error that routed funding from the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene rather than to the Department of Veteran Services. In response to FY25 process delays, FY26 Dwyer funding and Dwyer monies moving forward are recognized by the Mayor's Office of Management and Budget as belonging to DVS at the start of each fiscal year. For future years, we're working with State partners to establish a direct State to DVS flow of funding. The objective is straightforward. Reliable, timely support for veteran for peer-led mental health programming without administrative drag. An update, during this fiscal

year, FY26, 31 New York City Dwyer projects are in operation. Details can be found at nyc.gov/vetdwyer.

Next recommendation was appointment terms to the Veterans Advisory Board. The Board recommends that every new appointment carry a full three-year term, including appointments to fill a vacancy. We support this change. We also support a review to ensure balanced representation across all boroughs and stand ready to assist the Mayor and the Council.

Next is attendance at public sessions. To strengthen accountability and continuity, the Board recommends members attend at least three out of five public sessions each year with mandatory in-person attendance in the borough they represent. DVS agrees this is a practical standard that will improve consistency, participation, and trust. We must say correcting this issue hails back to the broader governance challenge mentioned in the improved section of this testimony. Working together, all impacted parties can accomplish this objective. We need to be thoughtful.

Next recommendation was encouraging veteran engagement in the political process. The Board urges collaboration to recruit veterans to

community boards and to expand participation in civic life at all levels of government. Our Department will continue to share opportunities through our channels. We welcome Council partnership to elevate these pathways. To be clear, DVS can assist and inform veterans about participating in non-political activities, such as joining once a community board, attending public hearings, and volunteering. The websites nyc.gov/vetcommunityboard, nyc.gov/vetvolunteer, and ourveterans.nyc offer examples of how we promote community and civic engagement opportunities. That said, the NYC Department of Veteran Services cannot engage in political activity. Hard stop.

Another recommendation was increased funding for the Department of Veteran Services. The Board correctly noted that our Department is the smallest in City government by headcount and budget. We are grateful to the Mayor and City Council for approving an FY26 adopted budget that increased our agency's headcount from 39 people in the FY25 budget to 49 in FY26. This represents a 25.6 percent expansion. This is more than a number. It is capacity

to execute, sustain, and scale. Past adopted budgets for DVS can be found online at nyc.gov/vetreports.

Next was recommendation about reaching older veterans. More than half of New York City's veteran population is older per 2023 ACS data. 70.7 percent of New York City veterans are aged 55 or older, 50.5 percent are 65 or older, and 31.8 percent are 75 or older. That being said, digital outreach alone is not sufficient. Aligning with Chair Holden's suggestion, our Department mailed 52,000 postcards to veteran households earlier this year. Within the first week, we received more than 400 phone calls, and our agency is committed to a holistic lifecycle approach in supporting service members. In practice, this means continuing to engage with veterans younger than 55 to keep them informed, connected, and active in the programs and services available to them. We will continue to blend traditional and digital outreach so that every veteran can connect with DVS.

Next is evaluation and documentation of programming. The Board called for dedicated funding to evaluate and document programs, including claims assistance and intake. Our Department currently reports through the City Council scorecard effort,

New York City Council hearings, the Office of Management and Budget, the Office of Equal Employment Opportunity, the Mayor's Office of Operations in service of the Preliminary Mayor's Management Report and the Mayor's Management Report, the New York City Comptroller, and we submit performance data in compliance with local laws, including but not limited to Local Law 23 of 2015, Local Law 30 of 2017, Local Law 215 of 2018, Local Law 44 of 2019, Local Law 4 of 2022, Local Law 37 of 2024, Local Law 38 of 2024, and Local Law 39 of 2024. Data that we report can be found at nyc.gov/vetreports. Additionally, our upgraded VetConnect platform improves outcome tracking, two-way messaging between veterans and staff and automated reminders for follow-up. This strengthens accountability and service continuity. The website for VetConnect NYC is nyc.gov/vetconnect.

Next recommendation was increased veteran vendors inclusion on the Street Vendor Advisory Board. The Board again recommends a formal veteran seat on the Street Vendor Advisory Board. Our Department supports Intro. 686 of 2024, which is supported by all of the Council's veteran community members. If approved, the Intro. 686 would add a

veteran seat to the Street Vendor Advisory Board and ensure that entrepreneurs who served have a voice in policy that affects their livelihoods. Agency liaisons for veteran street vendors are listed at nyc.gov/vetvendors.

The recommendation about funding resources for student veterans. The Board recommends an equal level of support for student veterans attending CUNY across the CUNY system. The Board also recommends that innovative housing solutions be offered to student veterans. Specific to CUNY, starting last fiscal year, FY 25, DVS executed what will become annual transfers of funds from our Department to the CUNY Office of Veterans Affairs, COVA. Among other things, resources from DVS will empower COVA to better streamline the City University of New York's delivery of services to student veterans CUNY-wide. Information for student veterans can be found at nyc.gov/vetstudents.

With regard to housing, recent updates that positively impact student veterans and all veterans are, one, for Housing Connect, DVS and the VA can now sign to verify a veteran's service-connected disability determination for hearing,

vision, and mobility impairments when an eligible service-disabled veteran applies for a disability set-aside unit and, two, there now exists a 10 percent veterans preference within the Housing Connect lottery. Veterans can visit nyc.gov/vethousing to learn more.

To the recommendation on veterans treatment courts. The Board recommended that veteran treatment courts, VTCs, which each have their own standard operating procedures and leadership structures within each borough, that they serve all veterans regardless of discharge status, adopt a uniform set of procedures and protocol and policies, and receive cultural competency training through the VA's Veteran Justice Program. The Board also recommended that non-profits which recruit, train, and support veteran treatment court mentors be properly funded. The veteran treatment court system is run by New York State through the judiciary arm of each of its counties, the New York State Unified Court System. County district attorneys have influence on the system as well within their prospective counties. The local VTC system is not run by the City of New York. Nevertheless, given

constraints on what we at the city level can do to change veteran treatment courts, areas where DVS has sought to add value are, one, working with the New York City Criminal Justice Agency to better identify veterans who encounter the criminal justice system. This ties back to veteran identification. And two, funding a local non-profit that supports veteran treatment court mentors, United Veteran Mentors, Inc. I want to note that Herbert Sweat, founder of United Veteran Mentors, a longtime veteran community leader, and decorated Vietnam War veteran. Herb testified at this Committee's hearing about veteran treatment courts in December of 2022. Herb passed away this month at the age of 76. Our prayers are with him and his family.

Now to recommendations to the Department of Veteran Services. One of the Board's recommendations was codifying responsibilities between the Department and the Veterans Advisory Board. The Board proposes clarifying roles, expectations, and procedures covering Board expansion, timely updates to our website, term standards, meeting locations and technology, and formally recognizing the board as New York City's

Community Veterans Engagement Board. We support these recommendations and this framework. Further, local designation would align New York City with federal engagement models and deepen intergovernmental collaboration. Establishing the NYC Veterans Advisory Board as the Community Veterans Engagement Board for New York City is critical for three reasons. One, it ensures that VAB meetings are always held on VA facilities. This enhances turnout. Two, New York City's veteran community is strategically more visible and hence more influential in the eyes of the VA regionally and nationally. And three, the CVEB offers a formal venue through which Veterans Benefits Administration, Veterans Health Administration, and National Cemetery Administration officials can respond to local community complaints. Representatives from each arm of the VA, VHA, VBA, and NCA must attend CVEB gatherings. It is also important for the Veterans Advisory Board to serve as our local Community Veterans Engagement Board because the existing CVEB for New York City, the Metropolitan NYC Veterans Community Veterans Engagement Board, has not met in more than five years.

Next was a recommendation about providing personnel support for the Veterans Advisory Board. The Board recommends a dedicated staff position in our Department to support Board administration. We will continue to facilitate meetings, hybrid broadcasting, and communications using existing personnel. However, we cannot support a dedicated staff line at this time. We stand ready to facilitate the Board's securing one or more VA work studies, paid interns, to support the Board's work.

The next recommendation was documented tracking on progress from previous recommendations. The Board seeks detailed metrics on claim submissions, approvals, and the financial impact of federal compensation and pension benefits. We support the spirit of this recommendation. Today, producing such reports requires manual data pulls from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs and from their Veterans Benefits Management System and long-term modeling of annual increases in VA disability and compensation rates, workload we cannot sustain without added staff. Should staff permit, for example, through the future addition of an administrative assistant to the Claims Team, we could

implement regularized reporting based on queries of the VA system.

Next recommendation was about discretionary contracting capability of the Department. Since February of 2023, our Department has had authority to approve veteran-focused discretionary contracts of 20,000 dollars or less. The Board requests a detailed review. We are amenable to a process review and could coordinate with oversight entities to assess program value and performance. During Fiscal Years 2024 and 2025, we managed no more than five small-dollar Council discretionary awards per year as a pilot effort. Starting in FY26, DVS will manage all veteran-focused Council discretionary projects valued at 20,000 dollars or less. Past being prologue, this will amount to DVS managing approximately 20 to 30 discretionary awards per year. DVS is also one of the inaugural agencies participating in the Mayor and City Council's Discretionary Grant Program, or DGP. DGP accelerates payments for a selection of small-scale discretionary funding awards and streamlines the City's discretionary funding process.

Now to legislation and program recommendations. One recommendation first is establish a preference for contracting with veteran-owned businesses. I want to start with the title of this section, establish a preference for contracting with veteran-owned businesses. New York City's procurement rules, particularly matters that involve set-asides and discretionary spending levels are dictated by New York State. That being said, this Administration supports State legislation which, if passed, would increase the discretionary spending limit for New York State certified service-disabled veteran-owned businesses that are certified as emerging business enterprises by the City of New York. During the FY25 legislative term, this legislation was introduced as S8233 in the Senate, it passed in the Senate, and A8783 in the assembly, it did not pass in the assembly.

Now to the VAB sub points. The Veterans Advisory Board supports Intro. Number 685 of 2024. This enables veteran-owned businesses to identify as such when registering to do business with the City of New York. An aside, the City's payee information portal already allows veteran-owned firms to self-

identify. Separately, the Intro. codifies what DVS currently calls the Veteran Business Leadership Association, or VBLA. The VBLA facilitates technical assistance, mentorship opportunities, networking, and certification support for veteran and veteran spouse entrepreneurs. Information can be found at NYC.gov/vetbusiness. The VBLA also maintains a map of New York City's veteran-owned businesses, which can be found at NYC.gov/vetbizmap. Our Department supports Intro. 685.

Next is about supporting veteran vendors. Two complementary measures merit support. Introduction number 686 of 2024 adds the Commissioner of the Department of Veteran Services, or designee, to the Street Vendor Advisory Board and increases Speaker appointments to include a representative of the veteran community. Introduction 687 of 2024 waives the 200-dollar annual commissary permit fee for mobile food unit commissaries that reserve space for veteran vendors. Both proposals lower barriers and signal veteran inclusion in a competitive market. Speaking of 686, 687, our Department supports both.

Next is the property tax exemption for Cold War veterans. The Board underscores that New

York City remains an outlier compared to other tax jurisdictions in New York and not adopting the Cold War veterans property tax exemption. Our Department supports Intro. 740 of 2024, which would establish this exemption locally, bring the City into parity with statewide norms, and provide meaningful relief to a generation that served through decades of vigilance.

In conclusion, the Veterans Advisory Board exists to ensure that policy is informed by lived experience. Its recommendations are grounded in neighborhood conversations and everyday realities of our veterans and military families. Across today's testimony, several themes emerge. One is continuity and clarity. Terms, attendance, and codified roles make advisory bodies stronger. Another theme is capacity and coordination, headcount growth, direct funding flows for the Dwyer program, and VetConnect NYC improved service delivery and accountability. Next theme is representation and access. A designated seat for veteran vendors, fee relief, preference of veteran-owned businesses, and a Cold War property tax exemption turn recognition into results. Our Department appreciates the Board's partnership and

the support of the City Council and the Mayor as we continue this work together. We may not be able to adopt every recommendation in full today. However, we can honor the intent behind each one to make New York City a place where veterans can live, learn, and work. In a word, a place where the veteran community can thrive.

A reminder that the New York City Department of Veterans Services can be reached online at nyc.gov/vets, via telephone at 212-416-5250, email at connect@veterans.nyc.gov, and through social media using the handle @nycveterans. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Commissioner. Once again, you did that very nicely and quickly. I don't know how you do it, but you continually read. And I guess this one has 12, well, almost 13, 12 pages of testimony, and so I got to say that you've done it again. I want to thank you for a very thorough testimony.

And I have some questions, and you did answer some of my questions. I'm going to ask them anyway because just for the record, we want to get a

commitment. I love the fact that you're supporting the legislation that's before this Committee, and it's the goal as Chair, and I think it's the goal, I would speak for the Committee Members, that it's our goal to pass this in this Council, pass all of these legislative proposals, and they're very good. All of them are long overdue so, if we can accomplish that, I'd say this Committee did its job. And, of course, you could say you had a hand in that because you supported all of these measures. And we will, you know, get a vote hopefully in the next few sessions.

So, let me just ask the process. Let's talk about this process on VAB. In as much as public meetings that the VAB holds in each borough are an important source of information for the VAB as it considers what to recommend, how satisfied are you with the degree of public participation? I know you mentioned that in your testimony, but what would you like to see as a benchmark for, or watermark for attendance?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: So, thank you for the question, Mr. Chair. Thank you for just everyone for doing this, for having us here today.

Right now, I mentioned it's about 20 to 30 is what we're currently at right now in a hybrid format. I wish we were at well over 50 would be ideal, and that's something that's on us, like we want to get the word out to different venues as far as letting people know about this. We learned from the survey that we did of the veteran community, oftentimes a better way to get our people is through other identities, not just straight up through the veteran's identity. It could be that we find veterans when we reach out to that community benefits organization, we reach out to that faith center, we reach out to that community education council, that community board, etc. so we want to try to do that, just add things to the mix to have more of our people come. And I think that in a perfect world, sustaining more than 50 attendees would be a goal. I want to just say this, we love the work that VAB has been doing. It's about increasing the number of folks who are providing wisdom to them as they provide these recommendations to us.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Just one thing before I forget, you mentioned that a dedicated staff for

2 VAB from DVS is impossible at this point. Are you
3 talking about just a full-time person on VAB?

4 COMMISSIONER HENDON: That's correct. I'm
5 talking about us having a full-time person.

6 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I don't think even
7 the recommendation, I'm not sure they were saying
8 that it's the full-time dedicated. I just think we
9 need consistency in DVS. That means one person or two
10 people or three people would be actually overseeing
11 the meetings and making sure that everything is doing
12 the right thing, they're saying the right things, and
13 people are taking attendance or just verifying
14 attendance. Because sometimes, and again, sometimes
15 we lose the fact that VAB members are volunteers so
16 they don't get paid and they don't even have a
17 budget. So, we talked about getting a budget for VAB.
18 And I think, I'd like to hear your, what do you feel
19 about a budget for, not coming from your budget,
20 let's say, that the Mayor or the Speaker would fund
21 the VAB for incidentals, just for hall rentals,
22 refreshments, things like that.

23 COMMISSIONER HENDON: So, thank you for
24 the question. As we always say, we can always do more
25 with more, as far as not just applying to us, but to

all within the veteran community. I think for us, it's, whomever is in our role as far as our lead for our intergovernmental affairs activities is typically that liaison to the Veterans Advisory Board. We had a discussion about, when it comes to human capital, saying, hey, would you be open to having a VA work study with the Board, and we're waiting to hear back from the board on that. We'd like to at least try that out. Because one work study can give you up to 25 hours of service per week. And we say, let's look at one and see if we want to go with more. As far as other things, when it comes to funding for other dynamics, that's something...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: A work study for a student to oversee, or?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: No, a VA work study as far as added support with other tasks that may be tied to execution of different activities, not necessarily oversee. And I want to be careful about, the Board has its autonomy. I don't want to in any way make it seem as though we would try to take that from the Board or try to run anything from the Board. For us, we're merely facilitating...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I know, I know. But I'm talking about a dedicated, let's say, three-member or two-member of DVS, two members of DVS that would be a liaison to answer questions, to help them set up things. Because I know this. I was a volunteer for decades, and I know you have very little support. There's always the one or two people doing everything. I wouldn't be surprised if the same thing's happening on VAB, where just a couple of people are really doing the bulk of the work. But they need a constant partner, and I think DVS could do that. Are you saying that even when you get to 49 members of the DVS, when you reach that point, you still can't dedicate a couple of?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'm going to clarify what we do right now, as far as, especially now that we have the CVEB construct with the Community Veterans Engagement Board. So we make the arrangements as far as identifying the VA facilities and working with VA so that the meeting can be held there. We also spread the word as far as that meeting will be occurring. We do deal with the Zoom aspects of it, as far as a hybrid nature of its curation. So there are different pieces where right now DVS does

own those pieces. I'd argue that the largest need for the VAB, my observation, I say this having been a Veterans Advisory Board member now in the seat I'm in now, is support with the actual writing of the report itself, where you take all this input in from the community. So, it's just taking it and just being able to synthesize it to put together the document. And that's something where we say, hey, we'd like to provide you with some support to be able to assist in whatever you need assistance with. I think that that's the largest issue, really. And especially now that we've gone to the CVEB concept, it's no longer on the VAB to go and secure the location. We've taken that. So between the Zoom piece, spreading the word in the community piece, and the actual physical location, these are things that we currently do account for. So, I think that those larger needs are...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And what I'm just asking is, are the same people at DVS doing this, or is it jumps around?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: It's consistently been our Intergovernmental Affairs Lead. So right now, Mike Bocchini's got the ball with it. And when it comes to the Zoom piece, our Press Secretary,

Chuck Rivera, has a handle with that. So we've got those steady hands as far as those pieces. And Mike's taking point with helping us secure the VA facilities as far as that is, I feel like that's a huge lift in and of itself to be able to have these meetings at the VA sites. And Alibi, our friends at Staten Island, love having it at the Gold Star Post in Staten Island so we always respect that as far as one location that is not VA where these occur.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And in the process, let's talk about this. I'm still on the process. Is there anything you would change about the process of which the VAB collects input and prepares its report? I know you said you oversee, you help them out a little bit. You're there to look over the report and so forth. But do you have any suggestions on collecting?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I think the biggest one is to...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I know you want to be... they're a separate entity here, but they need help.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: My biggest recommendation is that the recommendations be

bracketed city, state, federal, legislative, executive, judicial. I think by bracketing them that way, you'll have more eyes on it as far as policymakers when it comes to our elected officials, when it comes to staff. And I think it'll just be... once it's known that the reports come out, let's say I'm working in the legislature at the State level, let me take a look and see what's me, okay, let me see what I can do to help there. Same thing for our city officials and even our federal. So I think that if there's a recommendation that we just... so it's not us saying we want to influence what you're recommending, but it's how it's displayed so that the right decision-makers can see it and act and know, okay, this is my assignment within this.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, but sometimes it's just... it might be just saying, well, you know, we really can't handle this. It's the VA that does this or something. You know, if they're making recommendations that you have, you know, nothing to say about, I'm just talking about little nuances.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Oh, well, that's... I think that's fine. To me, if there's a VA-related

recommendation, that's something for our federal partners to...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Right, yeah, so there's certain recommendations that you can't do or, you know, you don't have the budget for or that could be put in a different category.

But let's talk about the recommendations. So, I know you supported most of the recommendations, if not all, at least somewhat. Which of the recommendations in the annual report do you feel are the most relevant in improving both DVS services and the lives of veterans in New York City?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think most relevant is anything that touches housing that was mentioned in this report. It also dovetails what we saw in our community survey. And so, you know, I'm speaking of the Cold War property tax exemption as far as Intro. 740. There was a segment in the report about student veterans and housing. There are housing insecurity issues with our veterans, period, not just student veterans. And so to me, housing, housing, housing, as far as recommendations that resonate the most in my mind.

Next on the list would be entrepreneurship and speaking to things involving, you know, codifying the Veteran Business Leadership Association or things that involve, you know, identifying our veteran-owned businesses that do business with the City of New York and, you know, making opportunities for our street vendors with the Advisory Board, anything that touches entrepreneurship, I believe that's important because at the end of the day, no matter what happens as far as our broader economy, our veterans always have the ability for self-enfranchisement as far as being self-employed and business owners, and so we want to be there for them with that.

And then the other one that was that I put on the list of recommendations that resonated, size of the agency. We appreciate it being mentioned in these forums and everyone clamoring. We wouldn't go from 39 to 49 without it, and that has impact as far as helping more people with housing, more people with claims, being more active in other spaces so we appreciate that as well. So, I'd say housing, entrepreneurship, and size of the agency.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Which recommendation in the report did you plan not to implement at all at DVS? Is there anything that you disagree with totally and you can't?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I don't want to answer it like this, and it kind of dovetails with something that we encountered with the Council's Scorecard. There's certain, some things are said there as though we need to continue to analyze X, Y, and Z, but those things are already being measured, already being analyzed, and so I mentioned that for us when it comes to reporting, we report to the Office of Management and Budget, to the Mayor's Office of Operations when it comes to PMR, MMR. We respond to several local laws. We have the Council's Scorecard Initiative itself, which we're actively addressing those recommendations. You have the Comptroller and audits from that group. You have Equal Employment Opportunity. You have these Council hearings. So, there's so many other places where we are already being measured and reporting out so I am just... I want to make sure we thread the needle between if something is new that needs to be gotten at and that we need to account for that is shown, but

that we're not doing another group's work or that we're not doubling certain impacts because we have so few resources, even at 49.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Are there any recommendations that DVS would have welcomed from the VAB that are, that were not made?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I'd say, you know, separate from the format, which is more of a, that's a stylistic point...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I agree with that. The format should, you know, you should be, you could break it up into the, you know, the federal government versus, you know, city and so forth so I agree with that, but what else would?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: You know, this is me saying things I've mentioned in this Body before at hearings in the past. We'd love to have contact with, if someone wins discretionary funding from the Council to do something that involves veterans, that that group, that they already be placed in contact with DVS. There's already things in motion where that group will touch base with DVS. We're going to start to handle this for anyone who has 20,000 dollars or fewer contracts. That's roughly half of all

discretionary awards. For the other half, if you receive a contract that's greater than 20,000, you know, we just ask that you, if you're going to do a program or activity or event, please notify DVS within a certain number of days in advance. We can help spread the word. We would also love to provide cultural competency training to those groups, maybe at least one time per year and, you know, make sure that folks are trained on how to use our VetConnect NYC platform if we want to refer folks to them. So, that's one that I think is, resources are coming from the Mayor's side and from the Council's side. We want to make sure that everyone, that all dollars invested, that we're amplifying what's occurring with them as far as helping our veterans. That's one recommendation.

And another one, and the same thing I've said before, is just encouraging our elected officials, you know, city, state, and federal, to ask the question when they do their own constituent intake, have you or a member of your family served in the armed forces? And then if so, would you like to be put in touch with DVS? I know we have local law that has us do this as far as Local Law 37 with us

and our City agencies. I have seen firsthand the constituent service operations that you all run in your respective offices are just as powerful as what's going on at these different agencies. And just to ask that question, if more, arguably if all of our elected officials did that, it could be a watershed also in bringing more of our people into the light.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You said you mailed out 52,000 postcards and you got 400 people.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yes. That was within the first week or two that we got that. We still get calls from that too, but that was when the first...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: How long ago was that, the 52,000 mailed out?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: The mailing went out, I believe it was April or so that mailing went out.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Oh, April, so...

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Yeah.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And you were able to update your list because a lot came back? Did you get some postcards that weren't delivered because the person is no longer there?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I have to check and get back to as far as those that have to check it back.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: What was that list generate, the 52,000? What was that list that you have? Is that all the veterans that you have addresses to?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: It wasn't all the veterans we have. I have to get back to as far as the methodology there, as far as how we attack this. For us, the key thing was we tried to de-dupe all of it as many addresses. It was those that we were able to confirm that we had de-duped so you could say it like that. So, it's having addresses, it's also making sure that not only you de-dupe it, but you checked it as best you can before you spend that money, before you send it. And so for us, it was everyone for whom we had confirmed to the best of our ability, this is a good address for this person.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: How many do you have on a list, that you know where they are, at least you have some kind of confirmation that the veteran lives at this address?

2 COMMISSIONER HENDON: More broadly, and
3 this is...

4 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: The database (CROSS-
5 TALK)

6 COMMISSIONER HENDON: Taking in veteran
7 data from all sources. More broadly, I'd say we sent
8 52,000 out. I'd say we're at, let's see, about
9 approximately 150,000 as far as veteran information,
10 but it's not complete. Meaning that I want to
11 complete is you have an email address, you have a
12 physical address, you have a phone number... (CROSS-
13 TALK)

14 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Put it into one. And
15 I'm just concerned that I'd like to mail to 200,000
16 in the future if we get a bigger budget, because I
17 won't be around, but at least you might be here and
18 then you can continue that.

19 COMMISSIONER HENDON: I want to just add,
20 Mr. Chair, what complicates this is the churn of New
21 York City. Even looking at our student veterans, for
22 instance, we always say 200,000 people leave active
23 duty each year. 5,000 come to New York City alone.
24 Many of them come as students, but do they stay? And
25 so for us, it's this constant churning of the list,

too, that we've got to maintain as far as always monitoring. That's why we were saying, okay, let's measure twice, cut once before we pull the trigger on things like spending money on sending out flyers.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Are you for term limits on the Veterans Advisory Board?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I think that it takes time to really understand the nuances of this work, and so I appreciate that... I don't think it should be just one three-year term and that's it, you know, so I think that there should be.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I'm just saying, let's say three consecutive terms, nine years.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Personally, I think that's a sweet spot as far as no more than three terms. I think that's a sweet spot, and this idea of in a perfect world, but once again, I can't control this. This came up years ago, too, with the Council, the idea of saying, okay, let's have turnover where a third turns over, a third turns over, a third turns over, so it continues to stay fresh.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Well, they're doing that on community boards now, which it's a double-edged sword. Let's put it that way. When you have

volunteers, you hate to say goodbye now. You've served your time in nine years. You can't come back, or you can come back maybe after three years, but I don't know if we should evaluate people. When they want to volunteer, we shouldn't just show them the door, so I think there should be a middle ground or something else we could think of to keep them there as advisors, let's say, but they may not have a particular vote. I don't know. I think we need to look at it, though, because I like your idea about in your home borough that you're required to attend that one in person. I mean, that makes some sense. I don't know. Sometimes you would, but you'd have to build in conditions. If something happened, they were sick or something, there are excuses for things, so they do that on community boards, and they have done it on other bodies, but it's important to have a very healthy VAB and to have people participate, and we have to find the people to do that. I think we have them.

Tell me about this vetting process that is going on with this one member. How long is that?

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Oh, this is a good question. This has been just a few weeks as far as just... (CROSS-TALK)

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Oh, weeks. We're not talking months.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Not months. It's been a few weeks, just about the typical vetting that's done, at least that I know on the Mayor's side, because it'll be a Mayoral appointee, and so that's it. As soon as that person is appointed, we'll...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah, because I know in the past, we've seen the vacant seats there, and nothing happens, and it's a little frustrating, and it's either side. I don't, you know, whether it's the Council...

COMMISSIONER HENDON: I got to give credit where it's due, because everybody's... I mean, I feel like on the Speaker's side, on the Mayor's side, everyone's on point right now, and I want to call out, you know, we have one of our newest members of the Board is Mecca Nelson, who's behind me, who I know will be testifying soon, who's, you know, our newest recent addition representing Staten Island,

who's a Gold Star spouse, you know, of Mario Nelson, so I just want to call that out. Like, this is, by my observation, I feel like the Mayor's team and the Speaker's team has been doing a great job of getting folks appointed.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Any other questions?

Okay. We can't take online, right? Okay, we don't have a quorum. Okay. All right.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Mr. Chairman, may I say one thing, if it's okay or not?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Sure, sure.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Just to flag, we said it in testimony. When I think about the Board right now as far as what's ahead of us, when it comes to something that we do need to take care of, it's how do we establish these norms of performance, etc., and just making sure that we have whatever the bylaws are to have those things set up and make sure that they can carry over beyond administrations, beyond VAB members, etc., and not need to do that in law, because the only real way to do it where you know to be firm is in law, but we don't need to put every single thing in legislation. For us, it's working all around, not just VAB, DVS, but also working with

folks on the Speaker's side and on the Mayor's side higher than us to make sure that we can... because a lot of good recommendations here, we just want to make sure we can codify them in a way where they can carry over. I just want to say that.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah. I think the fact... what came out of the pandemic was Zoom, actually. It was probably there before, but it actually showed us how it works, and it's great. It's made it a lot easier to have meetings, and the VAB has benefited from Zoom. It's tough to get around the city, and especially for volunteers to go to one location in the Bronx, let's say, and they live in Staten Island. It's almost impossible. Zoom works. We need regulations and rules if they log on and so forth. It shouldn't be that difficult. Also, VSOs can support that. I think VSOs can support the VAB, and I'd like to see a nice bond there. There have been... certain boroughs, we have that. Certain boroughs, we don't have it as much. If we can see how to get more VSOs involved.

One thing that I would like to see... I'm going to make this recommendation. I've been saying it, but the Council Members should have Member item

initiatives for veterans, which we can, let's say, and I'd like to see 50,000 dollars. I get 100,000 dollars now as a Council Member. We all do for immigrant services. We should have something like that for veteran services.

COMMISSIONER HENDON: Paul Vallone was always pushing this. He was always big on this.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Yeah. Paul Vallone and I agreed on that, and we tried to make it happen, and each year, it doesn't, and it should. I'd like to see in the future that that becomes a reality, and that would support a lot of things. It could support VSOs. That's near and dear to me that we keep them open, and we fund them on a regular basis. I'd like to give 10,000 dollars for each VSO in my District as a minimum. I do give to the ones that ask, but they have to go through a whole process, but I'd like to see if it was a member initiative, we could give... if we had 100,000, we could give a lot of money to support our veterans and DVS, too. I mean, so I think this is something that we should look at, and I mentioned it over and over again. I think you would support that. I don't see why you wouldn't. I think

the Mayor should support it, and I think the Council should support it.

Okay. There's no more, no questions?

Thank you, Commissioner, once again. I appreciate it.

All right. I now open the hearing for public testimony.

I remind members of the public that this is a formal government proceeding, and that decorum shall be observed at all times. As such, members of the public shall remain silent at all times.

The witness table is reserved for people who wish to testify. No video recording or photography is allowed from the witness table. Further, members of the public may not present audio or video recordings as testimony, but may submit transcripts of such recordings to the Sergeant-at-Arms for inclusion in the hearing record.

If you wish to speak at today's hearing, please fill out an appearance card with the Sergeant-at-Arms in the back and wait to be recognized. When recognized, you will have three minutes to speak on today's hearing topic, Implementing Recommendations from the Veterans Advisory Board. We will hear all

in-person testimony first and then turn to testimony on Zoom.

If you have a written statement or additional written testimony you wish to submit for the record, please provide a copy of that testimony to the Sergeant-at-Arms.

I'm now going to call the first panel. Dr. Mecca Nelson from VAB, come on up. Nice to see you again.

COMMITTEE COUNSEL CARVAJAL: Go ahead, you can go.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: And we're going to give you a little bit more than three minutes.

DR. MECCA NELSON: Thank you because I need it.

I am Dr. Mecca Nelson, Gold Star spouse of the amazing Sergeant Mario Nelson, killed in combat in Iraq. Just to let you guys know, October 1st, which is a few days away, makes 19 years, he was killed in Iraqi freedom. I am on the Veteran Advisory Board, ambassador for Tunnels to Towers, and an ambassador for the Institute for Veterans and Military Families and the founder of Humble Haitian Warrior, non-profit to honor the legacy of my late

husband and to assist and support military families, Gold Star, White Star, and Silver Star families and our veterans, and the CEO of Mecca City of Wholeness, dedicated to guiding and bringing awareness to Gold Star families, White Star families, and Silver Star family demographics, ensuring their sacrifice are honored and their voices are uplifted.

I'm not sure if you guys need me to give you a definition of White Star, Silver Star, Gold Star. All right, so Gold Star is a family member who lost a loved one, killed in combat, like myself, my husband, so my daughter would be considered as a Gold Star child. Wait, I just got to put a little bug for my daughter. My daughter graduated college, degree in criminology, and she is a deputy sheriff. I'm proud of her, just got to put that out there. White Star families are family members who lost a loved one that died by suicide from survivor's guilt or PTSD. Silver Star is a family of a veteran who served our country, came back with a health service-connected health issue or with PTSD, and oftentimes, these demographics are forgotten, and we are considered the forgotten demographics, so that's why I am here to help uplift that space. Within our meeting with VSB,

we had these conversations, so this is why I'm bringing it forward.

Also, I want to speak around Gold Star families and TSA. So in regards to TSA and Gold Star families, TAPS is requiring for us to provide verification when we apply for the TSA pre-check because now it's free for us, and what happens is TAPS gives problems, they cause confusion, and it's causing a lot of the families to become frustrated, and they're facing delays and unnecessary obstacles. TAPS is not a government organization that can verify who we are and why we are who we are. They should not have the right to state our title and to state whether or not we are allowed to receive TSA pre-check approval. They state that we are not allowed to show our DD-1300, which is the casualty assistance report, and then our DD, it's a typo on the form, our DD-2064, which is the death certificate. There's a typo. It says 2648, but it's not. It's DD-2064. We should be able to show that information along with our IDs to state that we are a Gold Star spouse. TAPS, once again, should not have that privilege, and there are a lot of complaints in regards to TAPS in regards to that. I'm not against TAPS, but however,

this process here, they should not be justifying or verifying who we are. Also, that's one aspect of it.

Now, in regards to our recognition for Gold Star families, White Star, and Silver Star families, these families are carrying the deepest burden of military service, loss, sacrifice, and long-term grief. They deserve equal recognition alongside our amazing veterans that came home that are constantly here, and we appreciate them for coming alive. I tell all the veterans, I thank you for being home. We have dates set aside for Gold Star families, White Star, and Silver Star, but it's not being recognized. We're not having dinners. We're not having brunches. We're not having parades based around it, but do you know how many of us are out there? There are so many of us that's out here. I currently have a military community mindfulness program in Marine Park, and there's so many of them that's there, and they did not know the title that they were Silver Star, that they were a White Star. I'm seeing this often, even as I travel doing the work to understand who they are and know more about them. We should be able to host community events,

breakfasts, luncheons to celebrate and honor them.
Bring awareness to this gap.

Also, providing education resources and awareness around the demographics, and make it more public. Do I have to look at that? No.

Okay, so now we have, this is another topic, military families and businesses. Commissioner James Hendon spoke about that. This is another reason why the work that is being done is why I'm with the Ambassador for the Military Institute, because they help entrepreneurs with their businesses. This thing here with Gold Star families, Silver Star, and White Star families, we own businesses as well. However, they ask us, are you a veteran-owned business? They say that we receive our veteran benefits. However, there is nothing in a drop box that states that we are Gold Star, that we are White Star, that we are Silver Star. Oftentimes, when we don't see that, we don't feel welcome, so we're not going to step into the space. However, I'm the one that's going to step into the space, because a difference needs to be made, and we should not have to be hiding behind bushes. I often make this space, have you ever seen the commercial where Homer Simpson backs up and hide

inside of the bushes? That's us. That's how we are.

We back up and hide behind the bushes, because we feel that we're not being seen, and we're not. We're really not. So I do feel when we are applying for, I know my business is certified City and State, I can't say that I'm a veteran-owned business. I can't even say that I'm connected to a veteran, because they don't give that space for us to state that. And I would appreciate that, because I do a lot of work with the City and the State. I do work with the district attorney's office, Department of Education. I do feel that we should be able to have that. They have the disability certification for the veterans. What about us? There's so many of us Gold Star spouses, and even brothers and sisters of the veterans that have businesses. What about the children? Think about them. They're important as well. And even with the employment applications, there is nothing to state, and when you fill out the applications, that gives us that space to state what we are. And we're supposed to receive, depending on where we're applying, what, 10 percent? Sometimes I feel like that is not, it doesn't work, really. Also, this change would help families feel seen, welcome,

and included in veteran-related opportunities. I've advocated this with Chase business program, which I'm a graduate of, and they actually implemented Gold Star families inside of their drop box because I've communicated it. A lot of other organizations has done that too, because I'm very bold about it.

There's something else that I want to bring attention to. There are widows that husbands served in combat, and they are not receiving their husband's benefits. Some are because they don't know how to, what to, and then there's others that, I know one that I came in contact with with the program that I'm currently having, her husband died before he could sign the papers to transfer his benefits over. There should be something where these families are receiving some assistance somewhere and more education on. This is sad, and it's been a few years since he's passed away, and she's not receiving his benefits, and she should be receiving them. I'm a widow, and that extra funds help, you know.

Now, we're going to connect around discounts and community support. Many businesses provide and give discounts to active duty. What about the families? This is something I've been going on

about for the past few years now. This excludes spouses, parents, and children, and widows who live with the true cost of service and sacrifice. I'm requesting to expand some discounts and support programs for all military-connected families, not just active duty.

Veterans, mental health, and workplace understanding. Veterans continue to struggle with PTSD, mental health challenges, and suicidal thoughts. Families carry the weight of this sacrifice long after service ends. Employers often lack understanding of the unique struggles veterans face in the workplace. For instance, a Navy veteran daughter shared how her co-worker, a veteran, was in a crisis, showing the urgent need for workplace education and preparedness. It would be great if they had expanded the employer education resource and training to better support veterans in the workplace. I have an actual statement from this young lady, Ronell, about a veteran named Sam Costo, an Army vet. It's very deep and nerve-wracking for me. We both got emotional as she was speaking to me. I just felt like this is something that should have been spoken about because this is happening a lot, but no one is

speaking up about it, and it's very sad. We speak about...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Dr. Nelson, you brought this up to the VAB, right, a lot of these issues?

DR. MECCA NELSON: A lot of them, yes, but this one here was a current issue that just came about on...

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I'll look at that. We're going to meet on a lot of these things because these are important, and it is a disgrace that the Gold Star and White Star and Silver Star are not being recognized or at least there's no communication. You don't get any communications from the VA really as to programs or meetings or anything else? There's no support, you're saying?

DR. MECCA NELSON: Well, to be honest, everything is focused around the veterans. Just recently, I've been having conversations with Commissioner James, and he began to speak more about White Star, Silver Star, and Gold Star. Whenever he does that in a public setting, I'm the loud one to say thank you and clap my hands because he's bringing it aware. We can do that, but we have to go up a

level because he's doing his part, bringing awareness to it by speaking it, but now we have to go up levels because these families are still suffering. There's a father whose son died by suicide, and because he died by suicide, it can be embarrassing for these families. They don't want to state that they died by suicide, but it's a real thing. Make these families feel good. Just because a soldier died by suicide, they should not feel embarrassed. They should be able to speak about it. It's sad. It's nerve-wracking to know that these families are suffering behind the dock, and no one is acknowledging them, these parents. What I do with the non-profit is I work with these families consistently. I'm supporting them consistently. No, I did not lose my husband by suicide, but I'm trained to work with families that dealt with that space.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: What I've noticed in talking to a lot of volunteers like you who are Gold Star, there is that sense of you want to give back. You want to help other families. I'm getting that from a lot. Most of the volunteers are either Gold Star, Silver Star. Most of the Gold Star volunteer. I'm finding certainly the spouses or the family

members. Let's talk about this more. We have a long list of people... (CROSS-TALK)

DR. MECCA NELSON: Can I just finish the last three?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: You can go ahead.

DR. MECCA NELSON: Last week, I was in Indiana at the Wayne County Veterans Memorial Park, and I was the keynote speaker for the first revealing of the 9/11 and Global War on Terrorism Wall. I do feel like a lot of our 9/11 heroes died in New York, and I would love for that wall to come to New York. It was beautiful, and I did not know my husband was going to be on a wall. It was kind of like a surprise for me. Also, I've been building out a cultural competency program for Gold Star, White Star, and Silver Star to educate individuals on how to handle us, how to speak with us, unique cultures, triggers, and the needs because we are often misunderstood. It would be great to have City partnerships and assistance with implementing this program, and even down to the funds to help facilitate this because it's important. I even have veterans and other military families to help support with this process.

That is my testimony, and I'm really hoping and praying that something can be done because I'm not here for myself. I'm here to make an impact for others that need it that I deal with each and every day.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I thank you for that. Thank you for all the things that you do.

Again, thanks for the testimony. We'll talk some more. Thank you.

DR. MECCA NELSON: Please read this about the Sam.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I'm going to read that when we finish.

DR. MECCA NELSON: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you.

Okay. Our next panel, Satish Dhanna, Gene DeFrancis, and Derek Coy. Satish.

SATISH DHANNA: Good afternoon, Chair Holden, Members of the Committee on Veterans, and members of the Veterans Advisory Board. My name is Satish Dhanna, and I'm the Veterans Program Supervisor at VNS Health and a medically retired U.S. Army veteran. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

For more than 130 years, VNS Health has helped New Yorkers live, age, and heal where they feel most comfortable in their homes and communities. As the largest non-profit home and community-based health care provider in New York, we serve more than 70,000 New Yorkers each day, including thousands of veterans and their families. Specifically, we are the largest hospice and home health provider to veterans in New York City. Founded in 2015, the VNS Health Veterans Program connects patients to VA benefits, community services, and health care. We want to thank the City Council for the discretionary funds that allow us to assist veterans in accessing resources, educate clinicians on the unique needs of veterans, bridge transitions back into the community, and raise awareness on the issues facing this population. In Fiscal Year 2025, we served over 1,100 veterans and their families.

We strongly support the recommendations in the Veterans Advisory Board's 2004 report. In particular, we endorse efforts to clarify roles and responsibilities between the Department of Veterans Services and the Advisory Board, provide consistent staffing support for the Veterans Advisory Board,

track progress on claims assistance so veterans can access the benefits they've earned, streamline distribution of discretionary funds for community providers, expand opportunities for veteran-owned businesses and vendors, and provide property tax relief for Cold War veterans. These recommendations reflect the realities we see every day. Veterans face complex health care needs, barriers to care, and economic challenges that directly impact their well-being. VNS Health is proud to stand by New York City veterans, and we remain committed to working with the Council, DVS, and the Veterans Advisory Board to ensure that all who served receive the care, dignity, and respect they deserve. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you.

SATISH DHANNA: Good afternoon, Chairman Holden and the Committee Members attending. My name is Gene DeFrancis. I am a United States veteran, '98 to 2003. And really quick, because we don't have a lot of time, I just want to go into three solutions and ideas that we've brought up before offline and online as well. The working together with the other City agencies, a member of the American Legion, one of the leadership there, and talking to the local

recruiters and some of our children and youth programming such as Boys' State, we're getting blocked out by the local high schools. They're not allowing the recruiters in, they're not allowing our veterans in to teach Americanism and several other programs. We're losing a lot of children in our community in the Bronx, born and raised in the Bronx. And we've had many incidences in a recruiting station that's not too far that's closed. They're being told that they can't get into, we had one-on-one conversations why the gates are down, and they're being told they're being shut out by the local high schools and allowed to, I think that's a form of discrimination that we can't allow, let the young adults and their parents decide. When they have a jobs fair, they should be invited. So hopefully we can communicate and work together on issues like that because we have wonderful programs within the American Legion. We're not recruiting for them to join, that's their individual. I highly recommend a military career. I think it's a lot better than some of the path that our young men and women are taking currently. But I have two other issues, then if

there's any other questions to that, but just opening up the communications to the high schoolers.

Regarding veteran vendors, I spoke with our local precinct council and commanding officers and our elected officials about expanding, not only opening up the licenses for vendors to the veteran community, but our community is trained in local watch. Every single veteran that has served on watch and with the perception of safety, in our busy crowded areas, to have a veteran stationed at some of our high trafficked areas with a tent that states, and they're in cooperation with the local Police Department and the City Council and the community board, to have them stationed there as more like a safe haven program, which we have with our local brick and mortar businesses where they have the sign in their window saying this establishment, this vendor, this property owner is safe. They've been vetted by the NYPD. And if you feel like you're being harassed, you feel like you're being followed, you can visit this vendor and tell them, and they'll call 9-1-1. They're not there to be a vigilante, just report any unsafe situations. If they see a suspicious package, if they see a suspicious person,

these vendors can be a vital resource to make the community feel a lot safer than their current condition. You could even put them in the local subway stations, some of the busy (TIMER CHIME) ones, if safe. And I'll stop there. I see I'm out of time.

Oh, okay.

I just wanted to bring the Board's attention on other children and youth programming. Back in the 1970s, a local American Legion post sponsored a Little League for 100 dollars. There was an unfortunate incident that occurred within that Little League that in 2019 made local papers. We won't get into the semantics of it. But the local American Legion was held accountable and liable. And for six years, they spent about 100,000 dollars in litigation to fight this claim. Now, they were just the sponsor. They just put it, I'm not here on official capacity for the organization. It's just myself calling out this injustice. They were doing the right thing. They did not recruit the coach or had any say in who the coach was, yet for 100,000 dollars now in legal fees, they're scared because of liability to invest in other children and youth program. We have funding that can go to several

others, Little Leagues. All our local posts are now hesitant to contribute and sponsor, which is unfortunate. We were brave. We did vet and took a larger stance in the Bronx to vet a local Little League in Throggs Neck. But we were told to proceed with extreme caution and make sure you knew who the coaches were. It's still in litigation to this day. It's really not fair to hold the American Legion liable or even the post. So, if there's something or anything the Board could communicate and work together with, I just wanted to bring it to your attention that that was going on.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I'd like to hear more about that. I was a coach in the American Legion out in Queens. It was one of the best facilities that they had. I don't know if it's still there anymore, but it was a well-run program. I hate to hear this.

GENE DEFRANCIS: Well, there's a difference between... we have Legion Baseball, which is now going on its 150th year, and I think they're having an event in Yankee Stadium to celebrate it.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: But this is a local organization in the Bronx, you're saying? The American Legion was sued in the Bronx?

GENE DEFRANCIS: Department-wide, in the entire state. This was a separate little league, not associated with the Legion Baseball. It was just a local post donating 100 dollars in Staten Island, and they're still fighting in litigation. Yeah, because they're the ones that had funding, too.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: I'd like to talk to you more about the high school. Were they shutting you guys out? Let's talk about that some more, all right? Thank you.

DEREK COY: Good afternoon. Happy first day of fall, Chair Holden and Members of the Committee. My name is Derek Coy, and I'm testifying on behalf of the New York Health Foundation, which is a private, independent, statewide foundation dedicated to improving the health of all New Yorkers, including the more than 133,000 or so veterans who call New York City home. I'm also a proud veteran myself, having served as a sergeant in the United States Marine Corps and veteran of the Iraq War. We appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on implementing recommendations from the New York City Veterans Advisory Board.

We support many of the Board's recommendations. In particular, we applaud those that promote programs and services connecting veterans to the benefits for which they are eligible, as well as to the health and mental health services, housing, education, and other critical supports, such as peer-to-peer networks. In the written testimony we submitted, we offer several considerations and further context and expand upon the Board's recommendations, drawn from New York Health's expertise and experience strengthening and increasing services to military veterans and their families. However, during my time here today, I'd like to focus on the unifying theme that should bring all of these recommendations together, that of suicide prevention. We strongly encourage the Board and the Council to expand the recommendations and adopt an explicit focus on veteran suicide prevention. For context, suicide rates for veterans in New York State are almost twice as high as our civilian counterparts, roughly 20 per 100,000, but we see that rates increase to 32 for veterans age 18 to 34. For veterans that transitioned in 2021, the year with the latest data available, it increases further to 46.

For veterans experiencing homelessness, it quadruples to 84, and, perhaps most shocking, is a near seven-fold increase for justice-involved veterans who experience rates of 147 per 100,000, by far the highest of any subpopulation of veterans. Recent research has shown that peer-based interventions that target higher-risk subpopulations are linked to reduction in suicide risk within these subpopulations, which makes strengthening the Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program, Onward Ops, and other peer support programs a key component in larger suicide prevention efforts, especially with the focus on younger transitioning veterans, many of which are student veterans like I was when I was attending the greatest school in the world, City College, using the GI Bill, while battling suicidal ideations myself.

Similarly, considering the egregiously high suicide rates for justice-involved veterans, strengthening and expanding suicide prevention services to this population and ensuring veterans treatment courts are as inclusive as possible is paramount in the battle to end veteran suicide.

Lastly, robust program evaluation and data collection, especially for suicide prevention

resources, are needed to understand what is working, where more resources are needed, and where more resources are needed. We support the Board's recommendation to use increased funding to NYC DVS to expand evaluation and documentation of programming with a particular focus on suicide prevention.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. Together, we can ensure that New York City veterans receive the health, support, care, and opportunities they need to thrive. And again, thank you for your continued partnership in this work.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Great. Thank you for your testimony. I like that little buzzer there. It's better than the bell, right?

All right. Thank you. Thank you, panel. Thank you so much for your testimony.

And our next panel is Robert Poles, Timothy Pena, and Joe Bello.

Robert, you can start.

Is the light on there? Okay.

ROBERT POLES: Oh, thank you. My name is Robert Poles. I am a United States military veteran with two honorable discharges. In the year of 1999, I was a resident of Borden Avenue Veterans Residence.

And for a period of approximately 23 years, I was a resident of a HUD-VASH housing facility in Brooklyn. For a number of years, I have been tolerated by the VAB and employees of the DVS of New York City. And I commend them for their work. They're all extraordinary people and whatnot. I previously encountered the Commissioner and the Executives of DVS.

My purpose here today was to present two proposals, unaware of the fact that this was a meeting generally based upon the January 2025 oversight and also the 2024 activities of the VAB. The Commissioner mentioned housing, housing, housing, and that is my primary concern. The Commissioner also mentioned community, continuity, clarity, capacity, continuity, and coordination. The third page of my package to the Council here contains two primary proposals. Proposal one is that what I'm asking is that Tunnel for Towers as a cultural and societal and housing involved with 9/11, the most significant infamous event in New York City, possibly by the Council, the DVS, and the VAB be suggested to the Mayor to be citated and commended for that. That involves housing.

My second proposal is that over the years that I was doing footwork here in New York City with regard to Borden Avenue Veterans Residence and also the residents, DHS residents, housing female veterans, I noticed two things. Number one, a (TIMER CHIME) decline in the quality of BAVR. And number two, what I consider to be discriminatory actions regarding the female veterans in comparison to the male veterans. Thank you all. I really very much appreciate you.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you for your service and thank you for your testimony.

ROBERT POLES: Thank you.

TIMOTHY PENA: Good afternoon, Chair and Members of the Committee. Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak today. By the way, this is me in ChatGPT. My name is Timothy Pena, U.S. Navy veteran, 70 percent disability rating. I run an organization called Veterans Justice Project. We advocate for better services and treatment and access to transitional services for incarcerated and homeless veterans.

On June 10th this year, I filed a federal lawsuit against the New York City Department of

Homeless Services, the Institute for Community Living, and the former Director of Homeless Services for the Manhattan VA for their failure to comply with requirements of the Veterans Affairs grant and per diem program at the Borden Avenue Veterans Residence in Long Island City. The VA grant and per diem program was created to ensure honorably discharged veterans who have served active duty regardless of diagnosis receive safe supportive transitional oriented housing. Congress designed this program so that veterans could access case management, health care, vocational services, and pathways to permanent sustainable housing while rebuilding their lives. Unfortunately, what I and many others have experienced at Borden Avenue falls far short of those federal standards. Instead of dignity and structure, veterans encountered unsafe dormitory housing without privacy, open drug use and violence, and unsanitary conditions including a lack of required sinks and toilets according to Department of Homeless Services. Veterans are being denied reliable transportation to VA medical and mental health appointments which are essential to recovery. We're often offered no meaningful community engagement. I learned just last

month in July a donation event for Borden Avenue veterans wasn't even held at Borden Avenue. Instead, at another facility, another ICL facility, Nevins, where they supposedly transported veterans from Borden Avenue to attend this donation event. When, in fact, I was over at Borden, they pick and choose who they want and then they actually called 12 News Brooklyn to cover the event. Most of the veterans over there didn't even know that this was going on. Most troubling, ICL and DHS are telling veterans that eligibility into a federal (TIMER CHIME) veterans' program is dependent on suffering mental illness or chemical abuse. This is a requirement in direct violation of federal discrimination laws and GPD eligibility criteria. The MICA designation that DHS has put on Borden Avenue has been used to justify this unlawful practice, effectively forcing veterans to label themselves as mentally (TIMER CHIME) ill or substance dependent just to access their benefits under federal law. May I finish?

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Just wrap it up. You can wrap it up. I appreciate it.

TIMOTHY PENA: I believe that this type of practice is why we have a problem with self-

identification. We have veterans who are coming out of the military and they're being told that they have to admit, identify as being mentally ill just to get access to our own federal VA programs. I want to be absolutely clear. I place no responsibility for this lawsuit on the Department of Veterans Services, this City Council, or the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. This is solely about Department of Homeless Services, who signs the contract for this program, ICL, who is supposed to implement this program, and then former Director of Manhattan VA, Department of Homeless Services, who signed off on this atrocity. Thank you very much.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Timothy, I would like if you could put me in touch with or give my number to any of the veterans that were denied any services at Borden, especially going to doctors and so forth. You could give me or have them call my office so I can talk to them. As far as the Department of Homeless Services, I do have a lot of issues with what they're doing, not only at Borden, but in other locations that I think they're turning a blind eye to or at least not addressing to what and not fixing the situation. Let's say it goes on and on.

TIMOTHY PENA: If I might. You know, these programs, I ran the front desk of a program, transitional program in Phoenix, for 17 months as a resident and the front desk clerk. Catholic Charities runs that program. Tunnels to Towers, U.S. Vets, Department of Veterans Services could take over that program and do it a lot better. And six years ago, I was told that Department of Homeless Services took over the housing of veterans from DVS, and look where we're at. So, thank you, sir.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: All right. Let's talk or you can give me some names so we can follow up on that. Thank you.

Joe.

JOSEPH BELLO: Yeah. Before I begin, just to reset, this is a hearing about the Veterans Advisory Board. So, on that note, we know the VAB operates under legal authority of the New York City Charter, Chapter 75, Section 3103, which defines its primary function as advising the DVS Commissioner and serving as a conduit for veterans to bring forward local City issues and City government. So, unless there's a law or something on the books that we're not aware of, the lack of communication, I still am

really thrown that the Commissioner would actually bring back up the CVEB again. And that is something that, once again, he has not spoken to me about, talked to me about. He just does what he wants to do. So, we have a problem there because that is by legal statute. So, unless we're going to change that and open it up to the federal government, then, you know, the City, then we already have a problem with the VAB. So, let me start.

Chairman Holden, Members of the Veterans Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to testify at today's oversight hearing. The VAB plays a unique role in New York City government. Established by local law, the Board advises City leadership, including the Commissioner of the Department of Veterans Services, on policies and practices that impact veterans and their families. As you know, VAB members or veterans themselves are deeply connected to the veterans' community. The Board's recommendations are developed through engagement with the community and a desire to offer meaningful solutions. However, despite numerous recommendations over the years, many do go unimplemented. The root cause of this is structural. These recommendations

often go unacted upon, not because their lack of merit, but because the City systems are simply not equipped to act on them effectively. It's important to note that while the VAB is empowered to make recommendations, especially to the Commissioner, there is no legal requirement for those recommendations to be acted upon or even listened to. Additionally, in recent years, the VAB's annual report, which is due at the beginning of January, has become increasingly delayed, sometimes by several months, which hinders any action of those recommendations. These gaps in structure and accountability directly contribute to the continued lack of follow-through on VAB recommendations. During my time on the Board, we repeatedly saw recommendations to the Administration that were either ignored or took years to be acted on. For example, at a City Council hearing on civic engagement last September, the Commissioner highlighted several initiatives, such as managing small-dollar contracts, expanding the VAB, holding the Veteran Vendor Summit, that had been actually recommended by the VAB for years before they were actually implemented. Additionally, while the VAB is

at times referenced in agency decisions, the record does not always support that narrative, to wit, the VetConnect platform.

From my experience, I've seen clearly how the lack of a coordinated, accountable, and adequately resourced implementation process undermines the Board's mission. This breakdown occurs at every (TIMER CHIME) level, executive follow-through, legislative responsiveness, and operational execution. First, regarding the Mayor's Office, many recommendations requiring executive-level action usually received little or no follow-up. During my time on the VAB, once the annual report was submitted, there was virtually no communication or follow-up from the Commissioner, the Deputy Mayor, or even a Senior Advisor. In effect, the annual report was submitted and disappeared into a void. Programs like the Joseph P. Dwyer Support Program that was mentioned by the Commissioner were delayed by administrative bottlenecks that could have been resolved with higher-level coordination. Without leadership from the Mayor's Office to prioritize veterans' policies, recommendations are left to languish.

Second, the City Council plays a critical legislative role, but progress on many of the Board's policy recommendations have been slow. Proposals like extending property tax exemptions to Cold War veterans or establishing procurement references have been introduced, but most remain in Committee or reintroduced in subsequent legislative sessions without progress. This is compounded by the lack of progress which the Council or someone from the Speaker's Office can communicate with the Board about their recommendations. The result is a disconnect. A recommendation is submitted, but there's no way of knowing whether it's been reviewed, rejected, shelved, or simply forgotten. This lack of feedback is more of an inconvenience. It's a failure of oversight and transparency. As the City Council's report card showed, DVS is staffed by dedicated individuals who work under real constraints and continue to face challenges in execution and transparency. During my years on the Board, we lacked stable administrative support, with meeting logistics, communications, and follow-up tasks often falling to interns or rotating staff. This makes it difficult to maintain consistency and long-term

planning. There are also times when it is unclear who within the agency is responsible or responding to the Board with its recommendations, particularly around technology partnerships. Apologies. These ongoing issues create a frustrating cycle. The VAB identifies issues, submits resolutions, and recommendations in its annual report, but without budget authority, a legislative mandate, or executive enforcement, most of these recommendations fade into the background, forcing the VAB to resubmit them again in the next annual report. What's most concerning is that this is not a matter of apathy. I believe there is widespread support for veterans across the City government, but without the system of accountability, timelines, and real follow-up mechanisms, the support is ultimately undermined. New York City created the VAB to elevate the voices of veterans and their families, but if no one in City government is required to listen or act, then that voice is silenced by design. I would urge the Council to consider legislation that formalizes a DVS relationship with the VAB, even if it's a secondary position on top of the main position, designating someone in the agency to serve as an official liaison.

In conclusion, let me emphasize that this testimony is not about assigning blame. It's about consideration for creating a better structure, as well as a strategic plan for both the short- and long-term, focused on communication and follow-through, so that the board has the tools, access, and support to fulfill its mission. Because if not, then we will continue to see what we're seeing at Veterans Advisory Board meetings, the lack of people attending, and the lack of communication. Thank you, Council Members, for your time, and I welcome any questions you have.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thank you, Joe, and again, I don't disagree with anything you said. Understand how government works. You know it's very slow. I'm frustrated. I'm frustrated not only with the City Council, with the Mayor's Office. Nothing moves like it should.

JOSEPH BELLO: I agree.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Being on the community board for 30 years, we were just advisory. So what happened, the City took our recommendations when it suited them, and when it didn't, they ignored them so that's nothing new in City government.

2 JOSEPH BELLO: Correct.

3 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: This Committee has
4 been trying, we're working on, I think we're going to
5 get progress by the end of this term, I hope. I pray.
6 But I think I wouldn't be surprised if nothing moved.

7 JOSEPH BELLO: Me neither.

8 CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Because that's what
9 I've experienced in my eight years in the Council.
10 Frustrating, but it's like sludge. Everything goes
11 very slow, and even important things are ignored for
12 no reason, and you don't get answers. But we will do
13 our best to, and we're going to do what the Committee
14 can do, what I can do, is advance these bills that we
15 have and vote on. And if it doesn't get full support,
16 then we'll hold those accountable. But thank you,
17 Joe. Thank you for all you do.

18 Thank you. This panel is a terrific
19 panel.

20 And now we're going to the remote. We
21 have one person.

22 Okay. So I got to read this? Okay.

23 All right. That concludes the in-person
24 portion of our public testimony. We will now move to
25 remote testimony.

If you are testifying remotely, please listen for your name to be called. Once your name is called, a Member of our Staff will unmute you. You may then start your testimony once the Sergeant-at-Arms sets the clock and, again, you'll get three minutes.

So, we have Christopher Leon Johnson as our first remote testimony.

Chris.

SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: You may begin.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: Hello. My name is Christopher Leon Johnson. I'm here to testify. And just to make a quick three-minute criticism, it's the fact that, look, the reason that this Committee is not taken seriously in City Council is because of the fact that nobody in the City really cares about veterans. The truth of the matter of fact is that nobody in the City really cared about the battles and the pitfalls that these guys and gals go through. They see these guys as like second fiddlers with everything that's going on. If the City Council had their way, like the Speaker of the City Council, they would have completely demolished this Committee because they see these guys as like a non-factor in

the city. I love my veterans. I love my veterans. I love them. I love them for real. That's the truth. The reason that the Veterans Agency doesn't get the funding that they get is because of the fact that they don't see these people as a powerful voter bloc. Why do they give the Committee for (INAUDIBLE) Why do they give this Committee for Immigration all the money they can get if they don't give the veterans the money they get? And the reason they give them all that money, especially when they're not (INAUDIBLE) is because they hold all the votes. The veterans need to really start coming together and form one big voter bloc and vote against the politicians that go against their interest. Let's keep that 100 percent. And I'll make clear, like I said, I think I'm virtually so they (INAUDIBLE) time, I don't care, but that they need to remove Sandy Nurse from the Committee for Veterans because she does not care about veterans at all. All she care about is protecting certain people in the City Council. I know very soon they're going to put the (INAUDIBLE) rule, but then she only care about protecting certain people in City Council that does more damage to the city than protects the city. Why do the City Council

protects criminals more than the people that, like criminals, and they get all the resources, they get proclamation, they get everything that they can get, but people that serve this country doesn't get the resources that they should get. The veterans need as much resources as they can get as possible. They need more resources. And that's the truth. The truth is that they need more resources. They need more resources and stuff like that. So going forward, I'm calling the City Council to like, I know that Bob, you do a great job as a Council Member (INAUDIBLE) only want to care about the veterans, but a lot of other ones like maybe Sandy Nurse doesn't give a give a rat's butt about the veterans. So like I said, I think you as a Chairman needs to tell the Speaker or tell Sandy she needed to resign from the Board, or resign from the Committee and put Erik Bottcher on the Committee.

SERGEANT-AT-ARMS: Thank you. Time expired.

CHRISTOPHER LEON JOHNSON: I gotta go. Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON HOLDEN: Thanks, Chris. Thank you so much for your testimony.

And if there's anyone else present in the room who has not had the opportunity to testify, please do so. Come forward to the Sergeant or raise your hand.

Nobody else?

Okay. Seeing no one else who wishes to testify, this hearing is hereby adjourned. [GAVEL]
Thank you.

C E R T I F I C A T E

World Wide Dictation certifies that the foregoing transcript is a true and accurate record of the proceedings. We further certify that there is no relation to any of the parties to this action by blood or marriage, and that there is interest in the outcome of this matter.



Date September 30, 2025